CHAPTER - V

CONCLUSION

On closure scrutiny of a host of primary and secondary sources on and of works of Steinbeck, I am eventually led to discover and conclude that he is true artist and adherent to the doctrine of art that integrity demands, therefore, that the text remain “true” to the artistic vision of the human condition- with the ultimate purpose that the reader “participates in the actuality”. He has honed his literary genius to deploy the literary devices of symbolism, allegory, allusion, parable, and biblical parallelism to convey his philosophic realization of misery which causes devastation to the poor and benefit to the affluent ones. The Grapes of Wrath embodies his philosophic observation and invention of conversation style through which his characters stand somewhat similar and analogic to that of biblical figures. It is precisely so because he appears to be truly conscious of the mindset of masses that they are prone to perceive parallelism between the characters of The Grapes of Wrath and of the Bible so as to convinced the migrant labourers of the dire need of mutual co-operation for mutual existence and prosperity.

John Steinbeck is remembered as one of the greatest and best-loved American writers of the twentieth century. He is frequently identified as a
proletarian writer of the nineteen thirties, one whose dominant interest lay in the social and political problems of the Great Depression. Migrant workers and union organizers had long been part of the California scene—and continued so to be. At the very end of the period, that he published The Grapes of Wrath, a work clearly and specifically grounded in conditions and events that were then making news. In fact, so directly and powerfully did this novel deal with contemporary events that it became an important part of those events—debated in public forums, banned, burned, denounced from pulpits, attacked in pamphlets, and even debated on the floor of Congress. The Grapes of Wrath has achieved a place among those novels that so stirred the American public for a social cause as to have had measurable political impact. Although thus associated with this class of social-protest fiction, The Grapes of Wrath continues to be read, not as a piece of literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other American novel, it successfully embodies a contemporary social problem of national scope in a artistically viable expression. It is unquestionably John Steinbeck’s finest achievement, a work of literary genius.

The Grapes of Wrath, still Steinbeck’s most famous and popular novel, is a very problematical work, and very difficult to judge. As story, or rather, chronicle, it lacks invention, and its characters are not persuasive
representations of human inwardness. The book’s wavering strength is located elsewhere, in a curious American transformation of biblical substance and style that worked splendidly in Whitman and Hemingway, but seems to work only fitfully in Steinbeck.

The enormous contemporary social impact of The Grapes of Wrath can encourage the slippery reasoning that condemns a period novel to die with its period. But continuing sales and critical discussions suggest that The Grapes of Wrath has outlived its directly reportorial ties to the historical past; that it can be considered as an aesthetic object, a good or bad novel per se. In that light, the important consideration is the relative harmony of its structure and materials.

The Grapes of Wrath is an attempted prose epic, a summation of national experience at a given time. Evaluation proceeds from that identification of genre. The positive trend asserts that The Grapes of Wrath is a great novel. Its materials are properly universalized in specific detail; the conception is philosophical, the characters are warmly felt and deeply created; the language is functional, varied and superb on the whole; and the structure is an almost perfect combination of the dramatic and the panoramic in sufficient harmony with the materials. This criticism admits that overwrought idealistic
passage as well as propagandistic simplifications turn up on occasion, but these are minor flows in an achievement on an extraordinary scale. Relatively detached studies of Steinbeck’s ideas comprise a third trend. These studies are not directly useful in analytical criticism; they do establish that Steinbeck’s social ideas are ordered and legitimate extensions of biological fact, hence scientific and true rather than mistaken or sentimental.

The two evaluative positions are remarkable in their opposition. They are perhaps overly simple in asserting that The Grapes of Wrath is either a classic of our literature or a formless pandering to sentimental popular taste. Certainly these extremes are mistaken in implying that somehow, The Grapes of Wrath is sui generis in relation to Steinbeck’s work.

Steinbeck had many of the legitimate impulses of the Sublime writer, and of his precursors Whitman and Hemingway in particular. Like them, he studied the nostalgias, the aboriginal sources that were never available for Americans, and like them he retained a profound hope for the American as natural man and natural woman. Unlike Whitman and Hemingway and the origin of this American tradition, Emerson, Steinbeck had no capacity for the nuances of literary irony. He had read Emerson’s essay “The Over-Soul” as his precursors had, but Steinbeck literalized it. Emerson, canniest where he is most
the Idealist, barbs his doctrine of “that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other.”

Steinbeck is not one of the inescapable American novelists of our past century; he cannot be judged in close relation to Cather, Dreiser, and Faulkner, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison, and Thomas Pynchon. Yet there no canonical standards worthy of human respect that could exclude The Grapes of Wrath from a serious reader’s esteem. Compassionate narrative that addresses itself so directly to the great social questions of its era is simply too substantial a human achievement to be dismissed. Whether a human strength, however generously worked through, is also an aesthetic value, in a literary narrative, is one of those larger issues that literary criticism scarcely knows how to decide. One might desire The Grapes of Wrath to be composed differently, whether as plot or as characterization but wisdom compels one to the grateful for the novel’s continued existence.

Steinbeck himself models the behaviour of the writer as the creator of the fictional world, as one who must maintain artistic integrity if the work is to be well envisioned, well grounded, and well made. On this ground of integrity, then, when Pascal Covici objects to such an “abrupt” ending, suggesting that “the incident needs leading up to, so that the meeting with the starving man is
not so much an accident or chance encounter, but more an integral part of the saga,” Steinbeck insists that he cannot change this ending: “To built this stranger into the structure of the book would be to warp the whole meaning of the book”.

His concern for meaning here is classical; importing from Aristotle the persuasion that poetry is truer than history deals in facts whereas the poetic arts deal in universals. Integrity demands, therefore, that the text remain “true” to the artistic vision of the human condition- with the ultimate purpose that the reader “participates in the actuality”.

Steinbeck’s role is at once idealistic and pragmatic, and it places him squarely in a persona of the bardic tradition in his relationship to text and reader. In this role he is the one who sees and understands the heritage of the past- both good and bad-the turmoil of the present, the bleak hope for a better future. His voice is that of a Merlin who tries to advice and adolescent Arthur, here an Every American, whose dream of and search for Camelot/Eden/Paradise is now tarnished and forever flawed.

Steinbeck is himself a participant, held by the evocative power of this own story. He is compelled to tell it and intends to compel the reader to hear and understand it not only with the intellect but with the heart as well. Perhaps
it is the bard-like voice or the closeness and intimacy of this writer/reader/test hug dance that has led some critics to label and to dismiss this novel on the basis of sentimentality.

The Powerful affective domain of GM only partially gives way over time to more analytical approaches that center on the novel as art. But this empathic aspect is intentionally a part of the novel’s “design,” it is considered alongside Steinbeck’s careful “design and balance” in its more formal aspects of structure, characterization, and language. In 1957, to illustrate, Lisca’s “The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction” addresses characterization, style, and structure. As an aside, he also discusses “The characters are so absorbed into the novel’s basic situation that goes beyond sympathy for individuals to moral indignation about their social condition. This is precisely Steinbeck’s intentions. In his conclusion, Lisca again melds analytical concerns “Steinbeck’s art encompasses but transcends its “materials,” creating “a well-made and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda”.

The Grapes of Wrath still fulfils its original twofold function as naturalistic novel and social tract. In the former function, it subjects its people to terrible things. The novel’s Biblical structure and symbolism are supported
by Steinbeck’s skilful use of an Old Testament prose. The extent to which he succeeded in re-creating the epic dignity of this prose can be demonstrated by arranging a typical passage from the novel according to phrases.

The Grapes of Wrath pointed out some of the techniques whereby the interchapters are closely knit into the fibre of the novel. Hunter and French supported this attempt through their discussions of these chapters thematic contribution to the whole. Through the work of Bluestone and Griffin and Freedman, criticism has moved from the mere repetition of Wilson’s charge about Steinbeck’s animalism to a careful analysis of the symbolic meaning and thematic function of the animals and animal tropes in the novel. Bluestone carefully noted out not only the wide range of themes which are accompanied by zoological images, but also he plotted a curve of their incidence and matched this neatly to the curve of the novel’s plot. Working together on the assumption that dominant motifs are of central importance in the form and meaning of certain works of fiction, Griffin and Freedman classified the various tropes put them into categories according to their function. Their work demonstrated that certain parts of The Grapes of Wrath cannot be understood without some analysis of the particular animal imagery. The two critics concluded that Steinbeck’s intricate and masterful manipulation of the various
references to machines is an essential factor in the stature of The Grapes of Wrath as one of the monuments of twentieth century American literature.

The Grapes of Wrath develops the old idea in new ways. It traces the transformation of the Protestant individual into the member of a social group—the old “I” becomes “we”. And it traces the transformation of the passive individual into the active participant—the idealist becomes pragmatist. It brings together and makes real three great skeins of American thought. It begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson’s faith in the common man, and his Protestant self-reliance. To this it joins Whitman’s religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy. And it combines these mystical and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action. From this it develops a new kind of Christianity—not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active.

The final stage of writing culminated in The Grapes of Wrath. His conscience squared, his integrity restored, Steinbeck quickly embarked on the longest sustained writing job of his early career. He told, “It is a nice thing to be working and believing in my work again. I hope I can keep the drive… I only feel whole and well when it is the way”. Naturally, his partnership for the
workers and his sense of indignation at California’s labor situation carried over, but they were given a more articulated and directed shape.

The Grapes of Wrath is arguably the most significant indictment ever made the myth of California as a Promised Land. As John Steinbeck composed this novel that extolled a social group’s capacity for survival in a hostile world, he was himself so unravelled in the process that the angle of vision, the vital signature, the moral indignation that made his art exemplary in the first place, could never be repeated with the same integrated force. Once his name became inseparably linked with the title of his most famous novel, Steinbeck could never escape the influence of his earlier life. Wherever human beings dream of a dignified and free society in which they can harvest the fruits of their own labour, The Grapes of Wrath’s radical voice of protest can still be heard. As a tale of dashed illusions, thwarted desires, inhuman suffering, and betrayal promises-all strung on a shimmering thread of hope-The Grapes of Wrath not only summed up the Depression era’s socially conscious art but beyond that-for emotional urgency, evocative power, and sustained drama-last few peers in American fiction.

To conclude, The Grapes of Wrath has by definition earned intellectual immortality by virtue of the magnificence of characterization in a sincere bid to
provide panacea of social inequality and economic disparity through proper mobilization of the masses through literary dynamics to achieve the nobility of goal of ideal and proper social order. That is how the novel shines like a polar star in the galaxy of literary firmament.

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