

Religion Lost in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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ABSTRACT

Religion takes another direction during the modern age in Europe and America. In fact, people stopped believing in the existence of God for many reasons. Among these reasons the wars all over the world, economic depression, political struggles, and the loss of the sense of safety and being secured.

This study tries to shed light upon a school which denies God. Section one deals with Existentialism, its proponents, and their thoughts and beliefs. Also, it talks about the theme of the group in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Section two handles the analysis of the main characters especially Casy, the ex-priest who reflects the idea of losing faith and trust in God.

The last part of the paper is the conclusion which sums up the findings of the study.

1.1 Existentialism: Meaning and Influence

Existentialism is a concept applied to a group of attitudes in philosophical, religious, and artistic thought. Its roots go back to the nineteenth century in the writings of the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. It affected literature and art because the existentialists

found them to be usually effective methods of expression (Holman: 192_ 3).

Sidney Finkelstein discusses the concepts and attitudes of existentialism elaborately. He covers its influence upon literature especially the American literature. He assumes that the existentialists believe that the individual's growth, progress, and happiness must be attained socially within a group of people together. There should be a friendship between the individual and society. He adds that the God of the existentialist is not the God of miracles (Finkelstein: 14).

Finkelstein suggests that if God endowed human beings with endless rights, they must still win the enjoyment of these rights for themselves. He adds:

He is not the God of the afterlife, for love of whom one must renounce the material world, but the God who operates through the laws of nature. (Ibid.: 15).

For the existentialists, existence is the only thing people are certain of. They believe that man's life begins and ends in nothingness. Life is inexplicable, dangerous and meaningless. Moreover they maintain that the nature of man's existence is decided by his choices (Stephen: 29). In short, what is important for the existentialist is the human existence. He denies God and stresses man's freedom.

Finkelstein holds that these views are the products of the age of reason and they also appeared in the French Declaration of the rights of man of the French revolution. Today, these views are held

in America and in the other parts of the world. There is a spreading despair. A question rises here whether the hopes of the preceding centuries are illusions (Finkelstein: 16).

There is what is called religious existentialism. It is a very personal approach to religion. It emphasises faith and commitment and minimizes theology. Its chief proponent is Kierkegaard. He attacked the Christianity of his time as hypocritical. He assumed that the attempts of men of religion to show Christianity as the only rational religion were useless. He claimed that faith is important it is irrational (Yeganeh: 534). The existentialists support the idea that faith in oneself is important. But faith in God is vain and pointless.

One of the influential existentialists is the German nationalist, critic, and atheist Nietzsche (1844_1900). He attacked all the ideals and ideas of the age. He attacked Christianity, conventional morality, and rationalism. His book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is a series of sermons of an imaginary prophet written in a poetic prose modeled on that of the Bible. In this book, he proclaims that God is dead (Finkelstein: 55).

There are many philosophers, thinkers, artists, and writers who follow existential attitudes through out the world. However, Jean-Paul Sartre is the father of Existentialism. He is the first who used the term for the first time. He is a French philosopher, essayist, dramatist, and novelist. He believes that "the fundamental truth of existentialism is in Descartes' formula "I think therefore I exist' " (Holman: 193).

Yeganeh affirms that Sartre's philosophy seems pessimistic at the first glance because he thinks that though man seeks a rational

basis for his life but he fails to achieve it. Then, life is meaningless "futile". But, he denies pessimism and regards his theory as a form of humanism (Yeganeh: 536).

Another existential idea is freedom which stems from man's sense of responsibility. Responsibility and freedom are the basics for a decent human life. It is better than hiding from these two in cowardly bad faith. Man is free: he has the right to choose. Even his refusal to choose his way in life is regarded a choice. Therefore, choice is central to human existence (Ibid.).

Andrew Bennett explains the reasons behind the disbelief of the Europeans. In the mid-nineteenth century people started to distrust the Bible because it proves that it was a collection of writings which lacked exactness. Those writings could not be trusted in terms of their historical fact and accuracy. Bennett suggests that "the study of fossils made it impossible to suppose that the earth could not be, as Bible propounds, only a few thousand years old" (Bennett: 162).

However, existentialism influenced many writers. The absurd theatre is one of the most obvious expression of existential themes.

Writers from different parts of the world show interest in existential themes. It is not necessary to be completely an existentialist. Some writers include themes or attitudes which are considered existential. Yeganeh shows that the influence of this school in America is not direct. She says that some of the novelists include ideas of this school in their novels though they cannot be regarded among its proponents (Yeganeh: 540).

Then it is clear that the existentialist stands aloof from any religious or conventional inclinations. He creates his own world. He insists that freedom, instinct, and responsibility are the essence of human beings. Another thing captures his mind: God is dead or He does not exist.

1.2. Existential Attitudes in *The Grapes of Wrath*

It is not possible to say that John Steinbeck (1902_68) is an existentialist. But, work *The Grapes of Wrath* contains some of the existential attitudes and thoughts. He presents the man-group in a remarkable way. This novel talks about the economic crisis during the thirties in America. The thirties was a decade of bankruptcy and unemployment. This did not affect the daily life of people and their living only. It also affected the literary scene which witnessed a period of slumber (Gillie: 122).

The Joads leave Oklahoma which becomes futile because of sand winds which ruined all the crops. People go to search for a work; any work in California. They find out that people there are not friendly. The Joads are not the only family who go to California. They move in their car along with hundreds of other immigrants. Families traveled towards the same end: to find a source of living.

Walter Allen points out that the group-man is a species in which an individual is considered a cell in the human body. The group-man can be felt to exist within nature. It is a part of a host of species (Allen: 165). Steinbeck describes the journey of these people elaborately through out the text:

In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and weary and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country.*

These men are headed towards a place to establish a new life. They go to ensure their existence. Steinbeck portrays these people through scenes showing them together: "Thus they changed their social life_ changed as in the whole universe only man can change. They were not farm men any more, but migrant men" (GW.: 418_9). These men are enforced to be changed because of the bad conditions of life. All of them move as one unit.

Gray suggests that the essential point of the plight of man under the conditions of the great depression is that "no matter how better the assault on its existence may be, the group will defend itself unyieldingly" (Gray: 15). This is true. All men stand together if something happens to anyone of them. The novel is full of situations of self-defense against any danger that may threaten the safety of the migrants.

* John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of wrath*. In *John Steinbeck: The Grape of Wrath and Other writings*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, p.416(Henceforth will be parenthetically cited within text as GW., followed by page number).

The group is one of the beliefs of the existentialists. Man within a group is better than being alone without a company who shares him everything in life good or bad. Moreover, human beings have the right to choose. They always decide things. They have the freedom to choose their way in life. Noah, Tom's brother, decides to stay near the river. He does not go on with his family:

Like to lay here forever. Never get hungry an' never get sad.
Lay in the water all life long, lazy as brood sow in the mud.

(GW.: 427)

When Tom kills the man who kills Casy, the ex-preacher, his mother goes to warn him that his youngest sister talks about his crime to her friends in a fight. At this time Tom becomes aware of the truth of his situation. He decides to do what Casy was doing: to be with the hungry who protest to get their right. Here, he recalls some of Casy's words about the necessity to be one of a group:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up

his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up. (Ibid.: 655).

John M. Ditsky says that Steinbeck's existential aesthetic concerns have been involved with logical positiveness (Ditsky: 61). In fact, though the reader can feel that the characters are either faithless or careless to the Christian doctrine, but it is possible to see that hope and promise are the essence of the characters existence. Rose of Sharon, Tom's sister, waits for her baby. She almost lives by the promise of the birth of the baby. Also, she talks about her

husband's intention to study and to have a nice house and a good job even when he leaves without a word. She has a hope that he may come one day: "May be he went to get them books to study up... May be he was a-gonna surprise us" (GW.: 505).

Ditsky explains that Rose of Sharon's act at the end of the novel is an act of universal motherhood. It confirms the new strength of the group-man (Ditsky: 62). After the loss of her baby and escaping from the flood, Rose decides to give her own milk to a starving man. This clue suggests the unity of all the hungry men and women in times of starvation to secure their survival and existence. Her smile indicates her happiness to be useful. This smile represents the strength of her hope and faith in herself.

2.1. Jim Casy: the Ex-Preacher

Jim Casy is like Tom represents the author's voice in the novel. His character is interesting as much as Tom's or Ma's character. These three can be considered the principal figures in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for their voices are the only strong and eloquent in a disturbed world: the world of the hungry poor.

When Tom is released from prison, the first man he meets is Casy. From their conversation, the reader knows a lot about their past. Tom Joad spends four years in prison for killing a person in a fight. Jim is no more a preacher. He sums up his life as a preacher sarcastically:

"I was a preacher," said the man seriously. "Reverend Jim Casy.... Used to howl out the name of Jesus to glory. But no no

more," he said. "Just Jim Casy now. Ain't got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears_ but they seem kinda sensible." (GW.: 230).

Casy stops to be a preacher because he feels that he does things which are contrasted with his position as a man of religion. He does not have the restrain which is supposed to hold him from committing sins. He talks to Tom about his sins openly. He finds it a hypocrisy to be something and to do the opposite:

There's me with all them people's souls in my han'_ responsible an' feelin' my responsibility_ an' ever' time, I lay with one of them girls. (Ibid.: 232).

Gray says that *The Grapes of Wrath* lacks a hero. Its pattern resembles the pattern of Homer's Odysseus whose various adventures are held together by his drive to escape danger and find his way home (Gray: 14). However, Casy, like Tom, can be seen as a major character. Though he talks a lot, but his speech does not lack the depth of an experienced man. Sometimes he prefers to be only an observer. This enables him to see inside the other persons and to judge the situations around him.

Casy decides to follow Tom to search for the Joads. When they meet the family, they discover that they must move to California to find some work to get their living. When Tom's grandmother asks Casy to give a prayer before breakfast, he insists that he is a preacher no more. However, finally he prays mechanically without a soul_ without deep religious sense:

He paused, but the bowed heads stayed down, for they had been trained like dogs to rise at the "amen" signal. "I can't say no

grace like I use' ta say. I'm glad of the holiness of breakfast. I'm glad there's love here. That's all." The heads stayed down. The preacher looked around. "I've got your breakfast cold," he said; and then he remembered. "Amen, " he said and then all the heads rose up.

(GW.: 296).

The ex-preacher accompanies the Joads in their trip to find a new home. He suffers with them the predicaments and handicaps of the road. When Tom's grandfather dies at the road to California, Casy says a prayer mechanically. Also, when the grandmother becomes sick, Tom's mother asks him to say a prayer, but he refuses. He does not want to fool her or anybody else. He confesses that he is not religious. Above all, he admits that he does not have a God:

"I got no God," he said.

"You got a God. Don't make no difference if you don' know what he looks like." The preacher bowed his head. She watched him apprehensively. And when he raised his head again she looked relieved. "That's good," she said. "That's what I needed. Somebody close enough_ to pray. (GW.: 443).

In one of their stops, in one of the camps of the migrants, Tom hits a policeman. Casy persuades him to escape. He tells the police that he is the one who hits the policeman. They put him in prison. There he meets men who enlightens him. After his release, he becomes a leader of a group who make a strike to enforce the owners of lands to rise the wages of the workers. The owners do not

approve this. Casy is killed, precisely at the time when he meets Tom again.

Harold Bloom explains that Casy's speech before his death is an orator's epitaph. People think him a leader only because he talks so much. Bloom suggests that he is a leader "an Okie Moses, and he dies a fitting death" (Bloom: 361). After the death of Casy, Tom kills the man who hits the preacher to death. He escapes to the wilderness. His mother is the only one who brings him food. When his youngest sister, Ruthie, tells about his crime, his mother comes to warn him. From his conversation

with his mother, it seems that he is very influenced by Casy.

Tom wants to take Casy's attitude and to call for freedom. Finally, he adopts Casy's case_ the case of the oppressed people:

Lookie, Ma. I been all day an' all night hidin' alone. Guess who I been thinkin' about? Casy! He talked a lot. Used ta bother me. But now I been thinkin' what he said an' remember_ all of it. (GW.: 653)

Then Casy becomes a guide even after his death. Though he denies God, Steinbeck gives the impression that Casy is a good man. He also takes care to show Casy's irreligious attitudes though sometimes he compares himself to Christ who chose the wilderness as a shelter from the outer world.

2.2. The Joads: The Striving Generation

Gray points out that the family of the Joads flee from danger trying to find their way home, to a new home which will give them

a secure means of life and enable them to achieve dignity. They meet different kinds of people. Moreover, they encounter many events, disasters, and hardships (Gray: 14).

In one of the camps the Joads meet a group of people who are "Jesus lovers". These people are portrayed as cruel merciless persons. They haunt the new comers to drag them into their group. One of the members of this group warns Rose of Sharon that if she dances and hugs her dance companion, she will lose her baby. This frightens her. This woman is called Mrs. Sandry. She tells Rose's mother that the camp is full of sinners and she must be aware of the sins and the sinners:

The sinners is awful strong around about. Wicket people, wicket goin's-on that a lamb' blood Christian jes' can't hardly stan'. They's sinners all around us. (GW.: 550).

Moreover, Steinbeck reveals how Jesus lovers are hostile while those who are not believers are good and kind. The members of this group isolate themselves from the other people. This can be noticed clearly in the scene of the dancing party in the camp:

In the distance, the Jesus lovers watched their restive children. "Look on sin," they said. "Them folks is ridin' to hell on a poker. It's a shame the godly got to see it". And their children were silent and nervous. (Ibid.: 574).

However the Joads do not mix with this group. They do not agree with their sophisticated ideas which bring more misery to the miserable.

Hyman indicates that Ma is the most developed character, Casy is the most significant, but Tom becomes the focus of the book (Hyman: 195). Then the Joads family is in the core of *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, Tom's mother has a leading role in the family. All the members of the family respect her opinion. All of them obey her orders. But, at moments she grieves and becomes more demanding and angry because of the cruelty of life.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* there are commentary chapters. These chapters comment on the migrants' trip. One of them talk about the preachers. The preachers are described as vicious and lairs. They say what they do not do:

Like to stay drunk all the time. Who says it's bad? Who dares to say it's bad? Preachers_ but they got their own kinda drunkenness. (GW.: 558).

Preachers wash people from their sins. Steinbeck wonders what kind of sins they are washing people from: "Wisht I knowed what all the sins was, so I could do 'em." (Ibid.: 561). Then Steinbeck criticizes the men of religion and their actions. He does not respect the religion that train people to do things mechanically without a sense or knowing their real meaning.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes hardships raise good strong people. Sometimes, instead of crushing the miserable, difficulties enable them to face their hopeless future bravely. But, when these people lack the most important principle in life: believing in a mighty supreme power, they will swirl around the same meaningless aims. Believing in God does not appeal to most of Steinbeck's characters. It seems that they only believe in man's strength and abilities. He makes his characters choose their way, but the way is hard to be trodden. Steinbeck also believes in the power of man within a group. That is why he presents the Joads as one entity passes through the same situations and hold the same attitudes.

Casy is one of the effective characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He hates his previous position as a preacher. He says that he does not have a God. Yet, Steinbeck gives him a significant role. He becomes a leader for the poor hungry farmers. He dies like a martyr. This is one of the existential attitudes: to deny the presence of God and to emphasise the role of man. However, it cannot be said exactly that Steinbeck is an existentialist. But, *The Grapes of Wrath* presents some of the attitudes and thoughts hold by the existentialists.

Usually, difficulties are suffered by the whole group together. They suffer from unemployment, poverty, unjust, and disbelief. The only thing these people care about is their survival. They believe in their existence. They seek their freedom and try to establish a new home which saves them from losing their hopes. But

even this does not save them from the fact that they are irreligious and do not trust God.

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الدين المفقود في رواية جون شتاينبك عناقيد الغضب

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الخلاصة

لقد اتخذ الدين في أمريكا و أوروبا خلال العصر الحديث منحى " آخر عبه في العصور السابقة. في الواقع توقف الناس عن الإيمان بوجود ألاله الخالق للكون المسيطر على شؤون العالم لعدة أسباب. إن من بين هذه الأسباب الحروب و الأزمات الاقتصادية و الصراعات السياسية و فوق كل ذلك فقدان الحساس بالأمان.

تحاول هذه الدراسة إلقاء الضوء على أحد المدارس الفلسفية التي أنكرت وجود ألاله. يتناول المبحث الأول المدرسة الوجودية مع تناول أهم أفكار و توجهات أهم أنصارها. كذلك يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على فكرة الإنسان-المجموعة في رواية الكاتب الأمريكي جون شتاينبك عناقيد الغضب كأحد مفاهيم الوجودية.

يتعلق المبحث الثاني بتحليل أهم الشخصيات في رواية عناقيد الغضب، خصوصاً رجل الدين السابق جيم كاسي لأنه يمثل فكرة فقدان الإيمان و الاعتقاد بالإله. ينتهي البحث بالخاتمة التي تحتوي على أهم ما وجدته الدراسة.