The Culture of Patriarchy in John Steinbeck's: The Grapes of Wrath

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Abstract

The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, is a masterpiece in American literature written by the notorious American author John Steinbeck. The novel is about the journey of a family of migrant workers the Joads during the Great Depression. The family leaves Oklahoma and goes to California in order to improve its social conditions, utterly degraded after the outcome of the economic crisis and the Dust Bowl, a natural phenomenon that weakened agriculture. The present paper seeks to show the decline of patriarchy, in favor of matriarchy throughout the storyline. Indeed, the reader is flabbergasted to notice the way in which Steinbeck dispossesses Tom Joad Senior, from his lifetime role as the head of the family, in favor of a powerful Ma Joad, a strong and confident woman. Moreover, in the beginning of the novel, we identify Tom Joad Junior as being the hero of the literary work; however, his sister Rose of Sharon ends up endorsing the role of heroine. In fact, the work of fiction ends up on her heroic act of breastfeeding a total stranger in order to save his life from a slow and torturing death.

Keywords: patriarchal, matriarchal, identity, dust bowl, Great Depression.
Introduction

John Steinbeck's masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* was highly criticized and even banned according to Karolides Nicholas. The American author, Maxwell Geismar is one of those who did not appreciate *The Grapes of Wrath* and this is evident when he refers to Steinbeck in his book entitled *Writers in Crisis: The American Novel, 1925-1940* and where we find such statements: “Lacking the art of ‘The Pastures of Heaven’ and the realism of ‘In Dubious Battle,’ marking, as it also does, a return to Steinbeck’s glamor, theatrics, and simplicity of view after the conflicts of his earlier proletarian novel, thus sentimentalized, often distorted, ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ is not at all Steinbeck’s best novel.” (265) Personally, I disagree with such comments and think that nowadays, no scholar could deny *The Grapes of Wrath*’s importance in American literature and its legacy throughout the world.

The novel recounts the journey of the Joads, a family from Oklahoma compelled to go to California where they hope to improve their critical situation during the Great Depression. In their quest to restart their lives from zero and construct a brighter future for them and coming generations, the family is weakened. There are many characters in the novel; however in order to show the decline of men’s authority especially father’s one, I make a distinction between male and female characters. I show how gradually Steinbeck’s fictional male characters lose their supremacy to strong female characters.

Thus, in this present paper I start by defining patriarchy and show the way Grampa and Tom Joad Senior exercise their authorities over the other members of their family especially in the beginning of the novel. However, throughout the narration, we discover that a whole nation is suffering due to a general critical economic situation, worsen with a natural phenomenon the Dust Bowl. This situation subverts men’s, positions, who are destabilized to the point of losing their supremacy in their families. This transition of power from men to women shows that basically we move from a patriarchal system to a matriarchal one in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* during the Great Depression.

I. Patriarchy’s Supremacy

First of all, we need to define Patriarchy before proving its collapse. Patriarchy is a term which means that the father is naturally the leader of his family. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick provide the following definition in their *Key Concepts*:

The term ‘patriarchy’ literally means the ‘rule of the father’. It has been adopted by the majority of feminist theorists to refer to the way in which societies are structured through male domination over, and oppression of, women. Patriarchy therefore refers to the ways in which material and symbolic resources (including income, wealth and power) are unequally distributed between men and women, through such social institutions as the family, sexuality, the state, the economy, culture and language. (269-270)
The term has been adopted mainly by feminists such as Bell Hooks who identifies patriarchy as being: “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.” (1) She provides this definition in her essay Understanding Patriarchy which is devoted to her understanding of this term.

In her essay, Hooks recounts how much she suffered from this patriarchal thinking, and unravels a traumatic event that marked her at an early stage of her life at the age of three or four year old, when her father beat her savagely because she dared to play marbles with her brother. Generally, marbles are associated to boys’ games and girls are not allowed to play such games. Those ideas are commonly imposed by society and people who transgress those codes are not accepted in their environment.

Thus, Hooks discovered at an early stage that she must not neglect her father’s authority for her own safety. Therefore, in order to exercise his power over his daughter the father used violence in order to be obeyed. Hooks also explains that it is not acceptable for a man to be docile if he wants to be well integrated in society and she gives the example of her husband who was pushed to change under social pressure. Hence, from its birth a baby is first of all classified either as a boy or a girl depending on its genital organs, from that moment the baby boy is conditioned to be a future virile, strong brave and violent man, while on the other hand the little girl learns to become a subordinated woman who must obey her father and her husband’s authority. Women’s main role is to take care of their families by cooking, tiding their houses, nurturing their children if they have any etc. So, we notice that men are predestined by society to rule and women to obey. In this sense male characters probably dominate female characters in The Grapes of Wrath.

In order to confirm this male’s supremacy let us discover John Steinbeck’s fictional family and its characters, focusing first on males.

The Joads is a family composed of grandparents, parents and children. The first male character we are introduced to is Tom Joad Junior. He has just left McAlester’s prison where he spent three or four years for homicide. He explains to the truck driver who gives him a lift, that he killed a man in self-defense. Thus, it is an act of violence that led Tom Joad to lose years of his youth imprisoned.

Then, the second male character we are introduced to, through Tom Joad’s discussion with the truck driver is his father Old Tom Joad who is described as being financially stable being a cropper who possesses a forty acres ranch in Oklahoma. This signifies that the protagonists’ father has a certain power because he possesses a ranch. So far, no reference is done about his mother.

The following important male character in The Grapes of Wrath is a preacher, Jim Casy
who starts by admitting to Tom Joad that he sinned because he had sexual relationships with women. Thus, the first important hint about women concerns sexuality and it lowers women’s position Jim Casy tells Tom Joad that: “A girl was just a girl. You could fuck’em an’ leave ‘em. It was nothin’ to you. But to me they was holy vessels. I was savin’ their souls. An’ here with all that responsibility on me I’d just get ‘em frothin’ with the Holy Sperit, an’ then I’d take ‘em out an’ screw ‘em”. (25)

Here, the preacher admits that he took advantage of his professional position as God’s messenger on earth in order to have sexual intercourse with women who meant absolutely nothing to him. However, He thinks that on the other hand he brought to those women an enriching experience because he considers himself beyond the others as a spiritual representative. Donald Pizer explains in his Twentieth Century American literary Naturalism that this crudity of speech between Tom and Casy is an attempt by Steinbeck to naturalize those fictional characters, or as he says: “Tom and Casy share at the opening of the novel, anecdotes which establish their shrewdness, openness, and understanding in a context of crudity and occasional bestiality. But even this texture of animality in their lives helps establish their naturalness.” (68)

However, despite Casy’s defaults, Steinbeck makes of him an important spiritual character superior to other characters. Jim Casy’s supremacy lays in the fact that he is a preacher and that he exercises power on his community. The French theorist Michel Foucault coins this power emanating from religion “pastoral power”. According to him, Christianity is linked to new ethical codes that gave power to pastors whom role is to: “assure individual salvation in the next world”, sacrifice themselves for the others and make people confess their secrets. A pastor is a preacher and we see that Jim Casy has this pastoral power; we can even go beyond since we can even compare him to the prophet Jesus Christ. The first common point between Jesus Christ and Jim Casy are the initials. Moreover, at the end of his life it is said that Jesus Christ sacrificed his life for his people. Jim Casy will end up dying for the sake of destitute migrant workers and his death will end up his power.

Among the other male characters of the family we have Noah and Aleck, Tom Joad’s brothers. Uncle John a drunkard who lost his wife and feels responsible for her death. Grampa, Tom Joads grandfather and the young Connie Rivers who is Tom Joad’s brother in law, married to his sister Rose of Sharon.

The first think that we remark is the fact that male characters outnumber female characters, the most important one being Ma Joad, Rose of Sharon and Granma’. Let us focus on two characters, Gampa and Old Tom Joad because they are fathers, thus the leaders of their respective families.

As mentioned previously, most civilizations follow patriarchy in which the father rules his family. The father is the decision maker and he is the one who provides his family with all necessary things to its survival. What about Grampa and Old Tom Joad, are they still at the head of their families when a whole nation is suffering from the outcomes of The Great Depression?
Grampa is an old man who spent all of his life in Oklahoma and he is really against leaving his place despite the bad conditions that are facing the Joads who had to deal with two main problems, the dust bowl, a natural phenomenon that creates a dusty hostile setting and the economic crisis. Grampa’s name is William James Joad. He decides in the beginning of the novel to stay in his hometown, and he explains the reasons behind such a decision to his family by telling them that he does not want to leave because that is where he belongs: “This here’s my country. I b’long here. An’ I don’t give a goddamn if they’s oranges an’ grapes crowdin’ a fella outa a bed even. I ain’t a-going. This country ain’t no good, but it’s my country. No, you all go ahead. I’ll jus’ stay right here where I b’long.” (113)

Despite his insistence, the old man was taken by force with them along the road to their way to California, a place in which he did not believe in. Unfortunately, Tom Joad’s Grandfather will never reach California “the Promised Land” because he dies en route of a fatal stroke. It is important to note Grampa’s importance in the plot line; thanks to this character Steinbeck shows that when a man becomes old he loses his authority and becomes powerless. Grampa is represented as a stubborn old character that spent all of his life in his hometown and when he is depraved from it, he ends up dying. And this is very symbolic in the sense that when someone is well rooted in a place it is very difficult uprooting him without drawbacks, this idea is reinforced in the following quotation from *The Grapes of Wrath*: “An’ Grampa didn’ die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place.” (147) Thus, death for Steinbeck is not only the physical death but also the spiritual one.

Before dying Grampa became very fragile and weak and even made something unusual to a man which is to cry: “Without warning Grampa began to cry. His Chin wavered and his old lips tightened over his mouth and he sobbed hoarsely.” (136-137)

This statement announces the imminent end of Grampa’s authority. Traditionally, it is the son who carries on the path of his father; however it is Granma who is momentarily put forward in the narration. After her husband’s death, we have the impression that she becomes the leader or at the head of her family for a while: “Granma moved with dignity and held her head high. She walked for the family and held her head straight for the family.” (139)

Her position gives the impression that all of a sudden she gains power. Despite the tragic death of her husband, she is not desperate on the contrary her attitude inspires toughness and strength. Thus, we have the impression that instead of her son Tom Joad, Granma is given importance after her husband’s death. What about Old Tom Joad?

In the beginning of the novel, he is a character who has a good position because thanks to the information that we learn from his son, we are introduced to a farmer who owns a ranch. However, unlike what the reader expects, we discover a dispossessed man who lost everything to banks: “Pa borrowed money from the bank, and now the bank wants the land. The land company
– that’s the bank when it has land – wants tractors, not families on the land.” (152)

He is at the head of a large family composed of a wife, Ma Joad and six children, Tom Joad Junior, Aleck, Noah, Rose of Sharon, Ruthie who is just twelve-year-old and Winfield the last child of the family is ten-year-old. His family’s situation is not unique, plenty of people were harmed during that dim period and this is evident in the intercalary chapters in which we understand that Steinbeck wants to generalize the situation of those Okies seeking a work at California. In the commencement, Old Tom Joad is the one who guides his family and makes decisions. His son, Tom Joad needs his instructions to act. For instance, Tom Joad junior agreed with his father to drug his grandfather in order to take him despite his will to California. Thus so far Old Tom Joad is the one making the decisions in his family.

Other important decisions were taken by the men of the family such as leaving Oklahoma to California. Old Tom Joad is the one who announced to his son that they were leaving despite his mother’s resentment who was afraid to lose her son. The father also took the decision to welcome his son to join them throughout this journey. Thus, in the beginning of the novel we have powerful men who take important decisions concerning their families. One must not forget that this supremacy of men over women has existed for ages and reinforced by religions. In monolithic religions such as Christianity or Islam, for instance, it is believed that Eve the first woman was created thanks to Adam’s rib. Thus, religiously speaking men are privileged over women. This power in the hands of men is explained primarily by the physical differences between men and women. Men are believed to be stronger and are inherently violent. According to Howard Levant power is only possible through violence. However, power had also led to human beings ruin, World War One is one of the examples of the impact of power on humanity which was about to be annihilated. Accordingly, power has also drawbacks and among them, destruction.

During the Great Depression, small farmers found themselves weak in front of powerful financial institutions. The economic crisis result is the impoverishment of a whole nation and a great part of the victims are Okies. Those people lost their properties, their wealth, their dignity and men lost their power and ended up insignificant towards the end of the novel.

In his book A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, Warren French quotes Steinbeck’s Their Blood Is Strong:

The father is vaguely aware that there is a culture of hookworm in the mud along the river bank. He knows the children will get it on their bare feet. But he hasn’t the will nor the energy to resist. Too many things have happened to him. This is the lower class of the camp. This is what the man in the tent will be in six months; what the man in the paper house has washed down and his children have sickened or died, after the loss of dignity and spirit have cut him down to a kind of sub-humanity. (63)
The man described in the previous quotation is in one of those squatting camps in which found themselves living migrant workers. We strikingly notice that Steinbeck declassifies those poor Okies who become part of a kind of under category. However, men seem to be weaker than women and it is because of those weaknesses that men lost their supremacy and women took their families responsibilities. Men are disconcerted when they have to face difficulties in their lives. And when they get old, they are even more fragile. On the contrary, we will see that aged women become wiser and stronger. Thus, the next part proves that we moved from a patriarchal to a matriarchal system in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

II. **Matriarchy’s New Authority**

After showing that the Joads’ male characters are the one ruling their family in the beginning of the novel, I will prove in this part that this authority is going to gradually decline in favor of women who turn to be stronger facing difficult times. Thus we have the impression that we move from a patriarchal system to a matriarchal one.

If patriarchy means the rule of the father we deduce that matriarchy means the rule of the mother. Before asserting that we move from patriarchy to matriarchy I will start by showing how female characters evolved throughout the novel. This means that female characters are not the same in the first chapters and at the end of the novel. They move from an inferior position to a superior one. In the sense that in the beginning of the novel at Oklahoma they are attributed tasks such as cooking in the kitchen or washing clothes, but in California there is a clear change, women start to work in fields as men and contribute in providing money to spend on their families’ exactly as men. There are three main female characters in the novel, Granma, Ma Joad and her daughter Rose of Sharon. I will mainly focus on the two last because Granma dies short after her husband’s death, when the family finally reached California.

We are introduced to Ma Joad in the eighth chapter. Old Tom Joad says that she is preparing breakfast, thus she is firstly located in the kitchen: “She’ll yell breakfast in a minute. I heard her slap the salt pork in the pan a good time ago.” (75) Her husband does not announce her son’s arrival, he just tells her that two strangers want to join them for breakfast and she accepts generously to welcome them. So far, she fits the way women are stereotyped. Women must above all spend hours in their kitchens cooking for their families. Moreover, women must be nice and obedient to their husbands who are the one who are supposed to make the decisions.

Physically, the emphasis is not done on Ma Joad’s beauty, she is just a woman whom body underwent changes due to childbearing. Tom describes her thus: “Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work. […] Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken.” (76)
Accordingly, Ma Joad is a woman who already has her importance in her family. We could imagine the kind of tasks she does and that are the reason behind her son’s admiration. She is a woman who does her best for the sake and the well-being of her family. That is why she is above all, praised for her motherhood. Among her activities, she has to wash dirty clothes and this also have to do with domestic chores in chapter ten: “she filled up her bucket with hot water from the stove, and she put in dirty clothes and began punching them down into the soapy water.” (93)

In this same chapter, the family still did not reach California and men’s authority is still evident since Ma waits for her son to speak before she does:

Ma looked to Tom to speak, because he was a man, but Tom did not speak. She let him have the chance that was his right, and then she said, “Why, we’d be proud to have you. ’Course I can’t say right now; Pa says all the men’ll talk tonight and figger when we gonna start. I guess maybe we better not say till all the men come. John an’ Pa an’ Noah an’ Tom an’ Grampa an’ Al an’ Connie, they’re gonna figger soon’s they get back. But if they’s room I’m pretty sure we’ll be proud to have ya.” (95-96)

From this passage we understand many meaningful things; on the one hand, men have the priority to express themselves. Women allow themselves to talk only if men had finished to say what they wanted it to say.

On the other hand, decisions are made by men as mentioned beforehand because Ma cannot allow Jim Casy to travel with them without the permission of the family’s men. However, personally she does not mind the presence of the preacher as well as her mother Granma who thinks that it would be interesting to bring him with them because he makes awesome religious sermons.

Ma Joad is successful in convincing the rest of the group to accept Casy and again it is clear that her son venerates her and highlights her importance among her family: “Ma was powerful in the group.” (105)

The Joads decide to slaughter a pig before they leave Oklahoma. The preacher wants to help Ma Joad salting the pig; she stops him by telling him that there are works that must be done by women and others by men. Casy convinces her that there are no differences in the dialogue that occurred between them:

The preacher stepped beside her. “Leave me salt down this meat,” he said. “I can do it. There’s other stuff for you to do.” She stopped her work then and inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing. And her hands were crusted with salt, pink with fluid from the fresh pork. “It’s women’s work,” she said finally. “It’s all work,” the preacher replied. “They’s too much of it to split it up to men’s or women’s work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat.” (109)

It is clear that Ma Joad is flabbergasted by Casy’s insistence on doing a woman’s job as she says. However, thanks to Casy’s reply it is clear that John Steinbeck is in favor of equality between
men and women. It is probably for her the first time that a man wants to share with her a task destined to women. Thus, Casy does something which is unfathomable for a man to do during the thirties. From that moment, we feel that there are changes in Ma Joad’s attitude. And those changes are clear in Chapter sixteen when she refuses firmly to leave the place where they are:

Ma stepped in front of him. “I ain’t a-gonna go.” “What you mean, you ain’t gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family.” Pa was amazed at the revolt. Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. I ain’t a-gonna go,” she said. “I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind.” And now Ma’s mouth set hard. She saidsoftly, “On’y way you gonna get me to go is whup me.” (169)

Ma Joads’ act is unusual and it is probably the first time in her life that she takes a firm decision and defends her idea such way. She gained power like men do, by acting violently. She threatened her husband with a jack and she did so for the sake of her family’s unity, which is very important to her; In his study of John Steinbeck’s *The grapes of Wrath* Warren French explains Ma’s reaction as follows: “When Ma threatens Pa with the jack-handle to prevent the party’s splitting up, she acts to preserve the integrity of the family.” (103) Pa Joad thinks that his wife is nuts before surrendering. We could assert that it is from that moment that the patriarch lost his supremacy and the matriarch, Ma Joad took his place as the head of her family and this is confirmed by the narrator: “The eyes of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control.” (70)

At the end of the novel, Ma Joad is going to transmit her power to her daughter Rose of Sharon. Let us first show how Rose of Sharon also known as Rosasharn Tom Joad’s sister, moves from being a delicate young pregnant woman to a highly symbolic heroic character. When we are first introduced to her, we learn that she is married to a young man of nineteen-year-old Connie Rivers and that she is about to have a baby, being pregnant. As her mother, her main tasks are to cook and help her mother: “Ma and Rose of Sharon washed up the dishes and piled them on the table.” (106)

And like her mother she also washes clothes: “Rose of Sharon brought out all the clothes the family possessed: the overalls, the thick-soled shoes, the rubber boots, the worn best suits, the sweaters and sheepskin coats. And she packed these tightly into a wooden box and got into the box and tramped them down. (108)

In the twentieth Chapter her husband cowardly leaves her in order to realize his dreams by himself. This act underlines this character’s selfishness. Being afraid of his future responsibilities towards the coming baby and in times of hardship, this young future father decided to escape his duties in order to live his life freely without any bounds. It is clear that he lost any authority on his family by acting this way and Rose of Sharon must face all of a sudden a stressful situation and becomes responsible of the future of the baby she is carrying in her wombs. Rose of Sharon’s baby does not survive; if Steinbeck stopped his novel after the baby’s death it would be
meaningless. The unborn child symbolizes the victims of the Dust Bowl, the Okies who died starving in a city abundant with fruits and vegetables. His mother failed to protect her child however thanks to her milk, she breastfeeds a man dying in a cave. Thus, Rose of Sharon ends up very powerful, since Steinbeck gives her the power of saving lives.

**Conclusion**

All in all, in the beginning of the novel men are the ones who lead their families however throughout the journey that the Joads undertook, men lost gradually their position and at the end they are insignificant. Jim Casy is killed; Tom Joad hides himself because he killed Casy’s killer. In the final scene Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon are the only characters that remain. They symbolize the ultimate hope for humanity. If we resume women’s strength it is in relation with their compassion and the love they share with the rest of their families. Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon suffered a lot in their lives. Women tend to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of their families. However, Steinbeck goes beyond this idea and showed that the only spark of hope he sees in humanity lies in women. Thus the final scene of the novel is highly symbolic. Rose of Sharon saves the life of a starving man in a cave breastfeeding him. By ending his novel this way Steinbeck highlights the importance of women in order to save humanity. Women have the power to reconstruct what have been deconstructed, to save what is about to fade, to survive the worst crisis ever. Despite, their supposed weaknesses, Steinbeck gives as the impression that the sole survivors of the treacherous adventures of the Joads are those two female characters. Subsequently, it is logical to conclude that there is a clear shift from patriarchy to matriarchy in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. 
References

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