

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL SECTION

VOL: 9, No.: 1, SPRING 2019

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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Revisiting the Politics of 'Post-Truth' in Steinbeck's Fiction

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Abstract:

Post-truth has been identified both as a widespread phenomenon, as well as a condition, in which debates are generated and maintained by appeals to prevailing majoritarian emotion /national political temper, over and above actual lived experience and realities thereof. Post-truth politics, it has been suggested, moves beyond the traditional contestations of power that occur due to falsifying facts. The paper revisits two Steinbeck novels, *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* in the context of post-truth politics, and examines the impact of a post-truth model of the American Dream on American agriculture of the Depression era. The paper also attempts to relate the realities therein to the present-day Indian agricultural scenario.

Keywords:

post-truth, American and Indian agriculture, capitalist economy, global market, ecological crises.

The paper seeks to revisit two of John Steinbeck's well-known novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* and attempts to analyse the ways in which the idea of post-truth (a term not yet coined at the time) gets represented, especially with reference to the everyday negotiations of the characters who are confronted with the realities of post-truth. Critical scholarship on both these novels has been extensively associated with the historical contexts of the Depression Era, the Dust Bowl phenomenon, McCarthyism and the mechanisation of American agricultural production. Both novels expose the machinations of post-truth politics wielded through an abstract entity called 'the bank' and the Big Brother figure personified by conscienceless labour contractors in California. The mechanisation of American agriculture exacerbated the existing uneasy, ecologically precarious, texture of agrarian subsistence economy to an ecological and human catastrophe on an unprecedented scale. In places like Oklahoma, a newly-formed profit-driven economy led to the forcible and violent conversion of small marginal farms into corporate-owned mega-farms and of generations of landed agriculturists into migrant labourers. The paper will attempt to examine how the then existing instruments of post-truth shape and project the American Dream, and exploit its attendant implications, in relation to the small man and his experiences. One of the significations of this exercise, the paper suggests, is that a critical parallel can be drawn in the context of post-Independence modern and present-day Indian agriculture, in relation to post-truth images of progress and development.

A quick survey of criticism on the two Steinbeck novels considered in this paper shows that the direct confrontation between the individual farmer/worker and corporate authority has received the most attention. *In Dubious Battle*, written in 1936, documents the plight of workers caught up in the profit making Californian apple megafarms, and the conflict of interests that arises from unbridled exploitation of the working classes by an extractive capitalist economy. The ruthless undercutting of daily wages in order

to maximise corporate profits led to brutal and dehumanising competition amongst the farm labourers for survival amidst a steadily deteriorating wage for employment. The protagonist Jim Nolan represents the working classes who become helpless pawns in the machinations of corporate profit creation, and makes a tragic attempt to inspire them to a united protest against injustice. The bucolic image of eternal sunshine, a fruitful land and overflowing plenty that was actively projected as inherent part of California by large landowners, and by corporate state-supported apparatuses, gets exposed and debunked in *In Dubious Battle* in the experiences of the workers employed in its fruit farms. *The Grapes of Wrath* documents the state-sponsored violent dispossession of marginal independent farmers and their subsequent forced migration seeking employment as manual labourers in Californian fruit farms. The particular experiences of the Joad family in this context are representative of the phenomenon of mass migration by erstwhile landowning and hitherto self-contained marginal farmers. The disheartening reduction from tenant farming to sharecropping is the first symptom of things to come, in the Depression-era history of American agriculture.

Even prior to the mechanization of American agrarian enterprise, the soil ecology of the naturally arid American West, in places like Oklahoma, had already become very precarious from over-cultivation, high-yield monoculture and the destruction and clearing of grassland. The vulnerability of the land was manifested in its inability to withstand strong winds, leading to dust storms, famine and drought. In his article "Water as Privileged Signifier in *The Grapes of Wrath*", David N. Cassuto points out that the disastrous ecological impact of such unsustainable agriculture was not, indeed could not, be recognised or accepted in the overarching narrative of the American Dream (Bloom 132). The complete transformation of what had been the Bread Basket of America to the Dust Bowl did not result in a revision of agrarian practices, but "an ideological shift" in the American Dream itself: "The myth of the garden remained intact, but its form evolved from an Edenic Xanadu to a neo-Baconian Atlantis that no longer awaited manna from heaven but wrested it from the grips of Nature" (Bloom 132). For the small farmers, eking out a sustainable living from the soil became an impossibility and abandoned homesteads drastically increased in number. But the changing paradigms of the American Dream meant that those farmers who still clung to their land in the face of bankruptcy were violently evicted, threatened and even killed; that their mortgaged lands were taken over by the corporate banks; that these small decrepit farms were converted into enormous landholdings subjected to mechanized cultivation and were now owned by absentee landlords. In parallel to this, water and water ecology have been amongst the biggest casualties in the present modern Indian agrarian scene. Sand mining has led to diminished percolation of rainwater to the underground water table, leaving farmers vulnerable to droughts, floods and landslides alike. The violent acquisition and transformation of agricultural wetland for industrial purposes is symptomatic of the larger pro-development narrative that is currently being enacted at the national level.

In *The Grapes Of Wrath*, the entire "monstrous logic of modern economics" (Levant 12) is epitomised by the abstract entity called "the Bank". Levant argues that death is associated with "the Bank", and this deadly reality becomes concrete in the symbolic form of the tractors that are used to force the small farmers off their land. In his words, the tractor becomes "the perfect tool of the abstract "Bank", which dehumanizes its driver and kills the fertility of the soil" (Levant 18). The idea that "the Bank" is "more complicated an enemy... because it is an abstraction" (Levant 11), makes it possible to forward the argument that the Bank functions as an agent of the post-truth generated by the modernisation of American agriculture in *The Grapes Of Wrath*. The ideals of

the American Dream were violently superimposed on the already-desiccated land through its abstract agent called “the Bank”, which in turn financed the machines and motors that destroyed and replaced the human bond with the land. The actual experiences of the insolvent farmers and their subsequent struggle for survival as displaced and dispossessed migrant workers are lost in the aggressive marketing strategies of corporate American agriculture, which insistently project images of peaceful plenty and prosperity, which are apparently the result of legitimately conducted capitalist business.

The Joad family’s decision to migrate to California is not so much forced eviction, as happened with their neighbours, as a gesture of hope. And this hope underlies all their terrible sufferings and privations along the way. The older generation does not survive the loss of a sense of place and the inevitable displacement; the weak characters abandon the family group. Their hope is based on the possibility of finding employment in California, an idea that has been deliberately and strategically propagated in the massive distribution of handbills that advertise well-paid work on Californian fruit farms. The real agenda behind the large scale distribution of the leaflets is to cheapen the cost of labour; this is done by persuasive advertising by the agents of the California farm owners, that makes the Joads, and thousands of others like them, believe that they could actually start life anew in California: “Why, I seen han’bills how they need folks to pick fruit, an’ good wages.... An’ with them good wages, maybe a fella can get hisself a piece a land an’ work out for extra cash. Why, hell, in a couple a years I bet a fella could have a place of his own” (Cassuto 141). The handbills hold out a false promise of renewal to these erstwhile farmers to an extent where those who have never been able to reconcile themselves to landlessness, can dream of working towards ownership again. As Cassuto puts it, “The California growers’ cartel, already enmeshed in a cycle of wage slavery, remained convinced that additional workers could only lengthen their profit margins. They recruited Dust Bowl refugees with promises of a vast, temperate paradise wherein they might recreate the homesteads they had been forced to leave” (14). However, what could be construed as the machinations of post truth in this context is not only the false promises held out by the handbills, but that the reality that forms the Oklahoman farmers’ experiences in California gets totally submerged in the meta-narrative of the American Dream held up by California’s agrarian industry, with its attendant images of progress, development and prosperity. The ideals of the American Dream legitimised and underpinned the production of false and misleading information about employment opportunities, which in turn becomes instrumental in the deliberate creation of an artificial surplus of labour in California. Amidst the abandonment of their hopes of renewal, the workers are forced to compete amongst themselves against ever-decreasing labour wages, so that they ultimately become agents of their own destruction.

The Joad family gets a rude awakening from the rosy picture promised by the handbills even before they are anywhere near California. On the migrant highway, they meet returning sharecroppers, who have already run the gamut of the deadly self-destructive competition imposed by the capitalist rhetoric of profit-making. These migrant farmers openly share their disillusionment with the employment scenario in California, leaving nothing in the telling, but the Joads decide to go on. Most criticism on *The Grapes Of Wrath* shows a tendency to sentimentalise this decision in metaphorical, Biblical terms that seek to situate the family in a moral contestation and struggle against the injustices of capitalism as it was enacted at the time. However, it is also possible to view the family’s decision to continue to California in terms of the disenfranchisement that is often part of the texture of post truth, as far as its particular victims in this novel are

concerned. Peter Lisca suggests that the Joads' predicament was not so much personal misfortune, as that it was representative of the entire socio-economic condition brought about by corporate politics (Lisca 39). What is important to note here is that the handbills become instruments of the larger conceptualisation of post truth that was embedded in a burgeoning and increasingly exploitative capitalist economy. The persuasive power of the handbills is premised on falsified facts, but it works by appealing to the agrarian ideals of the recently-dispossessed Oklahoma farmers through the promise of honest and lucrative labour.

The Joads were victims of post truth politics in the 1930s Depression era, in the specific context of the modernisation of American agriculture. A parallel can be seen with the current state of Indian agriculture in different parts of the country, dismal in its similarities to the disastrous human cost, ecological and economic consequences that marked the corporatisation and growth of American agrarian economy. Prominent examples are the small farmers of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, who believed in the aggressively advertised profitable qualities of the genetically modified BT cotton seeds, and farmers in the Punjab who were trapped by the idea of high-yield food grains, marketed by MONSANTO. The actual reality of these unfortunate farmers is that their land is hopelessly contaminated by the chemical fertilisers without which the crop cannot be sustained; the crop is neither high yield nor good quality, being infused with harmful chemicals; the seeds cannot be traditionally preserved for another season's planting as MONSANTO's cutting-edge research has ensured that the natural regenerative properties of the seeds have been genetically modified and destroyed; the farmer is forced into further debt if he is to buy next year's seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. Investigative documentaries (for instance, those by Kavitha Bahl and Nandan Saxena) provide open proof that the governments in these states have been in alignment with, if not actual collusion with, the profit-making schemes of MONSANTO, the World Bank and the forces of American economic imperialism. The debt-ridden marginal farmer is left with no option except to commit suicide, ironically, often by consuming the pesticides he had incurred debt to buy. The number of farmer suicides has increased alarmingly over the last decade, despite announcements from the government at the local as well as national levels, of schemes of loan waiver and other forms of economic support to food growers.

The trope of monopolization that forms the backbone of modern capitalism and an extractive economy makes it possible to create an ideological shift towards natural resources like water and arable land. The damming and diverting of river waters and the violent acquisition of agricultural land for industrial production in India have received plenty of media attention in terms of its being a demonstration of the nation's apparent progress towards modernity and development. This government-supported rhetoric remains undisturbed by the actual plight of those affected by the march towards a 'developed' national status. In many states, erstwhile small farmers have been displaced and dispossessed and left with no choice except to form part of a vast migrant labour population across the country. In Karnataka, many farmers in Bellary have been victimised and the soil of their land degraded, by the aggressive profit-making ventures of mining companies and large numbers of rural families have drifted to metropolitan cities like Bangalore in search of wage-labour for survival. The inflation and high cost of living in urban areas ensure that they remain disenfranchised despite earning relatively more in terms of wage-labour than they would have in agrarian economy. This is not to say that the ecological consequences and human injustices have gone unnoticed or undocumented or not received adequate media attention; but the imperatives of being a player in the global market which also involve being in collusion

with American economic imperialism, see to it that these counter-narratives remain largely 'unheard'. This willing and conscious participation in the creation of post-truth in Indian agriculture is at present happening to an extent where the local casualties are merely regarded as regrettable but 'necessary' fallouts in the grand march towards an idea of prosperity that is self-destructive in its conceptualisation. Vote-bank politics have further complicated the actual ongoing negotiations between farmers' petitions and government response. The print media is awash with full-page advertisements with juxtaposed images of an emaciated farmer-figure and a smiling politico, in apparent harmonious collaboration. The image of the farmer projected in these advertisements is one that shows him/her as supposedly a beneficiary of a benevolent paternalistic government that will never tolerate economic injustice of any kind.

Despite the present government in Karnataka being avowedly proletarian in its ideologies and its acclaimed pro-farmer stances, the actual experience of the average farmer is in many ways dystopian in its resemblance to the post truth conditions created by a hypothetical 'repressive' government. The drier parts of North Karnataka (like Raichur) some of which have been irrigated through damming and diversion of river waters, are still witnessing farmer suicides, while in the southern parts, sugarcane farmers are confronted with the politically-backed barons who monopolize and control sugar factories. The individual debt-ridden farmer's identity can be most closely compared to that of the 'unperson', an Orwellian product of government/state denialism and manipulation of the past. Once the farmer succumbs either to a desperate suicide, or to urban manual labour for wages, his past identity and life as a landowning food-grower is wiped out and conveniently forgotten, once the dust of media coverage and sensationalism has settled down. The marginal farmers of the 1930s Oklahoma, America and of 2019 Karnataka, India, have this obliteration of identity in common due to the ruthless competitive texture of the global market, in which the agricultural scene is inextricably compromised and enmeshed in capitalist power structures. Indeed, one could forward the argument that the dynamics of the corporatised modernised agricultural economy is maintained largely by the machinations of post-truth politics, wielded by those in power. As migrant and landless labourers, the erstwhile marginal farmers of Oklahoma are referred to derogatorily as "Okies" in California, while in big cities like Bangalore, no one cares about the rural identity or agricultural values of a landless farmer-turned-construction labourer. Entire rural families end up becoming faceless daily-wage labourers, invisible against the facade of urban growth.

In Dubious Battle ends with Jim's sinister death and *The Grapes Of Wrath* with a flood that compounds the miseries of the already displaced and distressed farm workers. However, the latter novel holds out hope for the people, in the form of the recognition of common circumstances and a mutuality that is based on it. The heavy Christian symbolisms associated with Jim's martyrdom and the flood (not to mention Rose of Sharon's uncharacteristic act of charity) have been extensively debated and linked with the context of Steinbeck's socialist sensibilities. The common consensus of much Steinbeck criticism points to his enduring belief that the humanistic values upheld in the unmechanised past by "the people" would now continue to be fought for by "the group" (Levant 12), which, in both his novels, is a product of the new era of development and progress. The degradation of soil ecology in Oklahoma, the desperation of farmers switching from food crops to unsuitable cash crops like cotton, their growing debts to the "Bank", their destroyed agrarian livelihoods and consequent landlessness, displacement and disenfranchisement all have dismal parallels in current day Indian agriculture. There have been unprecedented dust storms in Bellary, Karnataka, due to soil erosion and degradation from unbridled mining, and it is

debatable whether the land can ever be recovered, even for agricultural purposes. And it is equally debatable whether the displaced rural communities will ever be recompensed, either with land elsewhere, or in other forms of livelihood/ employment. Leading newspaper articles highlight drought, flood and other natural calamities as key factors in the agrarian crisis in Karnataka, but not enough attention is drawn to the original causes of such catastrophic phenomena. The soil has been rendered unable to withstand strong winds or rain, and landslides have occurred in parts of the state that were once considered environmentally stable. In the contexts of both the American past and of the Indian agrarian present, post truth realities must be understood not just as traditional 'global vs. local' contestations of authority/power, but as pointing to the permanent disappearance of ways of life that are not considered important enough in the larger, pro-development narrative espoused at the national and global levels.

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