

COLLAPSE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SELECT WORKS OF JOHN STEINBECK

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Abstract

*John Steinbeck, in his writings, represented the American society during the dark and turbulent era of the Great Depression of the 1930s. This research paper aims to explore the disappointment of the working class in their pursuit of the American Dream during the Great Depression. A key element of the American Dream has been the belief that any person living in the United States could become rich from rags through hard work and perseverance. The paper aims to investigate the reasons and factors that led to the failure of the American Dream in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.*

Keywords: Great Depression, American Dream, disappointment, failure, ugliness

The term American Dream is derived from the American Declaration of Independence, which states "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that the Creator endows them with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness - Preamble to the Declaration of Independence". (Cullen, *The American Dream*, 38). According to Cullen, the American Dream for the founding fathers was freedom in a true sense: freedom from racial repression and class distinction.

They dreamt of a society that would create a democratic space for all its citizens to realize economic liberty along with political liberty, irrespective of caste, creed, and class.

In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the term 'American Dream' in his book *The Epic of America*. It was written during the Great Depression, and Adams essentially states the spirit of the American Dream as: "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (Adams, *EoA* 415)

The Great Depression marked the 1930s in America. During this period, the stock market crashed badly, and the country faced the worst economic crisis, which lasted for more than a decade. Many people lost their jobs and encountered unprecedented hardships and acute financial troubles. During this period, farmers became vulnerable and suffered untold and unimaginable difficulties. These difficulties included the man-made ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. Extreme drought and soil erosion led to such horrible farming conditions that the farmers and workers were severely affected. Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and other states were terribly hit by massive dust. People leaving their homeland began migrating to different places in search of employment and a better life. "Why don't you go to California? There's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why, there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there?" (*GoW* 36)

The above quotation describes how a promise of a better life is made to tenant workers, depicting California as a utopia. It held a ray of hope and a promise that everyone would find a job, enabling them to achieve and realize their dreams. The novel tells the story of the Joad family and their forced

resettlement from Oklahoma to California by the bank during the Dust Bowl migration. The Joads realize that the things they were promised and they themselves had imagined about California are false. In California, they are forced to work in deplorable conditions on low wages and live in camps. They are humiliated and treated with disrespect by the Californians.

Equality is one of the sacred and pious principles stated in the American Dream. Warner states that “the principle of equality is necessary to provide all men with a sense of self-respect...” (*American Life: Dream and Reality*,128). The Joads experience the sting of inequality several times at the hands of Californians. When they reach there, they camp near a river to bathe. As they are enjoying cool river water, two men come over there and spitefully say that there is no land left to claim in California. The residents are contemptuous and hostile to the migrants. These residents derogatively address the migrants as ‘Okies’. When Ma and Rose of Sharon are resting in a tent, they are disturbed by a local policeman who warns them that they will have to leave the place by morning because the town doesn’t want any ‘Okies’ settling down there. “well, you ain’t in your country now. You’re in California an’ we don’t want you goddamn Okies settling’ down” (GOW 223). The statement of the policeman clearly highlights that in California, there exists a class distinction that demoralizes and dehumanizes the migrants.

At the second workplace, Tom Joad encounters two guards and asks them whether it is possible to get hot water, to which one of the guards derisively replies: “Say, who in hell do you think you are, J.P. Morgan?” (GOW 395). In this way, the guard abuses and forces the migrant workers to remain unclean and dirty. When Tom leaves, the guards continue talking about ‘Okies’. One of them says: “These goddamn Okies! You got to watch ‘em all the time!” (GOW 395). This clearly exemplifies that the guard doesn’t trust or like the ‘Okies’ at all. The Okies do hard work for which they are paid low wages. The employer explains to Tom why he cannot pay more than 25 cents per hour. The employer shows concern regarding the family situations. Still, at the same time, he points out that he stands above them all and belongs to another social class, which is considered to be higher than the ‘Okies’, and that he has the

power to manage their wages and can do whatever he likes with them. Tom and other 'Okies' are judged based on their social class instead of their ability and capability. According to Adams, a judge based on ability is crucial to the American Dream. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Californians are upper-class people. At the same time, the Joads and 'Okies' are considered to be of the lower class and therefore are prevented from advancing in society.

Okies try their best to maintain equality among themselves. After their stay in Hooverville outside the Baskerfeild in California, the family arrives in a government camp. The camp is governed and managed by Okies. Steinbeck states: "The sullen and frightened expression that is the rule among the migrants has disappeared from the faces of the Federal camp inhabitants. Instead, there is a steadiness of gaze and a self-confidence that can only come from restored dignity. (*The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* 1007). Steinbeck also states: "the difference seems to lie in the new position of the migrant in the community. Before he came to the camp, he had been policed, hated, and moved about. It had been made clear that he was not wanted" (*The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* 1007). It becomes clear when the employer says, "Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans" (GOW 310). Ma experiences the same when the camp manager visits the family after their arrival. The Manager welcomes the family. Afterward, Ma tells Rose of Sharon about the manager's visit, comparing it to the earlier encounter with the policeman, and she states, "...I feel like people again." (GOW 322) The government camp provides 'Okies' with self-respect and equality.

Freedom is another important aspect and consideration in the American Dream, as argued by the Founding Fathers. It simply meant freedom from slavery. Al experiences restrictions on his freedom from his family and society. He wishes to leave the family and work in a garage, but Ma, Tom, and Pa prohibit him.. Pa restricts Al from leaving because he believes the family should stay together. Another example of the loss of freedom can be seen when Okies plan to have a dance at the camp, and the police try to start a fight

to disrupt it. Thus, it can be said that it is the social structure and the attitude of the Californians that restrict the freedom of 'Okies'.

Ownership of a home is clearly a stated aspect of the American Dream. Ma and Rose of Sharon desperately wish to have their own home and dream of it throughout their journey to California. Rose of Sharon wishes to settle down with Connie in a little white house, and Connie will study in the evenings to qualify for a well-paid job. Another dream is to own a car. When Connie realizes that their dream is not going to get fulfilled, he leaves, saying goodbye. Ma too dreams desperately of owning a house: "I wonder – that is, if we all get jobs an' all work – maybe we can get one of them little white houses." (GOW 95). Ma keeps dreaming of owning a house throughout the journey, but the dream is never realized, and the family eventually starts living in a boxcar. Joad's dream of the house was based on the belief that they would get well-paid jobs in California. However, all their dreams shatter when they witness the reality in California, as they fail to get jobs because they are 'Okies.' The caste system makes the dream of owning a house impossible for the family, as they are not allowed to advance and progress in society.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck describes the challenging conditions in which farmers like the Joads family had to suffer during the Dust Bowl. Throughout the novel, he focuses on the Joad family and their journey to California. Steinbeck had mixed intentions that he was trying to express. His message in this novel is how the dispossessed families were treated through the journey from Oklahoma to California, and how the American Dream was shaped by the catastrophic events that were happening during this time. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck shows how unemployment and social inequality make the American Dream unattainable. The basic idea of this dream is synonymous with the belief that all citizens should be free and have equal opportunity for success. The Joad family will soon discover that the handbill advertisement for California work has beckoned countless other families onto Route 66, where despair and disillusionment invade these migrants". (*The Fallacy of the American Dream in The Grapes of Wrath (1938) by John Steinbeck-Birane Sene*)

In the novel *Of Mice and Men*, the failure of the American Dream is evident through various characters. First is the dream of owning a ranch by George, Lennie, and Candy. Second is the dream of equality portrayed through the character, Crook. The third dream is of personal fulfillment portrayed through Lennie and Curly's wife.

George, Lennie, and Candy uphold the spirit of the American Dream. All three characters belong to the lower working class of society. They dream of owning a ranch of their own through hard work, but it remains unfulfilled. They are ambitious for freedom, equality, and economic stability, but none of these goals is fulfilled. They are forced to live in poverty and misery and are denied basic standards of living and owning something in America. George and Lennie are in search of new jobs after leaving their old ones. Their American dream is to own land without a boss. Lennie keeps on asking George when their dream will be fulfilled, to which George replies: "O.K. Someday - we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and rabbits." (OMM 14). After listening to such a promising future, Lennie becomes excited and wants George to say more about their would-be farmland. George further says to Lennie, "We'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. Moreover, when it rains in the winter, we'll say the hell with going to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and sit around it and listen to the rain coming down on the roof-Nuts!" (14)

Though George and Lennie are employed, they feel suffocated at their workplace. The farm owner and his son, Curly, behave arrogantly with them. They are helpless because they don't have enough money to own land. They will need to work for the employer until they accumulate enough money to purchase the land. George says: "We gotta keep it till we get a stake. We can't help it, Lennie. We'll get out just as soon as we can. I don't like it any better than you do." He goes back to the table and sets out a new solitaire hand. "No, I don't like it," he says. "For two bits, I'd shove out of here. If we can get jus' a few dollars in the poke, we'll shove off and go up the American River and pan

gold. We can make maybe a couple of dollars a day there, and we might hit a pocket (32).

George and Lennie work hard on the ranch to fulfill their dream of owning land. George avoids any possible trouble in his job because he suspects that if he gets into any such trouble, he might lose his job. Candy, another ranch worker, overhears George and Lennie talking about their dream land. Candy, like others, also wishes to have a land of his own to get freedom from every bondage. This shows how pathetic the condition of the lower working class was during the Great Depression. They have nothing of their own but wish to own everything. George, Candy, and Lennie become partners, and until the end of the novel, they dream of owning land, but they fail to achieve their dream.

Steinbeck, through the character Crook, who is a poor ranch worker, portrays racial segregation. "Steinbeck opens with a well-detailed description of the heartbreaking living conditions of the African American Stable buck Crooks, who dwells in the barn with the animal he breeds and who sleeps on a long box filled with straw on which his blankets were flung (Steinbeck, 1937, 68). He is marginalized by his white co-workers, who do not permit him to enter their bunkhouse to play the Solitaire card game. They disdain him by expressing their repugnance at his bad smell. Moreover, Crooks is seen as a brute, not as a human being. He uses the same liniment of horses to mitigate the pains of his bow-like spine. Speaking of the horses, the fact that Crooks dwells in the harness room with animals "is a symbolic indication of being restrained by the White bunkhouse community" (Ali, 2019, 53).

Similarly, it is plainly expressed that Crooks' hostile deportments are generated from his demolished soul because of the excruciating treatment he receives from the white ranchers. In this course, Steinbeck denounces the dehumanization and nothingness ascribed to this ethnic community due to a personal experience traced back to his childhood in his hometown in California. (*Black Resistance in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and Toni Morrison's God Help the Child*, Soumaya Bouacida & Taki Eddine Lahmar).

Crook never wishes for money, land, or material possessions like others. He hopes for equality, upon which the notion of American democracy was founded. Like others, Crook's dream too collapses.

Lennie Small's name is just in contrast with his physical appearance. Steinbeck describes him as a huge man. Besides the dream of land, he also wishes to have soft things. Whenever George and Lennie talk about their dreamland, Lennie's interest largely remains on the rabbits, chickens, and dogs. Lennie's dream remains unfulfilled because of the unintentional murder of Curly's wife and his own murder by George. Curly's wife gets an opportunity to play a role in a show, but her mother denies, saying she is a juvenile. She later impresses another person who promises to take her to Hollywood, but she does not find success even this time. She suspects her mother has foiled the plan. Curly's mother acts as a foil to Curly's American Dream.

"Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath show that individuals from marginalized groups, such as farm workers, do not have a fair chance at attaining the American Dream, while simultaneously demonstrating the potential of the phalanx when faced with hardship. The American Dream, as portrayed in these books, is determined to be more akin to a myth: Lennie and Rose of Sharon are in no position to achieve the Dream they desire, showing that the concept of the American Dream, on which US society is built, is fundamentally flawed. The notion of the American Dream starkly contrasts with the Great Depression, which ravaged the nation, causing hundreds of thousands of farmers to lose their livelihoods and leaving them no option but to seek better days elsewhere". (The Attainability of the American Dream in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath, Angela Kroes)

Thus, John Steinbeck is a social realist who glaringly manifests social evils that existed and prevailed in society. His novels are a genuine critique of the prevailing conditions that are against the sacred spirit of American democracy. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the stark class and caste distinctions in California prevented the Joad family and other migrants from fulfilling the American Dream. In *Of Mice and Men*, an attempt is made to analyze the

factors responsible for the failure of the American Dream through various characters of the novel. The American dream is all about a dream of a land in which life should be better, richer, and fuller for everyone with equal opportunity according to one's ability. However, the dream remains unfulfilled in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

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