

From Fake News to Environmental Migration: An Ecocritical Reading of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

Migration is not a recent phenomenon. Since early history, humans have moved from one place to another to satisfy their basic needs or fulfill some far-fetched dreams. While Anglophone literature has immortalized migration both in England and on the other side of the Atlantic, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* stands as one of the earliest American novels to highlight interstate migration from an environmental perspective. In this novel, Steinbeck foregrounds the ecological calamity, known as the Dust Bowl, which hit a vast part of the country in the third decade of the twentieth century. In this regard, we will highlight the environmental and economic push and pull factors that drove the Joad family to west for California, many of which were based on fake news. Furthermore, we will shed light on ecological holism between the Joad family and their natural environment. Finally, we will foreground the economic, social, and linguistic aftermaths that this precarious journey generated both on Californians and environmental migrants.

Migration is not a recent phenomenon nor is it restricted to a specific area. Since early history, humans have moved from one place to another to satisfy their basic needs or fulfill some far-fetched dreams. Driven by a panoply of economic, political, social, or religious push and pull factors, migrants leave the place where they have settled since their infancy and travel to an unknown, yet would-be aspiring future. The United States of America is not an exception; in fact, it is the case that foregrounds the migration phenomenon. Since the first settlers who embarked on the Mayflower voyage, migrants from different parts of Western Europe began their transatlantic journeys to found a new country¹. To elucidate this, Corbett et al. state that England:

"established nearly a dozen colonies, sending swarms of immigrants to populate the land [as] England had experienced a dramatic rise in population in the sixteenth century, and the colonies appeared a welcoming place for those who faced overcrowding and grinding poverty at home" (Corbett et al., 2014, p. 64).

Anglophone literature has immortalized migration both in England and on the other side of the Atlantic. By way of illustration, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* represent a vivid portrayal of the abuses which migrants went through either on their way to America, or the exploitation that they endured as a cheap workforce. While these novels

¹ When I allude to The USA as a country of immigrants, I do not mean Native Americans, or the slaves who were shipped against their will from Africa.

and the like focused on transnational migration, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* stands as one the earliest and most influential American novels to foreground interstate migration from economic, social, and environmental perspectives.

The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939, period of a great significance both in the USA and worldwide: From an economic perspective, it was subsequent to the Great Depression which hit the USA in 1929, while from a historical viewpoint, this era was prior to World War II, a devastating war which tore nearly the whole world apart. Steinbeck made some tacit allusions to the economic upheavals that some American states went through; still, Steinbeck’s main concern was put on the ecological calamity which hit a vast part of the country. Thus, this paper seeks to analyze environmental migration from an ecocritical perspective by putting John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* under scrutiny. In this regard, we will highlight the environmental and economic push factors which drove the Joad family and many other impoverished families to west for California. We will also underscore the pull factors which lured them to undertake such a risk-laden journey, many of which were based on fake news. On this point, we will underline how fake news and unsubstantiated rumors shape migrants’ attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. Furthermore, we will shed light on ecological holism between the Joad family and their natural environment. Finally, we will foreground the economic, social, and linguistic aftermaths that this precarious journey generated both on Californians and Oklahoman migrants alike.

1. Migration Westward: Push Factors

According to Czaika and Reinprecht, “migration is a decision taken in the context of personal needs, livelihood challenges and opportunities, stress, urgency and uncertainty, based on incomplete information about migration prospects and possible outcomes of alternative behavioural options” (2022, p.55). From a historiographical standpoint, migration to western American states or territories can be traced long before the Dust Bowl era. By way of illustration, different groups of migrants set off to California after the mid-nineteenth century in what was called “The California Gold Rush” (Corbett et al. 2014, p. 759). In the twentieth century, James Gregory (n.d.) stipulates that “the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s plays an important and complicated role in the way Americans talk about the history of poverty and public policy in their country” (para. 1). In addition to the ecological factors, a variety of reasons compelled migrants from Oklahoma and other neighboring states to leave their homes and head westward. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck foregrounds both environmental and economic factors as being the major causes of such a massive interstate migratory influx.

1.1 Ecological Degradation and Environmental Migration

Environmental problems such as drought, cyclones or tidal waves are not a new phenomenon (Swain, 1996, p. 959). This can be due to climate change which, according to Boano et al., is “likely to decrease the arable land that is able to be utilized for agriculture as well as the length of the growing season” (as cited in Naser, 2011-2012, p. 730). In the same vein, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* narrates the story of the Dust Bowl, one of the worst ecological calamities which hit the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. “During the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, plains counties experienced substantial erosion that reduced agricultural land values in more-eroded counties, relative to less-eroded counties, and led to relative declines in population through the 1950s” (Hornbeck, 2023, p. 645). However, ecological disasters are not always natural; they can be sometimes human-induced resulting from exploitative practices and/or their “anthropogenic activities” (Deane-Drummond, 2008, p. 15). Similarly, the Dust Bowl-stricken lands became

barren as a result of farmers' greed and excessive use of mechanization to yield more products not only to satisfy their local needs, but also to cater for the growing European need for American wheat during the First World War (Worster, 1986, p. 112).

Although *The Grapes of Wrath* fits in the fiction genre, Steinbeck built its framework on events which he saw and heard in California (Demott Introduction, 2012, p. xl). Therefore, being an eyewitness of the trauma (Anuradha, 2018, p. 87), which thousands of American families endured on their way westward may make the reader believe in the veracity of the events, although some of them may have been hyperbolized for literary purposes. In this regard, Steinbeck introduces the reader to the first environmental and economic aftermaths of the Dust Bowl since the outset of the novel. Not only does he portray its impacts on the land, but he also describes its negative effects on people and their children's behavior (2012, p. 3). By so doing, he seems to make the reader believe in a possible exodus since the farmers are running short of crops and food supplies. This concept can be clearly discerned when Steinbeck says that "Dust comin' up an' spoilin' ever'thing so a man didn't get enough crop.... And ever'body got bills at the grocery" (2012, p. 47).

A close reading of the extract above demonstrates Steinbeck's skill in wedding both environmental and economic reasons for an unprecedented exodus which is about to take place. The environmental disaster ruined nearly all the crops, marred farmers' lives and made them unable to honor their financial commitments. Additionally, Steinbeck was sufficiently meticulous when he portrayed local farmers as being incapable of providing for rudimentary human needs. From a linguistic perspective, Steinbeck dwells on the huge impacts of the Dust Bowl by using the word 'every' twice. Stated differently, the Dust Bowl destroyed an otherwise former nice life, and made all local farmers indebted to their neighboring merchants.

1.2 The Economic Factor

Beyond its ecological impacts on Oklahoman farmers, the Dust Bowl had also substantial economic repercussions on local farmers. On this point, Steinbeck does not mention the effects of the Great Depression on the whole region; still, he brings to the fore the direct financial aftermaths of the environmental catastrophe on the agrarian population, a population which paid a heavy price for its inadequate agricultural practices (2012, p. 32).

Additionally, Steinbeck seems to condemn the whole capitalist system when he refers to the relationship between banks and tenant farmers. This relationship is not founded on free financial aid; it is rather built on loans which local farmers are supposed to repay with high interest rates. Therefore, any failure to meet their financial obligations entails getting evicted from the land. On this point, he describes the bank and the entrepreneurs it represents as a monster or a vampire when the narrator states that a "bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man, either. That's the monster" (2012, p. 33). Therefore, a bank is depicted as an avaricious entity which is devoid of any humane traits; it does not tolerate bargaining nor does it make any financial compromises since banks "breathe profits [and]... eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die..." (2012, p. 32). Moreover, local tenants are not sturdy enough to fight a financial institution or even a system upon which a whole country is based.

So, the tenants who spent most of their lives on the farm lands that they had irrigated and cherished got disappointed to see their lands unable to yield any crops, and found themselves later evicted and compelled to face the unknown. Steinbeck dwells on this dreary reality when he stated

that tenants “have to go off the land. Or the plows ‘ll go through the dooryard” (2012, p. 33). By so doing, not only does he demonstrate that little bankrupt farmers do not have any alternative other than forcibly leave the land, but he also shows capitalism greed and its reluctance to care for the working class’s vulnerability and suffering. This voracity is shown to culminate when the author asserts that such a system would “burn coffee for fuel in ship. Burn corn to keep warm..... Dump potatoes in the river.... Slaughter the pigs...” (2012, p. 349), in a means to keep prices high, and make as much profit as possible.

1.3 Ecological Holism: Between Attachment and Migration Pressure

According to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p. XVIII). One of the main concepts of ecocriticism is ecological holism or communion with nature. This entails that humans are supposed to shift from an anthropocentric relationship to a biocentric or an eco-centric tie with all the components of nature, and celebrate their kinship not only to humans but also to all life forms (Tucker, 2003, p. 11). Likewise, and despite some conspicuous aspects of their anthropocentric and utilitarian attitudes towards their natural environment, Steinbeck spotted several traces of ecological holism through which the Joads entertained strong ties with their surrounding environment. By way of illustration, although the Joads were said to have sold everything to cater for the needs of their long journey westward, some of the family members, especially children and senior citizens, were thinking of keeping some articles, which despite being of little intrinsic value, could serve as mementos that would always remind them of their cherished past (2012, pp. 88-89).

In a similar manner, Tom Joad, who spent many years behind closed bars, is portrayed to be the first one to have entertained such a unique relationship with nature. In this context, Steinbeck states that Tom “visited places he remembered- the red bank where the swallows nested, the willow tree over the pig pen. Two shoats grunted and squirmed at him through the fence, black pigs, sunning and comfortable. And then his pilgrimage was over....” (2012, p. 90). The selected passage illustrates Tom’s communion with nature to the extent to which he would care for both biotic and abiotic elements of the biosphere. Furthermore, Steinbeck presents this ecological symbiosis as being reciprocal since the pigs seemed to understand Tom’s sentiments, and looked at him with the same environmental gaze. While Steinbeck indicates Tom’s place-connectedness with his former dwelling, he portrays his ultimate visit to his house precincts amid a religious aura: Comparing such a visit to a pilgrimage, as if he were visiting a holy shrine, can be considered a vivid depiction of Tom Joad’s Eco-theological¹ view of nature.

In a similar vein, the Joads underscored their sentiments towards the natural habitat when they were talking about the willow tree. For them, the willow tree is not merely a green pillar which provides shade, clean air, leaves, and wood; it is rather a part of their lives and memories which they are about to leave behind, in a way to prove that the Joads view the tree from a purely ecological perspective, detached from any instrumental consideration. The ecological holism that

¹ Eco-theology is an off-shoot of ecocriticism. It can be defined as studying literature in relation to its physical environment from a religious perspective. For more on Eco-theology, check Deane-Drummond, C. (2008). *Eco-theology*. Anselm Academic, or Bock, N. (2013). *An eco-theology: Toward a spirituality of creation and eco-justice*. CrossCurrents, 63(4), 433–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12049>

stemmed from the Joad/tree relationship attained its peak when one of the Joads mentioned the significance of the willow tree by wondering "How 'll it be not to know what land's outside the door? How if you wake up in the night and know—and know the willow tree 's not there? Can

you live without the willow tree? Well, no, you can't. The willow tree is you" (Steinbeck, 2012, p. 89). Additionally, this ecocentric perspective is portrayed to have reached a life-death nexus between the Joads and nature. This aspect manifests itself clearly when Steinbeck depicts the reasons behind Grandpa's demise. On this point, Casy informed the Joads that "his life was over an' he knowed it. An' Grampa didn't die tonight. He died the minute you took 'im off the place" (2012, p. 146). Therefore, the late grandfather can be compared to a tree which was uprooted from its soil, and cannot recover vitality if planted elsewhere. This ecological holism shows that the Joads have developed some environmental awareness through their long contact with nature, in a way to demonstrate that "environment is not an 'other' to us but "part of our being" (Buell, 1995, p. 59). While this seemingly strong ecological tie can be regarded as a cling factor which may urge humans to stick to their land, it was not mighty enough to stand firm against the appealing news which they had heard about abundant job opportunities in California, or the economic turmoil and the ecological adversities which the Joads and other Dust Bowl-stricken Oklahomans had gone through.

2. Migration Westward: Fake News and the Journey to the Unknown

Fake news has been defined in different ways depending on the emphasis placed on its purpose and characteristics. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), the term fake news is problematic because it oversimplifies a complex information disorder. Instead, they distinguish among misinformation—false information shared without the intent to cause harm, disinformation—false information deliberately created and disseminated to deceive or cause harm, and malinformation—genuine information shared to inflict harm, often by taking it out of context. Their framework highlights that false or misleading information varies according to both its truthfulness and the intent behind its dissemination. In contrast, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news more narrowly as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and that are capable of misleading readers. This definition emphasizes the deliberate fabrication of news content designed to imitate legitimate journalism while deceiving audiences for political, ideological, or financial gain (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

"In the past, news reports were generated and distributed via conventional news media, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and newsagents" (Wang, 2020, p. 145). However, such massive means of news sources do not necessarily provide truthful information; they can sometimes either purposefully or inadvertently disseminate inaccurate information which can have a great impact on humans. Northeastern University Library (n.d.) defines fake news as a "purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news". Therefore, fake news can be of a paramount importance in humans' lives; it can shape their perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads and other Oklahoman families were not an exception; the news which they heard about prosperous California made them sell all their belongings and head westward. While this migratory influx was anthropogenically-induced, the choice of the final destination was carried out under the direct influence of blatant fake news and groundless rumors. In this regard, Ma Joad asserted that she saw handbills in which Californians asked for field

workers for very high wages (Steinbeck, 2012, p. 90). However, Tom Joad was the only member of the family who does not seem to be naively lured by this fake news as he knows a man from California who said that “the folks that pick the fruit live in dirty ol’ camps an’ don’t hardly get enough to eat. He says wages is low an’ hard to get any” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.92).

Nevertheless, Ma Joad challenged the veracity of Tom’s account for different reasons. Not only did Tom narrate the story second-handedly, but he also did not seem to convince his mother as he spent most of his life behind closed bars, and was therefore not aware of life outside jail or the environmental hardships that his family went through. Moreover, the Joads did not have access to any reliable means of media to verify the authenticity of the reliability of the apparently good news. Additionally, Ma Joad, and despite her apparent gullibility, provided a reasonable interpretation for the news spread around the country since affluent Californian farmers would not have squandered their money on printing handbills and sending newsagents to ask for workers had they not been truthful (Steinbeck, 2012, p.92).

In another incident, Steinbeck reports an abrupt meeting between the Joads and a man who was on the way home from California. While the Joads were astonished to meet the exception to the whole country which was moving westward, their surprise turned into a sort of concealed disappointment when they found out why he made such an unconventional decision. Although the man provided them with a first-hand account of the hardships that he and other migrants endured in Californian camps, the Joads were reluctant to believe him. Therefore, instead of considering the man’s testimony about camps’ life and the dreary working conditions, the Joads seemed to be still under the influence of the fake news stories in which they read about the prosperity and the fortune which they would amass once they would start work in the west. In this vein, Pa Joad averred that he “got a han’bill says they got good wages, an’ little while ago I seen a thing in the paper says they need folks to pick fruit” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.189). Furthermore, the Joads had already started their journey, and it was impossible for them to return to a land with which they no longer had any material tie. So, driven by a dreary environmental crisis and a dire economic condition, but also tempted by different stories which they have heard about a promising life in California, thousands of farmers from Oklahoma and other adjacent states sold nearly all their belongings and set off west to look for a better life. These farmers did not care about the long distance or the precarious journey which they would undertake; all they thought of was to reach a state which seemingly abounded in lucrative job opportunities for every able hand, and compensate for their economic losses in their former homes.

It is true that the Joads and other migrants were hoodwinked by the many fake news stories that were propagated nationwide; still, Californian farmers had their own rationale behind printing handbills calling for more workforce. In this regard, such affluent farmers used fake news to satisfy the crushing demand for labor, lure migrants, and later victimize them by making them work for meager remuneration. The man who witnessed this distressing experience reiterated this when he stated that “This here fellas says, ‘I’m payin’ twenty cents an hour’. And maybe half of the men walk off. But they’s still five hundred that’s goddamn hungry they’ll work for nothin’ but biscuits” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.190).

Another man who went through the same Californian torment substantiated this testimony to the Joads and narrated the misery that migrants were doomed to encounter once they would reach California. For him, sustaining a life with very rudimentary needs in his own hometown among his loved ones is much better than undergoing an adventure in a state where he and other migrant

laborers are not welcomed and looked upon as foreigners. To express such agony and make the Joads believe the accuracy of his testimony, the man asserted “But at least we can starve to death with folks we know. Won’t have a bunch of fellas that hates us to starve with” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.205). So, using influential wording such as death, starvation and hatred should have deterred the Joads from continuing their journey and return home. While the second man’s account generated bewilderment within the Joads, he made them accountable for their own decision as he said: “Well, don’t take my words. Go see for yourself” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.205).

As a result, an aura of doubt seemed to have haunted some of the Joads with regard to the availability of jobs for migrants. By way of illustration, Tom and Casy discussed this issue when they discovered that the whole country was moving west by stating “Well—s’pose all these here folks an’ ever’body—s’pose they can’t get no jobs out there?” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.173). While this skepticism was not materialized into a concrete decision to go back home, mishap and misery started to shower upon the Joads even before they could reach their final destination, and senior family members were the first ones to succumb to the hardship of the journey. By way of illustration, William James Joad, the grandfather, passed away on the way to California due to a severe stroke and did not receive a decent burial as “they got no money to pay for funerals” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.142). Additionally, “Grandma had convulsions from the heat, and she was weak when they stopped” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.163). Steinbeck tacitly foregrounds the macabre atmosphere of the journey when he likens the cars cruising westward to “a coffin on wheels” (2012, p.155). While the word coffin means literally a box or a container in which a dead body is buried or cremated, this morbid simile may entail that the migrants inside the cars were not only both socially and economically dead, but they were also cut off from a past which they left behind in their homeland.

3. Life in California: Disappointment amid The Grapes of Wrath

Once the Joads reached their final destination, they were disappointed to discover that the unduly positive picture they had in mind about prosperity and job abundance in California was based on misinformation and unsubstantiated rumors. Their new destination is not a land of milk and honey like the preachers say (Steinbeck, 2012, p.251). Therefore, they were, like many other Oklahomans, obliged to cope with a bitter reality in which they were not considered authentic Americans, but were rather seen as migrant communities or “environmental refugees” (El-Hinnawi, 1985, p. 30). The aftermaths that the journey westward had on the Joads were manifold and multifaceted: They were economic, social, and linguistic.

3.1 Economic Impacts

While in Oklahoma, farmers used to hear that the western parts of the country represented a thriving job market for every able hand (Steinbeck, 2012, p.130); however, the Joads were saddened to find out that those opportunities were not as numerous as they imagined since work was only seasonal (Steinbeck, 2012, p.433), because “due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work, migrant workers are recruited on a temporary basis, leading to circular migration” (Oso et al., 2022, p. 124). Once the Joads set foot in California, they were spellbound by the vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, the trees, and the farm houses (Steinbeck, 2012, p.227); still, they were not aware that this magnificent scenery would never be within their reach. So, these new comers were obliged to take any sort of jobs regardless of the meager wage they would receive or the hard work they would undertake. Steinbeck reaffirmed this attitude when he described two migrants talking about jobs: “You ‘ll take my job for twenty cents. An’ then I ‘ll git

hungry and I’ll take my job back for fifteen” (2012, p.339). Therefore, the new migrants turned to be a cheap workforce that struggled to earn a living while Californian farmers became more affluent. Moreover, some of these indigent families were constrained to sell some of their belongings for worthless prices to survive as in the case of Timothy who, out of hunger, sold his car for ten dollars (Steinbeck, 2012, p.293).

This new economic order was not only based on Oklahoman farmers’ suffering, but it was also founded on migrants who were literally imported from other countries such as China, Japan, Mexico and the Philippines (Steinbeck, 2012, p.232). Those migrants were reduced to mere serfs or bonds regardless of their nationality, race, or the services that their lineage had rendered to the country since the foundation of the country. Central to this argument is the fact the Joads’ pedigree as white Americans since the American Revolution, and whose ancestors fought with both sides of the American Civil War (Steinbeck, 2012, p.233), did not hamper Californian officials from treating them like any other non-white cross-border immigrants.

3.2. Social Impacts

The social impacts that migration had on the Joads and other similar families are beyond description. While still being on American soil, Oklahomans were regarded as outlanders and foreigners in a state where “more than 63 per cent of the population was foreign-born in 1855” (Pirragli. Qtd. In Baxster and Nowraseth, 2021, p. 6). Steinbeck reiterated this aspect when he stated that “they changed their social life—changed as in whole universe only man can change. They were not farm men anymore, but migrant men” (2012, p.196). In this new context, new migrants were perceived as a possible threat that would undermine the social fabric of an otherwise homogeneous society, despite sharing the same ethnic and religious values with Californians, or “even if they talk the same language” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.236). To minimize the intensity of such of menace, Californian officials and local residents resorted to a variety of policies which were either linguistic, social, or political.

Firstly, Oklahomans in California were called Okies just like migrants from Arkansas were nicknamed Arkies, a label which will stick to migrants throughout the novel. The aim behind propagating such nicknames was to consistently remind them that they were strangers and should be accordingly thrown away. Whenever the term Okie is mentioned in the novel, it is directly linked to dirt, ignorance, debauchery, theft, and mistrust (Steinbeck, 2012, p.283). More alarmingly, Oklahomans are sometimes portrayed as being deprived from human traits, and likened to wild animals. In this vein, Steinbeck echoed this derogatory concept when a Californian told his friend that “those goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being couldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell a lot better than gorillas” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.221). In the outset, Oklahomans seemed to be upset with this derogatory neologism and the social repercussions it brought about; still, some migrants got accustomed to this linguistic tag as in the case of Grandma who stated openly that such linguistic offences could not wipe out the Joads’ identity nor would it make them feel any sort of self-abasement since they are the people who will go on (Steinbeck, 2012, p.280).

While adult migrants bitterly accepted this new linguistic label, children seemed to be the most reluctant to cope with it especially at schools. Oklahoman students were subjected to linguistic harassment and bullying, while fighting and quarreling between local and migrant students seemed to happen on a daily basis (Steinbeck, 2012, p.339). As a result, some migrant students wanted to quit school and join their family members on the farms as in the case of Winfield who

said “I don’t wanta go to no school. Ruthie don’t, neither. Them kids that goes to school, we seen ‘em Ma Snots! Calls us Okies. We seen ‘em. I ain’t going to go” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.373).

Secondly, local Californian authorities prevented the new migrant communities to set foot in big cities while allowing them to settle in make-shift camps. Those camps, which despite being temporary, did not represent a safe haven for migrants as they were sometimes dismantled and burnt for sanitary reasons (Steinbeck, 2012, p.237). So, migrants were not only blamed for threatening the social fabric of the so-called host society, but they were also held accountable for spreading diseases among Californians. Additionally, the huge number of migrants fueled a xenophobic discourse and led to some cynical attitudes on the part of nearly all the strata of society. Steinbeck asserted that inner voice among Californians when he said:

“The owners hated them. And in the towns, the storekeepers hated them because they had no money to spend..... The town men, little bankers, hated Okies because there was nothing to gain from them..... And the laboring people hated Okies because a hungry man has to work, and if he has to work, the wage payer automatically gives him less for his work; and then no one can get more” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.233).

Thirdly, this population inflow divided California into sets of binary opposites: the haves and the have-nots, the refined and the unrefined, the educated and the uncivilized, and the immaculate and unclean. Consequently, Californians wanted to impose different restrictions on migrants so that they would not spoil an otherwise pure family line. In this regard, some local residents suggested banning Oklahoman children from going to schools while others demonstrated their fear from any possible relationships between Oklahoman men and Californian women. This nativist attitude manifests itself when a resident said “We can’t have them in the schools. They’re strangers. How’d you like to have you sister go with one of ‘em? (Steinbeck, 2012, p.283). To corroborate this concept of social isolation towards migrants, Californians did not think of hiring domestic servants in their households, who despite being a cheap workforce, were not considered trustworthy to look after Californian children and private properties.

Steinbeck demonstrates another aspect of the threat that could emanate from migrants when he narrated an incident in which an eleven-year-old boy shot a sheriff dead (2012, p.236). As a result, Californian officials seized this isolated incident to treat migrants as possible invaders who could carry out massacres whenever the opportunity arose. To inculcate this fright among the local population, migrants’ menace was hyperbolically compared to previous invaders’ acts in early history. By way of illustration, a Californian official told his colleague:

“What if sometime an army of them marches on the land as the Lombards did in Italy, as the Germans did on Gaul and the Turks did in Byzantium? They were land-hungry, ill-armed hordes too, and the legions could not stop them. Slaughter and terror could not stop them. How could you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched belly of his children?” (Steinbeck, 2012, p.236,237)

While the passage above displays historical cases that spotted different sorts of foreign invasions, it presupposes that the massive influx of migrants into California represents an equal jeopardy to the land and its residents—a danger which could be ethnic, linguistic, or even religious. However, the passage provides some tacit excuses for migrants’ misdemeanor. Stated differently, migrants are sometimes obliged to act in a given way to quench their children’s hunger. So, instead of treating migrants as a potential threat or social pariahs, providing them with basic needs such as food, jobs, education, and decent housing could have yielded better social outcomes for both migrants and local residents.

While this external threat pushed Californians to organize themselves by forming self-defense groups (Steinbeck, 2012, p.283), the state of economic and social pressure with which these newcomers were surrounded forced them to look by all means for a living. They resorted to unlawful and unethical ways such as stealing, lying, and begging (Steinbeck, 2012, p.433) in a way which ingrained regional stereotypes and prejudices, increased Californians' animosity vis-à-vis the migrants, and jeopardized the safety of migrants and local residents alike.

3.3 Family Breakdown

While in Oklahoma, the Joads were a united family that clung to the land and their agrarian lifestyle. However, their decision to migrate to California led to a quasi-family breakdown. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck shows this disconnection to have taken different shapes. This family disintegration started on the way westward as in the case of the grandparents who passed away¹ due to the journey hardship (Steinbeck, 2012, pp.142- 228), or Connie, Rose of Sharon's husband, who ran away and left his pregnant wife to fend for herself in a foreign land. Moreover, Tom Joad had to escape and spent the rest of his life in hiding after he beat a local officer. Even Casy, who despite not being a Joad, had to go to jail and stopped providing his moral and spiritual support to the family (Steinbeck, 2012, p.266). Steinbeck asserts this family disintegration when Ma Joad expressed her yearning for their former life in Oklahoma by telling Tom that the Joads were "the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more" (2012, p.393). Rose of Sharon could have been the last hope to provide a permanent material tie with the new land had not she delivered a stillborn baby. Steinbeck was sufficiently ironic in his use of the name "Rose of Sharon", which literally denotes a flower, to suggest that she is no longer a blossoming rose, but rather a withering one. Steinbeck may have used all these ecological, social, and linguistic tropes to indicate that California repelled the new migrants and refused to provide them with *jus soli* just as their former land drove them away because of their greed and anthropogenic practices. While the Joads were not able to realize the dreams they had aspired for, they thought that burying their grandmother in a nice place could represent an earthly solace and salvation for the whole family. Thus, when Steinbeck states that the grandmother "can get buried in a nice green place.....She got to lay her head down in California" (2012, p.228), he might have the intention to inform his readers that death, bereavement, and trauma will be the only available and permanent nexus between the Joads and California.

A close analysis makes us assume that *The Grapes of Wrath* is mostly about misinformation, fake news and interstate migration; still, an ecocritical reading helped us infer that the novel fits closely in environmental studies. If Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and environment while intersecting with critiques of racism, classism, speciesism², ageism, and ablism, Steinbeck's novel focused on the oppression imposed on environment, working class, and workforce from remote regions. The victimization which the novel portrays is so intricate and intertwined that it includes different components of environment. While in Oklahoma, local

¹ The tragic death of the grandparents on the way to California can be seen as an epitome of all the vulnerable people who could have passed away while undertaking that perilous journey.

² Peter Singer defines speciesism as being "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" as quoted in Foltz's *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures*, p: 2). Additionally, Roger S. Gottlieb states that the spiritual elements of environmentalism commit us to recognizing the intrinsic value beyond the boundaries of our species. On the issues related to speciesism, check Gottlieb, R. S. (2006). *A greener faith: Religious environmentalism and our planet's future*. Oxford University Press.

farmers victimized the land through irresponsible anthropogenic practices, but later they became victims of nativist scapegoating, xenophobia, and social ostracism on the part of Californian authorities and grassroot residents.

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, fake news brought about misinformation and public confusion. It also generated panic, social unrest, and economic and health risks. From a broader perspective, fake news may influence humans’ attitudes and behaviors; still, its power can culminate when mixed with major forces such as natural calamities and environmental injustice, and can therefore push humans to make irrational, hasty, and fateful decisions. Furthermore, rumors and fake news seem to intersect with some of the concepts of ecocriticism. While the latter endeavors for the welfare of all the biotic and abiotic components of environment, Steinbeck demonstrates that the lower stratum of society- the hardship-stricken- is more vulnerable to misinformation. Driven by a state of great precarity and the unsurmountable influence of fake news, the Joads set off to the west of the USA with great expectations: To pick fruit on Californian farms, and eventually reap the fruit of their hard work. However, instead of amassing the wealth they had already dreamed of, they unexpectedly reaped the grapes of wrath.

The Grapes of Wrath is about an environmental crisis¹ which started in Oklahoma and other adjacent states, but whose repercussions were felt in the far west of the country. As a literary work, it may be a unique novel in different ways; yet, it started with an aura of despair and finished with an atmosphere of dismay which culminates in Rose of Sharon nursing a starving man. The only glimpse of hope was the short period that the Joads might have felt on their way to California, a hope which was outlived by the bleak reality which they witnessed once they set foot in the west of the country. While Steinbeck does not provide a way out to the Joads and similar migrant families, he tacitly highlighted the central government’s inability to cater for the needs and safety of some its citizens in times of crises. Additionally, he may have left the opportunity for future generations not to fall prey of fake news and misinformation, and to decenter anthropocentric practices vis-à-vis all the components of their environment.

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¹ For more on the ecological crisis, check: White, L., Jr. (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>

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