



Ecofeminist Reading of *Grapes of Wrath*: Women as Life Giving Force

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Abstract:

This paper makes study of John Steinbeck's portrayal of two female characters as life giving force in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by adopting the ecofeminist theory and perspective as its modality. The main objective of this article is to explore the two female characters, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon who endure the adverse external forces as the nature herself- reviving, renewing and resuscitating - to live and save life.

The two strong female members of Joad family, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon maintain their spirit of bounty and compassion high throughout the time of crisis. Ma joad's role expands with the shift in stereotypical gender role at the household of Joads when Pa Joad who is tied to land loses his ego and spirit, and gradually becomes nostalgic. Ma's holding the powerful stature in the family in turn exhibits the vital power of hope for survival. She is a symbolic matriarchal power to reinforce human connection who sustains heroic will to survive and to humanize natural instinct during the massive economic threat on the family. Ma and Pa both are trapped on the inflow of change of time and space; however, Ma's philosophy of flow underlies her movement to change. Though Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon are stripped off of their domesticity and maternity respectively they preserve the spirit of compassion to save humanity.

Keywords: Ecofeminist, Androcentric, Microcosm, Macrocosm, Domesticity

1. Introduction

The social consequence rendered in John Steinbeck's novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, invited by environmental and ecological crisis has brought the farmers of Oklahoma on the road. The two female characters, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon of Joad household are the twin poles of domesticity and maternity who drive the novel forcefully. The novel is a saga of a family in particular and the migrants in general from the mid west of America moving to the west, California, a promising land. Agro industry oppresses and conquers the nature for money during 1930s of America that resulted in ecological disaster, the crop failure, and eventually the farmers from mid west are driven out and displaced of the generation of farm land. Though Steinbeck's fundamental concern is the migration as a recurrent human condition shaped by historical and social contingencies, the exploitation of nature especially the land for the large scale of mechanized production

ensuing the crisis is tacitly delineated in the novel.

Steinbeck's characters are farmers whose sustenance is land and when they are disconnected and dispossessed of their land they lose their substrata. The female characters here strive more through events and work toward a new identity. As the narrative unfolds the road drama of the Joad family, the characters evolve in the process of struggle, confrontation of hardships, crisis, and disillusionment caused by geographical and social causes. Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, who initially seem to be unaware of their potential, gradually perceive their role and become part of the larger whole. Within the tough macrocosm of depression era of 1930s the two female characters perform bravely and benevolently in their microcosm. Steinbeck has depicted the two female characters in two fold; one the victim of poverty and dislocation due to crop failure and debt, and another is transcendental consciousness of love and

compassion. The writer strongly implies that the values of nature system is higher and all encompassing than the patriarchal dualism and ruling class system. The novel evinces the ecofeminist consciousness breaking the hierarchy of patriarchal norms of American society and eulogizing the nature as all encompassing force. The Women he has presented inherit the vital power of sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and strength at the time of crisis who are capable to bring change, unity, and harmony. Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon are the symbol of nature, holding the power of life and hope. They move with their entire domestic structure packed and ramshackled on the truck though they can't keep their house in real on the new land. Goggans asserts, 'As racialized entrants into California via their subaltern status and isolated living spaces, the migrant mothers Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon recognize the myth to which they were denied access and attempt to organize a new identity' [1].

2. Methodology

The interpretive method has been chosen to analyze the chief characters of the novel. Ecofeminist literary theory has been adopted to scrutinize the social setting and personal behaviors of the characters, and narrative style of the primary text. In order to analyze this novel, several books, journals and articles by prior researchers have been taken into consideration as secondary sources.

3. Ecofeminism

Ecological feminism termed as ecofeminism, the word first coined by the French thinker Francoise d' Eaubonne renders that there are important connections between women and nature's oppression. Ecofeminism is a new terminology in western metaphysics that evolved through various social movements of late 1970s and early 1980s. The thrust of this social, political and philosophical movement is to reject the exploitation of women and nature by male-dominated system. Western wisdom has denominated women and nature as emotion, animals, and the body whereas elevated men by associating them with reason, humans, culture, and

mind. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all kinds of oppressions emphasizing that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without liberating nature from the oppressive grip of androcentric hegemony. The dualism, the ways of feminizing nature and naturalizing and animalizing women has served a justification for the suppression of women, animals, and the earth. Development of science, industry, and capitalism is attributed to western patriarchy which in turn exploited nature for money and comfort. Vandana Shiva contends in her book *Staying Alive* that development is "the extension of the project of wealth creation in the modern western pattern of economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or the exclusion of women (of the west and non west), on the exploitation and degradation of nature" [2]. Shiva argues this development process excluded women (the marginal, farmers, indigenous people) causing the loss of their control over nature's sustenance base. It drained the resources away from the needy ones evidently as "The privatization and revenue generation displaced women more critically, eroding their traditional land use right" [2]. Organic and self subsistence agriculture is substituted by cotton farm which kills the nature's cycle of renewability in red country in *Grapes of Wrath*. Tractor machines are brought to plough the land for commodity production dismantling their house and settlement at the order of bank. Commodity grows but nature shrinks. Poverty touches the women more severely because they are double marginalized and are primary sustainers with nature.

Nature has been identified as a nurturing mother from the ancient time that links women's history with the history of environment and ecological change. Scientific revolution undermined the central position of earth, as an organic whole. Carolyn Merchant condemns the western culture and treatment of nature and women as a resource and subordinate being. She emphasizes on "values and social structures, based not on the domination of women and nature as resources but on the full expression of both male and female talent and on the maintenance of environmental integrity" [3]. Ecological feminists build on the philosophy that nature and women are considered as close to each other; earth's natural function and women's capacity of reproduction has salient resemblance. Women's life giving power of

gestation, birthing, and feeding the offspring with breast milk is analogous to earth's potency to provide rich produce and complex life biosphere both considered sacred as Gaard and Gruin emphasize the Goddess religion which sanctifies the earth and women's fertility and is immune of any kind of hierarchy seeing the divinity as immanent[4]. Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon rise from the individualized forms of consciousness to the level of class and collective humanity.

4. Ma Joad's exit conflated with hope

Ma Joad, the mother of Joads household appears as a feeder from the beginning itself who happily agrees to share her morning meal with the strangers when proposed by her husband. Tom who is trying to give surprise to his mother hears her voice "cool, calm, drawl, friendly and humble" from outside. Her readiness to share her meal with "the fellows just coming along the road" and taking in the preacher pleasantly even at the time of crisis radiates her generosity of a woman, a mother like the nature herself. Ma's physical description from Tom's eyes gives a picture as such,

"Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child bearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of grey cloth in which there had once been colored flowers, but the color was washed now . . . Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and superhuman understanding" [5].

Ma Joad is a strong foundation of Joads atop of her domesticity, mothering, cooking, nurturing, and speaking her mind in decision making condition. It is highly realized by Tom and other members that "She had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess" and by herself, "if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone" [5]. Ma's position in the family is tacitly exhibited as Ma's presence is considered equally important as the head of the family and other male members during the family

counsel; the male members wait for her to come back from the kitchen "for Ma was powerful in the group" [5]. Her movement from the family counsel to inside the kitchen to tend the meal silently foregrounds her significance in the family.

Ma Joad has been recognized by Steinbeck as the good mother archetype providing emotional, spiritual support and physical sustenance like the "earth mother who grants nature and humanity fruitfulness" and who is "integral to the creative matrix of the cosmos and holds the promise of perfection, beauty and unity" [6]. Ma practises compassion even in the unfavourable context of migration and encourages her children especially Rose of Sharon, the self discipline and she sustains her generosity till the end passing it to her daughter whose act of nurturing a starving man brings the novel to an overwhelming end. Steinbeck's narrative prepares Ma for the journey of her forceful choice after she is shoved out of her house. The journey would lend her the unhomely experience shattering her dream of having a little white house among the trees in California. Ma's exit from Oklahoma infers the unexpected adventure, hardships and challenges. Leaving home, though a physical departure brings all kinds of possibilities- hope, fear, despair and uncertainty. Arun Gupto deciphers,

Leaving home can be understood as performing acts: acts on streets, roads, journeys, multiplicities of places and peoples, carnivals, celebrations, loneliness, meeting the unknown, the fear and joys of knowing the unknown. . . . There is a hope that outside is different in terms of problems and conflicts, there are expectations that there would be a different world beyond the walls of this home, this city. [7]

The moment she loses her domesticity at Oklahoma, there is a challenge she should take up as a migrant mother who hopes to re-establish in their dreamland trusting the handbills to be true to provide them the job of labours in California.

5. Ma's Domestic Power and Connecting Bond

The Narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath* is organized in tripartite structure, viz. Oklahoma, life on the road and life after their arrival in California. Much of the novel's plot occurs on the road. Ma Joad recreates her home-site in every point they stop in their journey, literally creating the domestic scene in that new landscape. By revealing every description of Ma Joad's domestic world with dwindling resource every day, Steinbeck unveils migrant mother's concealed domestic labour. Her doing of laundry and cooking before leaving the house and at the government camp signifies her domestic enterprise, her desire and efforts to keep her domesticity stable and tidy. Ma's social power has been generated from her productive domestic exertion notwithstanding her domestic efforts entangled with her effort of seeking employment and economic security. Joad family enacts the working class migrants, farmers turned labour in the agro-industry of California. Steinbeck recruits the female figure, Ma Joad and her domestic realm to redefine human values and blurs the dichotomy of inside and outside, domestic and economic. Jane Williamson states that the novel "breaks down the walls of the domestic sphere by linking the daily work of the private and public, creating multiple gendered domesticities, and showing that human caretaking□the necessary force survival . . . crosses gendered boundaries" [8]. The writer doesn't seem to rewrite the gender role equation by showing the mother taking the strong hold of the family.

Ma Joad's role is the practical expansion of social power out of need extending beyond the individual family concern and survival. When Pa Joad expresses his qualms "Seems like time is changed, . . . Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now" [5]. With the expansion of Ma's role there occurs a shift in gender roles, individual identity and community identity. The migrant family becomes outsider and Okies; the landless farmers turn into labourer. Ma shows her leading role as Pa Joad becomes passive and no more a head of the family. The Joads become the outsider and dweller in rag town. With the increasing economic hardships and other crisis coming along, mother makes the decision and father seeks her consent in every matter in order to maintain the

family. Ma Joad's effort and ability to keep the family going materially and emotionally is the sine qua non to struggle for survival against the chaos of capitalist system. Ma Joad doesn't confine herself to home and care taking. Her competence expands through her cross country journey by creating connection with other families through her domestic realm as well as working in the field and acting benignly.

After the catastrophic dust ruins the crops, health, and the economy of the farmers and the bank shoves the families out of their houses Ma Joad is thrown to confusion leaving her landless, moneyless, and workless. Her everyday domestic ritual seems to even out the oddities and confusions of her life. Besides cooking she keeps on controlling, feeding, and comforting her family members; she keeps on influencing the family decision. She monitors the meagre resource and tries to maintain domestic stability in contrast to the instability outside. Cooking is the faith of Ma that keeps everyone alive and comfortable. "Ma literally creates- or directs the creation of- the family camps by routinely laying out bedding for sleeping, boxes for sitting, and dishes for eating at each site. . . no one recognizes this ritual becomes a method of controlling chaos and asserting authority" [8]. Ma Joad's crucial dispute with Pa Joad about the separation of the family members when their truck breaks down exhibits her revolt and matriarchal power. Ma always enacting to protect the family suddenly becomes violent when the male members propose to split for a short time due to the technical problem. She flaunts herself aggressively wielding jack handle, and threatening Pa Joad and insisting all family members should be together, "I ain't a-gonna go. . . On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me . . . All we got is the family unbroken. Like a bunch of cows, when the lobos are ranging, stick all together" [5]. This is how she enfeebles Pa Joad and insists on family unity.

Ma Joad emerging as a leader of the family is a homemaker really making her home. She represents alternate female state of mind to run and manage the family at time when male ego has been thwarted and incapacitated by external force, viz. capitalist economic dominion. Gladstein describes Ma's role as it becomes dominant when the novel progresses,

Ma's challenge is made to prevent the

weakening of the group structure, not for personal power. The fact that she acts on instinct as an agent for group preservation is underlined by her surprise at what she has done. Once the group realizes that she has taken control, that she is the power, they decide not to try to fight her [9].

When Pa is exhausted on being penniless, homeless, and jobless it's Ma who encourages in an ironic tone that things should be accepted and life should go on. Ma does not let herself weighed down by past memories, instead she suggest the male members to live by the single day that comes ahead. Ma's strength is like an incessant flow of water, the nature herself despite the intermittent forces huddling it "Man, he lives in Jerks. . . Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on" [5].

Ma Joad makes relentless effort to fuse the individual Joad together into a single whole in order to strengthen the hope of survival. She holds the family with her will, fighting the various detrimental circumstances. However Noah, Tom, and Al distance themselves shedding water on her faith on family solidarity, Ma accepts the fact of changing family dynamics. The preacher, Tom and Rose of Sharon are the individuals emerged from that same household and domesticity of Ma who make decisions and enact for the mutual welfare and wellbeing.

6. Ma and Rose of Sharon's Mutualism

Robert DeMott in the introduction of the novel analyses, notwithstanding the novel being the significant indictment of the myth of Promised Land, it can be extolled for the social groups capacity for survival in hostile world [5]. The Joads engage in mutualism both inside and beyond their family group. They merge and cooperate in the groups in an increasingly competitive environment. Believing on give and take relationship amongst the migrants they accept and ask for help and willingly help each other every way they can. Steinbeck emphasizes on this mutualism and group survival in the interchapter 14, "I lost my land changed into we lost our land . . . This is the beginning - from 'I' to 'We'" [5]. Joads and Wilson join together for mutual advantage as they are

connected more emotionally and Ma explains "Each'll help each, and we will git to California" [5]. The powerful incident of altruism and mutualism is evinced at the end of the novel when Rose of Sharon makes an attempt to save a starving man in the barn by donating her breast milk intended for her stillborn child.

Rose of Sharon in the silent appeal and approval from Ma, acts out benignly which in turn benefits both of them; a dying man getting nourishment and Rose's bodily pressure being released reducing the chance of infection. Andy Smith in her article "Mutualism and Group Selection in *The Grapes of Wrath*" explains this context as "While the mytho-religious symbolism of the tableau certainly evokes the sacrifice of a holy mother, it also aligns with the other example of self organized mutualism presented by Steinbeck throughout the novel" [10]. Despite the ethical questions, the writer rules out all these constructed conventions by regarding the spontaneous mutualism at times of survival needs. Rose of Sharon's response towards the starving man is not a sudden enactment but the training and schooling of her mother throughout. In the beginning she dreams to have her own luxury house at California where she will have her baby tended in shared household of her husband. It is thwarted by Connie himself, her husband after he runs away. Ma neutralizes her daughter when she is upset and emotionally hurt. Rose of Sharon's weak temperament is transformed to maturity with Ma's continuous care and counselling. And no doubt it's Ma Joad who instigates to dedicate her nurturing potential just in time of crisis to save a withering life. Gladstein explains, "By giving her breast to the old man, Rose of Sharon takes her place with Ma as earth goddess. Her youth and fertility combine with her selfless act to signify continuity and hope" [9].

7. Conclusion

The paper made study of the powerful presentation of two female characters, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon in the context of economic depression era of 1930s' USA. It's not just the story of a family that struggles to deal with the forces which they have no control but also a universal family bond, unceasing humanity, and all encompassing love and kindness of

femininity. Steinbeck explores the broken socio-economic condition by representing the life of the home which in turn does not remain untouched. With the changing socio-economic condition, a new dimension of stature emerges in the household of Joads. Ma and Pa negotiate the space in order to survive and Ma performs the masculine role in propelling the family onward. The novel anticipates the hardship of the farmers in future by describing the apocalyptic state of environment in red country due to the massive transfer of land usage from the generation of farmers to the large companies. In the macrocosm of tough scuffle against poverty, deaths, separation, and homelessness Ma Joad holds her spirit high within her microcosm of domestic realm. The migrant Joads have to tackle with the local sheriff, vigilantes and the corporate farmers who discriminate and denominate the migrants as the 'other'. They evolve into new identity of roadside migrant culture that grows to another dimension of class and community though they are treated as intruders.

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