

**ANTI CAPITALISM THROUGH THE ADOPTION OF SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY  
SEEN IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*  
PANDANGAN ANTI KAPITALISME MELALUI ADOPSI IDEOLOGI SOSIALIS  
DALAM NOVEL *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* KARYA JOHN STEINBECK**

**Silviana Selyandita, Imam Basuki, Irana Astutiningsih**  
Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Sastra Universitas Jember  
Jln. Kalimantan 37, Jember 68121  
*E-mail:* imabas88@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

Through *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck shows his idea to protest against bourgeois class. He tells about the bad conditions faced by migrant workers in California. This novel is announcing that a worldwide of proletariat's consciousness is in the process of formation for socialism. This consequence means that this novel connotatively saves the rejection of capitalism. Therefore, seen from this rejection and its involvement to portrait social conflict, this novel can be included as the part of social realism genre. To analyse this novel, Marx's theory is applied. On Marxist perspective, Steinbeck's novel is categorized as the superstructure basis. It is because this novel gives a portrait about the change of social system because of economic system called capitalism. As the part of social realism genre, however, Steinbeck applies Marx's intention about the idea of socialism. He considers that there is a need for universal kinship to overcome this mass oppression occurred by capitalist class. This universal kinship will point to class struggle where at the end of the struggle, it emerges classless society.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, Socialism, Universal Kinship

**ABTRAK**

*Melalui The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck menunjukkan kritiknya terhadap kelas borjuis. Ia menceritakan bagaimana kehidupan pekerja migran di California mendapat perlakuan begitu buruk. Karena itu, novel ini menawarkan sebuah solusi untuk mengatasi tindak-tanduk opresif akibat sistem kapitalisme. Menurut Steinbeck salah satu caranya adalah dengan membentuk kesadaran kelas yang berujung pada terbentuknya sistem sosialisme. Dari sini juga, dapat diketahui bila novel ini termasuk dalam kategori novel realism social. Untuk itulah, teori Marxis digunakan untuk menyelidiki konsep-konsep sosialisme yang ditawarkan Steinbeck dalam novelnya. Ia ingin menunjukkan bahwa kapitalisme dapat di atasi dengan adanya kesadaran kelas, dimana kelas proletar menyadari posisinya terhadap kelas borjuis. Kesadaran ini kemudian akan membawa sebuah rasa persaudaraan yang universal antar kelas proletar. Di titik inilah, serangan terhadap sistem kapitalisme dapat dimulai dengan memunculkan sebuah perjuangan kelas. Muara dari semua ini pada hakikatnya adalah menuju suatu masyarakat tanpa kelas.*

**Kata Kunci:** Kapitalisme, Persaudaraan Universal, Sosialisme

**1. Introduction**

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel written by John Steinbeck. This novel describes clearly the suffering of migrant worker in United States. Corporate farming threatens small farmers and leads to a socio-economic crisis that alienates the workers. The novel is pervaded by the sense of the exploitation of the workers.

However, this novel shows Steinbeck's position to protest bourgeois class. It is such as

depicted in character of banks. The banks are synecdoche for the whole economic system, they become an economic monster. Therefore, this research observes the idea of anti capitalism in Steinbeck's novel. The idea of anti capitalism is parallel toward socialist system. This idea is based on the decryption that poor people are coming together in order to gain power against "capital-mined owners".

*The Grapes of Wrath* however is set in a crucial period of the United States. In the 1920-1930s America witnessed one of the greatest trauma in its history. It was known as the Great Depression. The great financial crash of 1929 resulted in widespread financial ruin that led to unemployment and homelessness. The economic crisis brought a spirit of social and political revolution all over the country. It is worth emphasizing that Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* stands as a record of the painful experience of the 1930s. By presenting a vivid picture of the social conditions, it is inscribed in what Marxist thinkers such as Gorky and Lukacs call as social realism novel.

Through this novel, Steinbeck provokes that society developed from capitalism will alienate and suffer human beings. This novel therefore tries to show the capitalist condition in California as an evil thing. Thus, this research tries to understand *The Grapes of Wrath* as a critique of capitalism in California. Then, the position of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* within social realism can be determined.

## 2. Method of Research

From the problems mentioned above, this article tries to comprehend about the idea of anti-capitalism in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The analysis is started from collecting data which later be used in the process of analysis. The undergoing research will employ Marx's theory to discover the concept about the class struggle between bourgeois and proletariat. The analysis performs a more descriptive analysis toward the sorted data.

This research can be categorized as sociological research within Marxist perspective. To analyze the condition of class struggle in the era of 1920's in United States such described in the novel; this research applies two steps of analysis. Firstly, this research analyzes the practice of capitalism in 1920's. In California, capitalism in fact has walked along with industrialization as the important part of capitalism. The emergence of industrialization makes the efficiency of work. As discussed by Marx, the effect this development is the shift of surplus value where capitalist class as the dominant subject takes massive profit from this economical change. This condition emerges two basic classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The contradiction between the various workers

and the capitalists assume increasingly the character of the contradiction of two classes. The workers unite against capitalists in economic matters, predominantly those which concern wages. Class struggle then becomes the motive force of human history that finally conducts social revolution. "From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into fetters. Then begins the epoch of social revolution" (Marx, 1867:20). In this case, the work of art is the part of social revolution where it is applied to spread proletarian ideology. This scheme pushes Steinbeck to write his novel as the means of struggle. In explaining Marxist theory, Tyson conveys:

"For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the base on which the superstructure of social/political/ideological realities is built" (2006:53-54)

Steinbeck's work of art in this case is categorized as the superstructure basis. It portrays the change of social system because of economic system called capitalism. This situation creates a huge gap between bourgeois and proletariat that drives the between-class conflict. Therefore, according to Marx's conception above, this research continues to second step to analyse the portrait of class struggle such as described by *The Grapes of Wrath* as the side effect of capitalism. From these two steps, it is beneficial to know the position of this novel that tends to depict between-class conflict as the symbol of its rejection toward capitalism.

## 3. Result of Data Analysis

Steinbeck in this novel does show the suffering of migrant workers in California because of capitalist system. He intends to provoke that this suffering can be overcome by uniting in a particular class, called proletariat class. The awareness of proletariat class will point to universal kinship. This universal kinship is the embryo for class struggle. In Marxist perspective, the class struggle is the key to fight against bourgeois class where the end of this struggle is the emergence of classless society. In

Steinbeck era where massive oppression is undergone by proletariat class, this phenomena was obvious. The classless society or this utopia is the source of their spirit to give a huge challenge for the oppressor.

#### 4. Discussion

Steinbeck exposes the misery of migrant workers in California. He inveighs against the cruelty of corporate farming practices that herd the migrants like cattle, surround them with armed guards, and make them live in starving. Although this condition is known well by migrant workers, they can do nothing. They think that it is normal because they are just workers. This economic supremacy then leads to political supremacy. It enables the bourgeoisie as the governing class to force society to accept its own ideology as the dominant one.

Though *The Grapes of Wrath* is fiction, many critics treat it as an attempt at factual reporting. They advocate its suppression on the grounds of its vulgar language, and accuse Steinbeck of propagandizing for Communism. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the novel in which Steinbeck's commitment finds a harmony with the themes, artistry and heroes of his fiction. It is a book of epic dimensions in both its topic and the universal thought of socialism. It unites his concerns for the exploited poor migrant workers in California with the showing problem of the poverty of the human spirit.

Steinbeck is aware that when wealth corrupts, it corrupts thoroughly. It happens because capitalist system gives particular person to rule other based on their private capital. "The result of capitalist mode of production produces capitalist private property" (Marx, 1956:141). However, the rich are different from the poor not only because the rich have extra capital but because they can be frozen into their possessions. "The quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you forever from the We" (Steinbeck, 1997:259). Moreover, the ownership of capitalist class has an impact to construct the unbalance power distribution in society. The economic superiority of the capitalist class conditions its political superiority. The class which owns the means of production and economic power usurps political power as well. This class holds, "state power and all the means of political power which go with it (police, prisons, army, courts, etc). Thus it can be said that the domination of

production produces also all other types of domination of society" (Mbengo, 1998:10)

However, Steinbeck finds that the source of this conflict is the ownership of the Banks, Big Companies and Corporate Farming. They become monsters. They refuse to breathe air but instead, "breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air" (Steinbeck, 1997:53). They are obsessed by his property that they have hired gun-toting guards to keep trespassers away. To Casy, such an irrational acquisitiveness creates the spiritual emptiness, which no amount of property can fill, "Million acres? What in the worl' can he do with a million acres?" (Steinbeck, 1997:359). He then continues that:

"If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich, an' maybe he's disappointed that nothin' he can do'll make him feel rich ... I ain't tryin' to preach no sermon, but I never seen nobody that's busy as a prairie dog collectin' stuff that wasn't disappointed" (Steinbeck, 1997:360)

The process of alienation is made complete with industrialism. Steinbeck describes it at the beginning of the novel like a tractor which is seen pulling down peasants' houses. The man is even shown to be no more than a robot in the service of a machine.

"Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades--not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of disks cut it and pushed it to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth ... No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died" (Steinbeck, 1997:59)

Steinbeck then portrays that this economic contradiction between the capitalists and proletariat creates the conditions for the organization of proletariat leading them to become aware of their suffering and the need for revolutionary action.

Steinbeck then shows that the dehumanization and general injustice occurred by the migrant causes them to realize the necessity of community. This process of unification is achieved through the actions of the migrant workers themselves. From this understanding, Steinbeck applies Marx's intention about the idea of socialism. On Marxist idea, "The Marxist writer has an obligation to articulate and express the interest and the needs of proletariat class" (Marcuse, 1977:2). Steinbeck thus fulfills his decision on Marx's perspective in this novel. Thus he gives a portrait of migrant workers and their suffering within capitalist system in California.

By portraying California's poverty of migrant worker, Steinbeck also considers that the literature is the expression of the dialectic movement of the political and economic idea. It also shows that his novel can be categorized as the social realist work, "Realism is the form in which the interaction between literature and society appears to be most obvious. In realist text, literature might be seen to reflect society or history" (Haslett, 1999:86). Through his work, Steinbeck tends to give an understanding that a good novel must work for humanism.

Finally, through *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck succeeds to release the awareness of capitalist's oppression toward proletariat class. Steinbeck criticizes people's inability to see that the poor people are also human. He commits with social issues related to the living conditions of migrants workers in California. Steinbeck does show that this conflict evolves to be a universal kinship signed by socialist practice.

## 5. Conclusion

This novel shows Steinbeck's position to protest bourgeois class. He tells about the bad conditions faced by migrant workers in California because of capitalist system. To fight against this capitalism, Steinbeck creates a character like the Joad in order to show the dehumanization and general injustice occurred by the migrant. It causes them realize the necessity of community. This process of unification is achieved through the actions of the migrant workers themselves. From this understanding, Steinbeck applies Marx's intention about the idea of socialism. He is aware of that there is a need for universal kinship to overcome this mass oppression occurred by capitalist class. This universal

kinship will point to class struggle where at the end of the struggle, it emerges classless society.

## References

- Haslett, Moyra. 1999. *Marxist literary and Cultural Theories*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1977. *The Aesthetic Dimension: toward a critique of Marxist aesthetic*. Boston: Bacon Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1956. *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*. McGraw Hill, inc.
- Mbengo, F. 1998. *Marxist Theories of Class and Class Struggle*. University of Dares Salaam.
- Steinbeck, John. 1997. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: Macmillan.
- Tyson, Louis. 2006. *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge.