

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Gender Relation, Matriarchy and Feminism in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath***

**A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English in Partial**

**Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts in English**

**By**

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## Abstract

Critics have argued that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about social and inner changes. As the Joad family starts its journey to California, their organization of the family becomes essential to their survival. In times of material loss, Ma Joad breaks with patriarchal rules, emerges as the new leader of her family, and plays more than the housewife role assigned to the women of her time. She becomes, then, an essential figure to the maintenance of the family's integrity. The aim of this study is to analyze the way in which the determination of new social values, especially those regarding the role of women in the family, occur in the novel, taking into consideration the historical context of migration in which the narrative takes place.

The main argument of my thesis will be the violation of traditional norms of Patriarchy and highly welcoming Matriarchy in Steinbeck's work *The Grapes of Wrath*, though several critics have argued about this piece of art on the Marxist ground. The migratory movement to the west contributes to the ascertaining of new social values and to the establishment of new family roles. With Pa Joad's loss of control over his family during the journey, Ma is capable of breaking with the patriarchal ideology to assume a more influential position in the family. This thesis endorses some previous studies on *The Grapes of Wrath*, and represents an opportunity for new studies on the novel.

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## **Chapter-I General Introduction of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath***

When reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, one immediately notes the kind of Migration portrayed in the novel—the westward movement of hundreds of families from the south western and central plains of the United States during the 1930s—as an important factor of social change and the determination of new values, including those regarding the social role of women. These changes are mainly due to the need for survival in a new and unknown environment. As once pointed out by Warren French, in “The Education of the Heart,” Steinbeck's novel is an attempt to show how people learn that their survival will depend “upon their adaptability to new conditions”(99). In this sense, one can see the long process of learning and changing undergone by the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* —Tom Joad, the preacher Jim Casy, and especially the mother, Ma Joad, to mention just a few and connect this process to the context of migration depicted in the novel.

Critics such as David Wyatt and Stephen Railton have argued that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about transformation and new social systems. This notion can be perceived in the novel as the Joads face their obstacles along their journey. The fictional Joads, who represent thousands of historical families that had to leave the south-central plains in the United States to escape drought and extreme poverty, evoke the suffering and need to adapt of the migrant laborers who arrived in California in the 1930s in their flight from adverse climactic and economic conditions of the Dust Bowl. The area of the country in and around the state of Oklahoma, affected by violent dust storms and drought during that period, which resulted in the failure of small family farms and in large-scale unemployment. Among all the changes caused by the Joads family's movement Westward, one that catches attention and sympathy is that suffered by Ma Joad. As the narrative in the

novel proceeds, one can see that the family environment is deeply affected by the new conditions in which they find themselves. The family that used to be ruled by Pa Joad, the father, encounters in Ma Joad's figure a new leader who does not hesitate to take on a central role in the family's decisions in order to maintain the family's physical survival and moral dignity. As the title of this thesis suggests, she sets the patriarchal rules aside in favor of a more flexible approach to action in the face of unforeseen circumstances. Her determination is able to overcome traditional family boundaries and leads her to undertake more than the role of motherhood assigned to women in a traditional patriarchal system of family organization.

This research work will be dealing with how that Ma Joad's transformation in *The Grapes of Wrath* is intimately related to the historical context of migration depicted in the novel and the importance of this context to social changes, and to the determination of new values and roles, including those of gender. Although Ma Joad is always described as a strong woman, capable of taking part in family decisions, her most important changes only occur once the Joads are on the road to California. Even though she seems to have the seeds of transformation within her, she is not able to overcome the traditional family boundaries at the beginning of the journey. On the contrary, this process of surpassing the limited housewife and mother's role is a gradual one, in tune with the various obstacles faced by the Joads' during their journey, especially Pa Joad's loss of control over his family. She begins to stand out as a family leader when circumstances force it and she finds the inner strength to do so. Therefore this is to argue that in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the more distant the Joads are from their homeland, the more obstacles they face along the journey, and the more unfit Pa Joad is to assume the family's responsibilities, the stronger and more decisive Ma Joad's role becomes.



Regarding the socio-historical contexts in which the stories take place, these two women are capable of surpassing the typical place of house wives in the North American patriarchal society from the 1930's in order to keep their families intact. This research work has been limited to the text *The Grapes of Wrath*. The intention behind this is to integrate Ma's character analysis with the historical context of migration, taking into account the effects of movement experienced by the Joads to the construction and development of a character. In this recent research on the critical responses to the novel, it has been observed that in fact critics have been debating the social and family transformations in *The Grapes of Wrath* ever since it was first published. It is found that the structural changes in the family and the acquisition of the idea of unity among the migrants have always caught the attention of students of the novel. It seems, however, that the critical responses to the novel have not been uniform over time but have followed a certain chronological pattern.

In his Introduction to *New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath* (1990), David Wyatt mentions three different phases of critical responses to the novel, each spanning about fifteen years. The first phase, from 1940 to 1955, encompasses the sociological analysis of the novel in a more generalized way. During that phase, according to Wyatt, "the novel served commentators as a pretext for argument about social justice in the United States and even about the ultimate nature of humankind"(4). Character analysis would then, fit the purpose of making statements about the social condition of the historical migrants. The second phase, from 1955 to 1973, is characterized by a more critical analysis of the artistic and literary features of the novel. The typical analysis of the novel during this phase would take into account symbols, biblical allusions, and other literary devices used to construct the characters. These two first phases were, according to Wyatt, broadly presented by Peter Lisca in

his special edition to *The Grapes of Wrath*, released in 1972. Wyatt's proposed third phase of critical response, from 1973 to 1989, encompasses new readings of the novel after the emergence of new theoretical-critical approaches to literature in the academy, such as feminism, deconstruction, and new historicism (4-10).

At the same time, recent criticism has called attention to the early responses. In their entry on *The Grapes of Wrath* in the most recent work on the author, *The John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* (2006), Michael J. Meyer and Brian Railsback affirm that "...recent works of criticism have presented a thorough overview of the varied initial reactions to the novel and the controversy over it" (132). Their statement shows that this might be a new phase of the critical responses to *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Meyer and Railsback attempt to show, there is a certain concern of current criticism with what critics used to say about the novel when it was first published. It seems that the controversy found in the different reactions of critics towards the novel is the starting point to the discussion of the complexity of the issues within *The Grapes of Wrath* to many scholars nowadays.

Preface to *The Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism*, Peter Leska pointed out that in the years that followed the publication of the novel debates mainly around its social and political issues, due to its strong connection to the "newsreels of the day". In this way, Frederic Carpenter demonstrates in "The Philosophical Joads" (first published in 1941), how the main lines of American thought can be found in the novel. Carpenter claims that the transition from the importance of the "I" to the importance of the "we" in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the result of the combination of self-reliance, love of all men, and effective action, in which the Joads become aware of the need for social changes (708).

Ma Joads is the centre for all the responsibility for the family, because she is the only adult member who possesses the needed integrity to do so. In this way, Ma Joad emerges as an important character. According to Lisca the novel has had much more to offer to its readers than a debate on social and political issues, as important as they are. He states that Steinbeck gave his novel a “great authenticity of detail” (709).that transgressed the level of mere propaganda, as in so many other novels of the 1930s, to achieve the “level of lasting art (710).” It is much easier nowadays to appreciate the literary value of *The Grapes of Wrath*, since it was once so difficult to separate the novel from its socio-historical context of the late 1930s ( v).

In “*House and Home: Thematic Symbols in the Grapes of Wrath*,” Betty Perez attempts to integrate the analysis of literary motifs to the transformations that occur in the novel. She analyzes the symbolic use of house and home in the novel, arguing that the notion of “home” undergoes a complete change throughout the novel. As soon as the physical home falls apart, the need for a spiritual home increases. In this context, the character of Ma Joad seems to increase in importance too, since she is, for Perez, the personification of the idea of home (843).

Although it seems to be possible to analyze the novel without considering its social themes, their importance can hardly be ignored and as a result many different critics have chosen to take them into their accounts. French’s thesis, for example, is that the Joad family members go through a long process of education in which they learn the importance of social organization for the survival of a whole community of migrants.

Rebecca Hinton also examines the notion of the family in the novel, stating that, in times of strong social changes, the concept expands and the family becomes more than the conjugal unit. In order to illustrate her argument, Hinton shows how the

Joads, especially Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, adapt to this new social organization, embracing the cause of the helpless families that find themselves in the same conditions that they are (103).

For those critics primarily concerned with the social issues, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about transformations and new social systems. David Wyatt affirms that the novel “marks the end of Steinbeck’s conception of home and place” (19), and Stephen Railton, in “Pilgrims’ Politics: Steinbeck’s Art of Conversion” argues that it “is a novel about an old system [capitalism] dying, and a new one [socialized democracy] beginning to take root” (27). Railton’s essay is an important study of the Joads’ inner changes throughout the novel, and his thesis is that *The Grapes of Wrath* is about the conversion of people who become aware of the need to get together to defeat the social inequalities of the system (28-30)

For her part, Nellie Y. McKay specifically takes into consideration the transformations observed in Ma Joad’s character, in “‘Happy[?]-Wife-and-Motherdom’: The Portrayal of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.” Ma Joad’s assertiveness and leadership, McKay argues, are the results of her family’s lack of opportunities. As a starting point for her analysis, McKay assumes the traditional patriarchal belief that women are responsible for both the biological and cultural upbringing of the family. According to her, in this belief, “woman, wife, motherhood and mothering [the cultural function of nurturing] are synonymous”(47). She says, women should completely devote towards her family. She should nurture her child as a good mother and care and obey her husband as a good wife. But this research has tried to broken this patriarchal value. It shows that the female character in this novel were no more inside the four walls of the house following the traditional role of women they are now outside of it in equal position to man, they are now

involved in decision making process for the family and they are also working for the survival of family when the Male figure collapsed during the chaos of Economic Depression.

The critical responses to *The Grapes of Wrath* have employed a variety of different approaches, but most of the critical writing on the novel has turned into a study of the social transformations portrayed in the novel. As It has observed above, the family changes that critics have perceived in the novel have been one of the main objects of study since its publication. This is to agree that Steinbeck's novel has much to say about social transformation. The new roles established in the novel indicate the necessity of social organization and unity in order to break with the oppression provoked by the capitalist system. The novel suggests that overcoming the barriers imposed by that system seems to be less difficult when people recognize the importance of mutual cooperation, and when the conception of family surpasses the traditional boundaries.

To deepen Ma's character analysis, it is important to place historical context of migration, taking into account the effects of the movement experienced by the Joads in the construction and development of her character. In this way, this research intends to integrate the literary study of the novel with social, historical, political and economic issues inherent in its context of creation. The Joads' westward journey is not a simple matter of family choice, but a compulsory act which results from the combination of several interrelated factors: the natural (the harsh drought that swept the central area of the United States in the 1930's), economic (the families' loss of their lands to the bank system), socio-psychological (the general feeling of impotence in the presence of a rapid change in the economic and natural structure of the area), and cultural (the general belief of finding prosperity in the West). These factors are

all introduced to the reader in the opening pages of the novel and especially in the intercalary chapters that, according to French, generally portray the condition of families in the same situation as the Joads (96). This research analysis will therefore focus both on literary aspects within the novel, such as the construction of the narrative and characterization, and on social, historical and cultural issues that can be largely discussed and associated with the topic of this thesis.

Finally, this research analysis will definitely contribute to literary studies, especially to the research area of Literature, History and Cultural Memory, since this analysis will integrate the study of one of the most important characters in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the study of migratory issues which are specific to a given historical moment that may intervene in the construction and development of a character. It can be expected that this project may signify an opportunity for new studies on Steinbeck's works.

Although Steinbeck won two of the most important literary prizes during his life—the Pulitzer, and the Nobel—and became one of the best-selling artists of his time, it is difficult to find recent national publications concerning the author's books in our universities. Most of the critical works on Steinbeck seem to belong to a previous stage of literary criticism. This research shares the idea that the study of Steinbeck's works is still relevant. The main themes in his novels (social class struggles, migration, human conditions and the identification of rural people and nature), especially in *The Grapes of Wrath*, are recurrent themes in contemporary history including our own.

In order to complete the analysis, this thesis work has been organized in three different chapters. In the first chapter, It deals with the historical context in which the narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath* occurs, relating the most important historical facts

in the United States during the 1930s to the fictional narrative in the novel. Similarly, It discusses how the migrant families in general are portrayed in the novel, exploring their attitudes towards their situation and the process of social change. Likewise this chapter also tries to depict the transformations that the Joad family passes through and how the old patriarchal value gradually, with the journey of Joad's family, transform into matriarchy. It will also analyze Ma Joad's increasing importance to her family throughout the novel, observing how she goes beyond the family boundaries and starts to play more than the role of a housewife as the Joads face the obstacles of their Journey. At the same time this chapter analyze the Gender relation from feminist perspective in this novel. At the end, in the third chapter of Thesis It is intended to have accomplish the determined objective, establishing a conclusion of the main points identified and highlighted during the entire analysis.

### **The Migratory Movement of 1930s and the Migrant Families**

In the first half of the decade, as pointed out by Worster, almost one million farmers left the plains, and other two and a half million left the area after 1935 (49). The Pacific Northwest received over 450,000 migrants during the 1930s—almost 40 percent came from the northern and southern plains and almost 300,000 poor people entered California by vehicles in the second half of this decade (50). Meltzer mentions the day one observer counted over thirty cars with plates from “states between Chicago and the Rocky Mountains” in a single hour (55). The main path of flight was Route 66, “the mother road, the road of flight,” as described by the narrator in *The Grapes of Wrath* (118). In this “road of flight,” old cars drove and, sometimes, they broke down while mathematical equations became new statistics. Numbers like the ones stated above represent the migratory movements to the west during the 1930s. Movements marked a more drastic quest than that of the first American settlers who

went westward: the quest for survival. The desperation of the plains families increased while new statistics arose.

The bad condition of migrant families became alarming. In his book, Meltzer observes that "...most migrant families had work for only about four to six months a year. Their average income—per family—was between \$350 and \$450 a year" (65), half of what was considered as a substantial level by the California Relief Administration, according to Worster (53). Since the migrants had to move constantly along the state of California to work, they had some fixed automobile expenses, which left even less money for them to feed, clothe, or live under a decent shelter. Earning way less than what was expected for adequate life, these migrants faced problems ranging from hunger to serious diseases. Pneumonia, meningitis, and tuberculosis were some of the most common illnesses among these people, especially the migrant children, as pointed out by Meltzer (73). In fact, Meltzer's data show the obvious: how can one stay healthy with no food or adequate shelter? Important examples of the hard consequences of starvation and bad living conditions can be found in the last chapters of Steinbeck's novel. Winfield, the youngest male of the Joads, gets sick from hunger (350), while Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn (444). At last scene, a starving man near to death (455). The situation of the fictional Joads is not different from that of the real migrant families of the 1930s, and the novel illustrates what was very common during that decade.

As one may notice, the migrant families had to face extreme conditions of suffering during the 1930s: poverty, starvation, disease, and lack of shelter. Nevertheless, as if it was not enough, these people also had to confront the prejudice of people from the western states. To see how offensive the word "Okie" was in the 1930s, Worster mentions a sign in a San Joaquin Valley theater: "Negroes and Okies



upstairs” (52). In the social hierarchy of that decade, the migrants became as unwelcome in public places as the African-Americans, who had always been mistreated by the dominant white society.

The word “Okie” became quite common in social classification during the 1930s. Apparently, it was used to generalize about migrants from the many states of the plains. According to Worster, “no matter what your reason for being poor, or your place of origin in the southern plains states, once across the Colorado River you became an ‘Okie’” (51). This new way to refer to migrants only shows the intolerance of some people who did not care for the origins of those families. For them, the Dust Bowlers were all the same and reduced to human beings close to animals.

One of the most absurd comments made during that time represents the ignorance of some people who almost animalized the rural migrants. The journalist H. L. Mencken, as cited by Worster, said that the rural people “are simply, by God’s inscrutable will, inferior men . . . and inferior they will remain until, by a stupendous miracle, He gives them equality among His angels” (53). Mencken’s declaration sounds illogical to hear, but there were those who agreed with his theory of the biologically less developed rural people (53), which shows how unwilling people were to help the suffering migrants.

As in real life, in Steinbeck’s novel the Okies are not seen in a more romanticized way. When the Joads leave a gas station on their way to California, the service-station boy comments on the precarious situation of their jalopy, and tells his helper he would never have the courage to travel in a vehicle like that. His co-worker replies;

“Well, you and me got sense. Them goddam Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they

do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas." (221)

The service-station worker shares the same opinion as Mencken and many other people who do not consider the Okies "better than gorillas." Giving to the migrants the chance to be heard through his characters, Steinbeck provides them the opportunity to question the use of the word "Okie." When Tom Joad first hears the word, he learns that it is not a well-meaning way of referring to migrants. As he asks another migrant who has already been to California what the meaning of it is, the man gives his own, but true definition for it;

"Well, Okie use'ta means you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch.. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it" (205-6).

This passage represents the feeling of displeasure and indignation of migrants, who suffered from the insulting way they were referred to in the west. The man in the novel is clear when he says that the meaning of the word is not as offensive as the way people use it.

As in the passage above, many other passages of the novel are important to understand the point of view of the migrant families. This way, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* becomes part of the voice of those families and their main complaints. In fact, the families in the novel ask for nothing more than a place to settle and to restructure their lives. Their requests are not as offensive as the western people might think. These fictional families do not differ from the real families, and like Steinbeck, important people who observed the migrants during the 1930s contributed to show how reasonable these families' claims were.

These Dust Bowl observers were of great importance to the recognition of the migrants' causes. They showed to the rest of the nation the suffering of the families that fled from the dust storms and poverty and the plains. Among these observers were photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, economist Paul Taylor—Lange's husband—and Carey McWilliams, who was the director of California Immigration and Housing Office. According to Worster, these people "assumed responsibility for bringing the plight of these migrants before the nation in the late 1930s" (54). Together, these observers produced documents, articles, and photographs which helped the government think of solutions for the problems of the migrant families. Some of Dorothea Lange's photographs, for instance, are well-known for the sincerity in which they reveal the pain of migrants. Lange represented the Farm Security Administration (FSA) together with other important photographers. The pictures they took in their travels throughout the country were used to illustrate Archibald MacLeish's "Land of the Free." This, as Worster observes, reflects MacLeish's concern with forest devastation, the ruin of the soil, and the deterioration of the land as results of an unorganized development of commercial farming (45-6). With the intervention of observers, people had a more faithful idea of what was going on in some areas of the country. In a speech at the Commonwealth Club in 1938, Paul Taylor expressed his feelings about the migrants. These simple facts people must face. It follows as elementary, therefore, that whether we like them or not, we dare not tolerate in our midst their hunger and malnutrition of their children, their unsanitary living conditions, and their disease. Neither the state of California nor the United States can postpone or avoid this responsibility (qtd. in Meltzer, 77).

The other important Californian figure to take up the migrants' cause was Steinbeck himself. An important fact about Steinbeck's dedication to the novel is his

commitment to the migrants' cause as a whole. Not only did he write a novel denouncing the bad living conditions of those people, but he also traveled along with some families and had his own impressions on what was going on at that time. In his visits to squatters' camps in the second half of the decade, Steinbeck collected enough material to write a series of articles for the San Francisco News. "The Harvest Gypsies," as these articles were entitled, were published in October 1936.

Steinbeck was not just a mere observer of the migrants. He embraced their cause as his own. He lived in a migrant camp, joined migrants in their search for work and even picked cotton with them, as pointed out by Lisca (75). Steinbeck's efforts to understand the migrants' needs were extremely important to his novel. Living with migrants made him see what these people really needed. He had to live with starvation, unemployment and disease near him, which made him feel devastating. His compassion for the families was such that, according to Lisca, Steinbeck's plans in that year included signing a six week contract to write the screenplay for *Of Mice and Men*. With the six thousand dollars he would earn, he could give two dollars to each of three thousand migrants. His intentions show the precarious condition of the families. Two dollars apiece would make a big difference at that time. Experiencing the migrants' needs and transcribing those needs into *The Grapes of Wrath* was not an easy task for Steinbeck. Facing negative criticism on his novel seemed to be even worse. According to Worster, the reception of the novel was not the best among some critics.

The animal-like life that bothered Wilson is one of the most striking features in the novel. The characters' behavior is not impelled by their own will, but by the circumstances in their lives. Nevertheless, many other Americans were discontented with the way *The Grapes of Wrath* reported the dilemma of the migrant families, and

Worster mentions that Steinbeck's novel was banned in many states. Yet, the greatness and importance of the novel are still recognized nowadays. No other novel of the thirties had anything like its national impact; it taught an entire reading public what to think about the Okies and exodusters, and it would endure, for all its aesthetic and analytical faults, as one of the great American works of literature. Worster's words illustrate the outstanding place of the novel within American literature.

Despite all the problems some critics attributed to it, *The Grapes of Wrath* cannot be discarded for its literary, social, cultural and historical significance. It brings to readers part of what the migrant families of the 1930s really felt, and denounces the abuses of a society that pretended not to see what should be seen and fought. The migratory movement of the 1930s was a striking event in American history. Provoked by poverty and lack of opportunities in the plains, this movement figured as uncommon and unique. Lots of families saw no other alternative than taking the road to the west. The dream to find better living conditions outside the plains was not immediately achieved by families that faced starvation, unemployment and extreme poverty in an unknown land. In this troubled context, *The Grapes of Wrath* emerges as a novel of social accusation and becomes one of the most important literary works of its era.

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is largely determined by the implications of the economic and environmental crises observed in the 1930s in the United States. In order to present to the reader the consequences of these problems to the population, the novel brings forward migrant families and the obstacles they have to overcome during this period. The Joads are the main characters in the novel, but the reader becomes acquainted with many other families in the intercalary chapters (usually referred to as "interchapters"), as well as in the chapters about the Joads. All

these families undergo a process of deep change provoked by social, geographical and economic factors. In the context of migration, they have to acquire new values and abandon old family ideals in order to survive. In this chapter, research will be made on how the families are portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, identifying the most important social changes observed in the family sphere. The families in the interchapters of the novel will be the main focus of examination here.

## **Chapter – II: Gender Relation, Matriarchy and Feminism in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath***

### **A Break with the Old Values: Ma Joad's Importance for the Joads.**

In the previous chapters, the groundwork has been laid for the major analysis of this thesis: the process of change identified in Ma Joad's attitudes throughout the novel. It is not possible to understand these changes without taking into account the socio historical scope in which they occur. Her transformations take place at the same moment more complex transformations occur around her. Ma Joad's adaptability to the new circumstances is extremely important for her family's survival. In times of hopelessness, she gradually demonstrates her strength and assumes the position of the new head of the Joads. With Pa's loss of control over the migratory situation, the family's welfare depends on Ma's brave attitudes. Even though she is described as a powerful woman, Ma also undergoes a deep process of changes that define much of the family's destiny. The purpose of this chapter is to show how these changes happen, as well as their consequences to the Joads. This research also demonstrate that the old patriarchal rules in which the Joad family is founded are left behind at the moment a more collective organization of the migrants is needed.

Although Ma Joad is described as a strong woman, she occupies, at the beginning of the novel, the place that is designed for women in a patriarchal society. Ideologically speaking, Ma Joad has to exercise the typical work assigned to traditional mothers, and, so, responding to the subjection of the prevailing ideology of her time. She may have her words heard in the family's assembly, but she has to stay standing like the other women and the children in the family. At the same time she participates in the decisions, she has to take care of the kitchen and make dinner. Ma's interference during the Joads' assembly brings some discomfort and shame to Pa, who

should be responsible for making all the decisions for the family (102). This shows that Ma Joad is already willing to break with the patriarchal rules in order to do what she believes to be more sensible to be done. She believes the family has to carry Jim Casy with them, whereas Pa disagrees. Pa's reaction is the proof that patriarchal protocols have been broken. That happens constantly in the novel up to the moment the old system (Patriarchal) is completely overcome.

As soon as Ma Joad assumes the responsibility over the family, the patriarchal rules cannot be put into practice anymore. It is time to break with the oppressive ideology that underestimates women in favor of men. During the journey, Ma Joad is never intimidated by Pa's comments, so much so that when they argue at the government camp, Pa does not succeed in repressing her. When she answers Pa back, challenging him, she demonstrates that in such a harsh situation, the patriarchal model is not acceptable. Differently from Pa, Ma is still working. She keeps on doing her usual work and, at the same time, becomes the shelter of the whole family. The relation of dominance once established between men and women cannot exist when the only person in the family who is still accomplishing some work is the mother. In an extreme act of liberation, Ma makes it clear to Pa that the old patriarchal prerogatives do not have any value in the face of male's forced idleness.

As It has already pointed out, Ma Joad undergoes a deep process of learning by the tough circumstances of migration. Her attitudes towards her family are deeply connected to her ability to understand that her role and the roles of the other Joads are those of cooperation and mutual help, and no longer those patriarchally established. When Ma starts to argue with Pa and shows no subjection to him anymore, she also leaves her subjection to the patriarchal model behind. Even though it seems hard to break with the established ideology—it is inculcated through the discourse of social



institutions such as religion, education, and the family itself—Ma seems to be capable of overcoming it by her increasing importance to the Joads throughout their journey. In a gradual process of learning, then, the Joads, especially Ma, understand that a family is not made of mothers or fathers only, but of people who need to cooperate in times of necessity. That is the lesson taught by Casy to Ma Joad before the family leaves their homeland. In this sense, Ma Joad is able to break with the old patriarchal ideology which excludes women from the main decisions, assigning different roles to men and women, and expecting that they rule or are ruled over, respectively. Ma Joad is not simply a woman who overcomes natural or socio-historical obstacles in a constant search for her family's survival. She is also a woman who fights against the ideological patterns that privilege men and treat women as inferior.

### **Change from Patriarchy to Matriarchy**

John Steinbeck in his Novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, tries to present the transformation from patriarchal system to matriarchal system with the journey of migrants families continues. While going through the novel it is clearly seen Steinbeck's support and his favor for the change in traditional values. He not only depicts the changes in roles of female characters but also praises the new system excessively which can be seen in several instances in the novel.

In the novel, Ma Joad tires of her nurturing role, the status quo in the current matriarchal society, and attempts to rise to a position of power, disregarding her family's safety and well-being in her struggle for potency. Metaphoric imagery first rises to the reader's attention at our first glimpse of Ma Joad, as she washes dishes, with soapsuds up to her elbows. This relative abundance of water is only a part of Steinbeck's description of the Joad home which shows it to be a virtual Paradise. Water, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, is a symbol used continually by the author to show

abundance and privilege, and is used to show Ma Joad's ineffectiveness as a family decision-maker.

Ma Joad's character is, without question, one of strength and unblinking courage. She is often the driving force of the Joad family, and she proves her valor by standing up physically to her husband. She also believes herself to be equal with men in all ways – an idea not necessarily supported by the intellectual community of Steinbeck's time. When she is treated like an equal, she is content. This is shown in the text of *The Grapes of Wrath* during a scene in which the director of a camp honors Ma by squatting with her, and communicating as equals. During the time of the novel, men squatted together during decision-making times, a point continually stressed by Steinbeck. ("The squatting tenant men nodded and wondered and drew figures in the dust..." ( 33).)

This scene is used to show Ma's downtrodden and rebellious nature towards patriarchy, and her quick acceptance of even this small portion of power. The change from patriarchy to Matriarchy over the course of *The Grapes of Wrath* is recognized by many readers. This change takes place because of Ma's bid for freedom and independence; but the incorrect observation made by most readers is that Steinbeck made this character as a representation of his moral feeling, and that his book proves his support of matriarchal society. In some instances this argument is true. But the truth, as going through the text is that this change brings only more pain and suffering for the Joads.

Warren, French" *The Joad family shifts from a patriarchal society to a...matriarchal one*" has focused within the time period of the novel, the men were "...the nucleus of the family government..."(P.42) the leaders, the decision-makers.

They squatted together in a circle, and talked, the old men and the young men alike, and based their choices upon the good of their family unit.

Ma Joad's bid for this political freedom is unopposed by the weak men around her, and she soon becomes the driving force of the family. This shift from patriarchy to matriarchy functions, like any change, on multiple levels - and, like any change, must bring some beneficial and some harmful aspects into the Joads' everyday life. Pa Joad is often considered to be Ma's opposition - at which he generally fails miserably, as shown by numerous confrontations (when Ma Joad confronts him with a tire iron, and during nearly every argumentative interaction) - but he is also used by Steinbeck as the representation of man in the family unit, a representation that is perhaps somewhat disdainful, or at least cynical. Steinbeck signals the Joads' vulnerability by representing their patriarchy as senile. (Warren 403). His character is one of intelligence, even wisdom, but also one of trepidation - especially during interactions with his wife. His decisions are often swayed by her quick opinions, and more often than not his pronouncements are directly contradicted by Ma Joad. He backs down from a physical encounter with his wife, as well as multiple verbal disagreements. He, as a protagonist, is easily overcome by the will of the female antagonist. "In multiple instances, his decisions would have been for the better of the family, when her own bring them only farther into disillusioned poverty. Pa Joad and his father are soon at a loss, once their family has moved from relative comfort in their long-time home to the long road to California. ("As the older Joad men sink into ineffectiveness and despondency, family authority shifts to Ma Joad." (Warren 404).)

### **Analysis of gender relation from feminist perspective**

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of interdisciplinary inquiry that studies gender as an important category of analysis. There are two premises about gender: the first one is that the inequality of the sexes is a cultural construct and not a biological imposition; the second is related to man's power that has dominated knowledge and imposed his beliefs as universal, shaping methods and paradigms of human relationships.

The feminist point of view really enriches this analysis because feminist criticism has two important concerns, one is to revise concepts thought as universal, and the other is to restore a female perspective more deeply. Feminist criticism has shown that traditional criticism reinforces images of women and behavior and encourages them to accept subordination by praising women for virtues like humility, passivity and subordination. It is through feminist criticism that women confront patriarchal values and unveil the prejudices against them expressed in male texts.

Among topics to be discussed in this analysis, especial attention will be given to the domestic theme as well as the experiences that Steinbeck's women characters had during their exodus from Oklahoma during The Dust Bowl to California's promised land. Most of the experiences female characters had took place on the road, and they appear to reinforce the contrast between the private and the public, especially because the characters are portrayed in historical context – the great economic depression of the 1930s, –which changed the role of the male in the American society, as well as the female role, since American women were required to join the work force in order to improve the family's income.

In the U. S., the late thirties had an atmosphere of woman's independence in some professional aspects. The great depression years radicalized and awakened

many women, who became feared and active once they were not the passive “angels in the house. American women were leaving the private sphere and taking risks in the public place, performing activities considered exclusively for men, like helping with the family’s income.

Unfortunately, life and the images of women have not change that much for a large number of women around the globe since the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. While in some parts of the globe women have conquered intellectual space and gained respect, in others, they are still facing the same problems Steinbeck’s women characters faced in the early twentieth century. This analysis will start by focusing its initial discussion on Ma Joad - the leading female character - who deconstructs the female and male roles according to the power of convincement. She uses the power of the word, of language and discourse that is supposed to belong to men. In the beginning of the narrative, Ma Joad is not allowed to expose her thoughts freely, she has to wait to be allowed to talk, but that old behavior starts to change, even because she is the kind of woman who always had her own independent mind, although she is under a patriarchal system and has to accommodate to it.

The first time Ma Joad is introduced to the reader, she is described as “ ... heavy, but not fat; thick, with child-bearing and work” . Her image is really strong. In her appearance there are universal symbols of womanhood, femininity, and mothering. Her appearance is shaped by ‘child-bearing and work,’ her dress is a ‘Mother Hubbard’ with ‘flowers,’ which are signs of her condition as a mother and a common woman; the colors are almost gone, like her asleep wilderness, as her husband will say. The attention the narrator devotes to Ma Joad’s description is paramount if compared to the other characters; he tells the reader about her feet, hair, arms, hands, face and eyes. It is worth quoting the description at length about her

position and influence over the family, for she seemed: to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practice denying them in herself. And since then, a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess .

Since the beginning of Ma's characterization, the reader become acquainted with her strong personality, and her discrete position of leadership. Her place is important, for she is The Mother, but she is humble enough to bow to the hierarchy of the family. Ma has an archetypal role, because her description stresses her superhuman qualities, which distances her from the ordinary mortals of the family, and because of that she becomes an ideal. That Ma Joad has a strong importance in the family is stated early in the novel, in the first description. Her position is that of a healer and an arbiter, a citadel and a goddess. She is aware of her power over the family, however, her sense of tradition and respect for hierarchy prevents her overt expression of it except when it is necessary.

GLADSTEIN (1986:79), says that "...her characterization, both narrative and dramatic, is multidimensional. Her character rises from the pages of the book as much more than Mother Earth or serene and aloof goddess," for Ma Joad is simple and complex, a leader and a follower, a woman whose ignorance does not interfere with her wisdom.

Ma Joad's behavior might seem contradictory, because she is humble and follow the patriarchal hierarchy, but at the same time her discourse and attitude is of revolt. She indeed, does not break with the idea of tradition and hierarchy, because these elements keep the value of the patriarchal society that put up the value of the family. And also because the patriarchal tradition puts the mother in a pedestal, making the mother an element of union in the family.

Hooks (2000:7), says that "...feminist consciousness – raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetuated an maintained.....through consciousness raising women gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at homes".

In Steinbeck's work the role of the mother and wife is often synonymous with housewife, and of mother. Ma Joad's qualities are supposed to belong to an ideal wife: she is pure, pious, submissive and domestic, four cardinal virtues of women's behavior. Although Steinbeck does not view the domestic role as degrading, but as a particular function, and most of his women characters seem to find fulfillment as housewives. Ma Joad represents the ideal universal mother, because she nurtures not only her children but those who are in need. In the beginning of the narrative she is entrapped in the domestic sphere, involved with household chores taking care of everybody.

GLADSTEIN (1986:78) says that "...she functions as a nurturing mother to all. The fact that she is known only as "Ma" and is not given a first name reinforces her maternal image." The first time she appears in the narrative is when she is preparing food for the family, which is a traditional image of the mother's duty. She takes stoically her daily activities of cooking, cleaning, washing things that are going

to be unclean very soon. She devotes no time for herself, because her duties of mother and wife are stronger than her inner desires as a woman, if she has any, for the narrator does not mention any. In the beginning of the story, Ma Joad is living accommodation in action, for she obeys the patriarchal rules, although her discourse is always strong and decisive. Her first words reflect her hospitality. Without knowing who ‘the coupla fellas’ were – for her son young Tom Joad was back from prison, together with the ex-preacher Casy – she is ready to share the little food that was left, and asks them to come inside her house. The Joads have just lost their homes, and piece of land, but she is responsible for a sense of community that will reflect upon their behavior towards people.

The Joad family is complete with Tom’s arrival, but they have to decide if there is room enough in their truck for Casy, who first talks to young Tom and Ma about going with them to California: Ma looked to Tom to speak, because he was a man, but Tom did not speak. She let him have the chance that was his right, and then she said:

‘Why, we’d be proud to have you. ‘Course I can’t say right now; Pa says all men’ll talk tonight ...I guess maybe we better not say till all the men come. (P.127)

Ma Joad first respects the hierarchy and then speaks, and this is a sign of what would happen to the family through their exodus to California, for men’s inability to act in that new decisive situation of dispossession, will make a woman the leader of the family. When the men gather together to decide about taking Casy to California with them, Pa, without turning his head – for the women were out of the men’s circle, which reveals the lack of understanding by men of the importance of the female’s



opinion – he asked “Kin we, Ma?” , referring to the inclusion of Casy in the family truck, to what she answered pondering:

Ma cleared her throat. “It ain’t kin we? It’s will we?” She said firmly. “As far as ‘kin,’ we can’t do nothin’, not go to California or nothin’; but as far as ‘will,’ why, we’ll do what we will. An’ as far as ‘will’- it’s a long time our folks been here and east before an’ I never heerd tell of no Joads or no Hazletts, neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked. They’s been mean Joads, but never that mean’ (...) Her tone had made him ashamed. (P.139)

Ma Joad’s words above reflect that in the plot, free will has a major role, and later, the Joads will make several free choices in order to assure the survival of the group. She is the one who made the group decide to take the ex-preacher with the family to California, and her attitude was based on a sense of sharing and community. Not noticing, old Tom Joad consulted his wife, and gave her the opportunity to speak, and to decide which represents an evolution in his behavior. However, he did not expect the powerful tone of her opinion. Her words quoted above shook her husband and the rest of the family because of its assertiveness.

For the first time in the narrative, the men of the family seem to perceive Ma Joad’s importance, especially after her powerful words, because “...they waited for her to come back across the darkening yard, for Ma was powerful in the group” ( p. 140). Gender relations are deconstructed throughout the narrative process, for example, the former powerful male leader (Pa) becomes submissive to the will of a woman (Ma Joad) who takes the control of the family, and Casy does ‘female activities.’ Another important sign of this process is when Ma Joad leaves the meeting about the final decisions in relation to the family’s moving to California and the men

wait for her return, which is the first sign of respect for her. This is a symbol that there is going to be a great change of roles, and a recognition of her value.

Before leaving to California, while everyone is getting ready for the journey, Ma Joad stops inside of the half-empty house – they had sold most of the things – and opens a stationery box. Inside it, there are “...letters, clippings, photographs, a pair of earrings, a little gold ring, and a watch chain braided of hair and tipped with gold swivels” (P.148). Ma examines carefully those objects, they are everything left of her entire life. This is one of the few moments she devotes to herself. There is no reference to her inner emotions while looking at those objects, because the narrator works like a camera, just showing, instead of entering people’s mind and telling their feelings.

According to FRENCH’s (1994:79). understanding of Ma Joad’s attitude before leaving her house to California, the act of looking and touching those important objects is “pathetic,” however, he does not take into consideration that she was an old woman, and he does not consider the importance of this moment. He says that Ma “...burns a few pathetic souvenirs of the past matter-of-factly” Indeed this is a profound and meaningful moment, for her, who used to live with stability, in her own house and was forced by economic conditions to lose and to leave everything behind to start a new life. Those souvenirs held the story of her life, and are symbols of her femininity and memories, her only treasure, therefore they are not pathetic. Ma Joad’s act of burning some of those objects, represents a loss of identity, a sense of fragmentation of her memories as a woman and a mother, and also loses the death of part of her past, and a new beginning.

On their way to California, the Joads meet the Wilsons, and Granmpa dies in the Wilsons’s tent, who share the little there was left and friendship with the Joads.

Both families identify with the idea of going together to California. Their working together in times of need illustrates the strong sense of hospitality and sharing among these simple country people.

An important change takes place in the Wilson/Joad gathering, it is the fact that Rose helps Ma Joad and learns from her, since Rose is never interested in helping her mother with the household chores. This attitude might seem irrelevant, however, Rose's new attitude shows the change that is happening in her in her process of maturity; she is shown peeling potatoes, cooking, and comforting Granma after Grandpa's burial. Rose starts to act as an adult, and for a moment she is not self-centered. She seems to start learning the importance of the work of each member for the good of the group. The two families decide to travel together to California, but Mrs. Wilson gets sick, and their car is broken. Due to this, Tom suggests that he and Casy would stay and fix the car, while the rest of the family would keep moving. Ma Joad gets desperate, for she does not want the family to fall apart. She stepped in front of her husband and says that she is not going, "Pa was amazed at the revolt" (P.228). Ma's attitude changes the focus of the male interest and decision, because at least in that moment, she is in the center of people's attention deciding, and expressing her mind without her husband's permission.

Ma Joad gets a jack handle and threatens old Tom Joad, however, he insists on their going; his sentence is a summary of patriarchal beliefs: "I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind" (P.230). In old Tom Joad's opinion, his wife should obey him anyway, she is not supposed to decide alone what is good or not either for herself or for her family. He treats her like a father towards one of his kids. However, Ma Joad surprises him and the other people saying:

On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me...An' I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'...An' if you get me, I swear to God I'll wait till you got your back turned, or you're settin' down, an' I'll knock your belly-up with a bucket..." (P.230)

This is a moment of epiphany to Ma Joad and to her family. Because it is the first time she perceives that the most important thing she has – her family – is about to be broken. But the thing that shocked her family is that she rebels against the father, the embodiment of the patriarchal family, and in front of everybody. She does not understand the dimension of her attitude. It is also the first time she fights for her own opinion, showing that despite being a woman, she has a mind of her own as the text shows:

Pa looked helplessly about the group... "Come on," said Ma. "You made up your mind"... "So goddamn sassy," Pa murmured. "And she ain't young neither." The whole group watched her revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break into fury...And Pa's anger did not rise...The eyes of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control. (P.230-31).

This scene represents a moment of awakening for her family as well, because they realized that Ma Joad becomes the leader of the family: "All right," said Ma. "We'll go along. We'll stop first place they's water an' shade..." (P.231). Indeed, everything she wants is to keep the family together, she wants to protect it from falling apart. Her attitude with the jack handle echoes Granma's when she shoots Granmpa. And because of Ma Joad's will to protect the family, she fights with the guards when they reach California, in order to prevent them from seeing Granma's corpse - the Joads could be arrested for driving with a corpse in the car - and avoids

her family from being blamed also for hiding a fugitive man, her son Tom, who could not leave Oklahoma, their home State, which is destroyed by drought and misery.

From that moment on, the Joads somehow change from a strong patriarchal structure based on the attachment to the land to a powerful female orientation based on the maintenance of the family, for it is from the land that men get strength, while Ma Joad takes it from the union of the family, Ma Joad changes from passivity to an active behavior, and this process reflects BEAUVOIR's (1980) argument that nobody is born a woman, but becomes one. As long as Ma Joad is conscious of the family unit, and that her family is going to fall apart, she perceives that it should be her role to agglutinate the group. It is this belief that makes her stronger, and courageous enough to break her role of passivity to action.

Ma Joad is an example of BEAUVOIR's (1980) belief that destiny: biological, psychic, or economic define the way a female behaves in society. It is civilization that shapes this intermediate product between male and the castrated being that is called "female." Thus, women's passivity is a trace she develops inside her since infancy. So, it is a mistake to believe that women's passivity is a biological process, indeed it is a cultural one.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* gender relations are very tense. There is a relation between the geographic moving and the psychological one, which brings a conception of the gender relations in mutation, for women get stronger while moving, but men start a process of weakness. Both men and women throughout the geographic move, experience things that make their psychological aspect come to the understanding of women's importance and power.

When the Joads finally reach California, they face the corruption of their dream. They do not find equal rights; people live in shanty camps, begging for

miserable wages. The situation is contradictory, for there is plenty of food in the fields, but they are not allowed to have any, and most of the workers are either starving to death or working for a pittance. However, the Joads, especially Ma Joad, does not give up the dream of getting a house and better conditions of living, for her optimism is a powerful weapon against weakness. Sometimes Ma Joad fights with a desire to cry, but she is the provider of courage, of dignity, of the idea of home. She transforms every tent into a home, into a nest for her family; and instead of falling apart she encourages the family to keep on going.

BEAUVOIR (1980) says that woman has a deep need of being optimistic, and Ma Joad's incredible strength enables her to undergo pain and hardship without flinching, while at the same time provides her family with renewed strength.

After a period of humiliation along the journey, when the Joads reach the government camp in California, they feel like human beings again, because they are treated with some dignity in one of the camps. The Joads do not stay only in the organized camp, Wedpatch, but they move from camp to camp in order to find work, and the situation gets worse day by day; there is only starvation and slave work. The family gets together in order to evaluate the situation and Tom shows his discouragement, but before the inability of men to guide the family becomes superior to Ma Joad's strength, she decides:

we're a-goin' to Marysville. I don't care what the pay is...Pa sniffed. "Seems like times is changed," he said sarcastically. "Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick...Ma put the clean dripping tin dish out on a box. She smiled down at her work. "You get your stick, Pa," she said." Times when they's food an' a place to

set, then maybe you can use your stick an' keep your skin whole. But you ain't a-doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why, could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffle their nose an' creep-mouse aroun'. But you jus' get you a stick now an' you ain't lickin' no woman, you're a-fightin', 'cause I got a stick all laid out too." (P.480-81)

Ma Joad's words express that when the male is the provider and protector, he has endless power, but whenever he identifies with the perspective of weakness, and does not show his characteristics of male, which are strength, and decisive word for example, he acquires characteristics of femininity. So when Ma Joad defies her husband, she says that both are on the same level, they belong to the losers class. Through her comment, Ma Joad reproduces the patriarchal system, where the female are inferior to male. She deconstructs the capitalist idea of patriarchy that to be a male, every man should be a winner, and succeed over the female. Ma Joad does not speak for herself but for all women, she says that women will be submissive whenever men are providing, but in hard times there is equity, and in that moment a different female attitude was required. Through tough attitudes, Ma Joad acquires respect and admiration from her family. She influences action, and her opinions are accepted by the group. The great depression was shaking up the role of the people, where the rules they knew did not fit anymore, since there was no place for hierarchy, because men and women were on the same level. Old Tom Joad complains, but makes his choice to follow Ma Joad for the good of the group: Pa grimped with embarrassment.

“Now it ain’t good to have the little Fellas hear you talking like that,” he said...”You get some bacon Inside the little fellas ‘fore you come tellin’ what else is good for ‘em’, said Ma. (P.481)

The father figure loses its power to the family in the moment old Tom Joad succumbs to the female power. There is no source of strength anymore for him: his former piece of land is gone, what is left of his family lives under tents in dirty migrant camps, and there is not either enough food nor job for them, besides, he has lost his position of leader and master. However, for the good of the group, he falls into obscurity and leaves the official control of the family to his wife. He abdicates his position of master and protector for the good of the group. The source of woman’s power is her desire to keep the family united and together; Ma Joad’s power is not because of her accomplishments. She does not conquer the position of leader, however little by little, she occupies the empty place of the leader. Her new active behavior is shown as good for the family, for she is the one who shares the responsibility of keeping the family together with young Tom Joad, who is her beloved son, and with whom she has the closest relationship. Both mother and son are confident of one another as is shown in the passage below:

Tom sighed, “I’m gettin’ tired Ma. How ‘bout makin’ me mad?” “You got more sense, Tom...I got to lean on you. The mothers they’re kinda strangers, all but you. You won’t give up, Tom.” The job fell on him. “I don’t like it,” he said. “I wanta go out like Al. An’ I wanta get mad like Pa, an’ I wanta get drunk like Uncle John...” “You can’t, Tom. They’s some folks that’s just theirselves an’ nothin’ more...Ever’thing you do is more’n you”... “Now, Ma-cut it out. It ain’t true. It’s all in your head” (P.482).



Ma Joad is portrayed as the mother-goddess who inspires and protects her hero-son. She perceives that Tom has a mission before he does, which is to help people, but her son feels like giving it up. His words reflect the emotional state of the men of his family: Al, the youngest son, wants to leave the family, his father is mad, his uncle drinks. These men are challenged by the economic chaos, and submit to it – except Uncle Tom who is marked by his wife's death. The male characters become powerless, and then, the family is their only shelter. Because of Tom murdering two people – the first one in Oklahoma acting in self defense, and the second one in reaction to his friend Casy's death – Tom is forced to leave his family, since his stay would charge his family for hiding a fugitive. Ma Joad is forced to dismiss him, since both realize that the family could not keep hiding himself forever. He leaves because he wants to protect his own family, and his final words to his mother represent Steinbeck's message in the novel:

... I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'whe-wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' - I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build-why, I'll be there. (P.572)

Tom's words reveal a message against buccaneering capitalism that imposes suffering against his people. His message is also a sign of the importance that free will has for those who really decide to act, either for their own benefit or for the good of the group. Tom leaves in order to escape from prison, however, the true prison in the novel is the world outside the prison walls, where he could not get neither a decent

job, nor good life condition for his family. This is the most difficult loss for Ma Joad. First she loses Tom for some years when he goes to jail, but after she loses him forever, because fate condemns both to live apart from each other, once Tom seems to be predestined to belong to the world. Both mother and son learned that the community is more important than the self, even if their true desire is to go along together.

REUTER (1996) referring to romance and society, states that little by little the possibility of social mobility is built, because the characters search for changing their condition, by making money or just transforming the world. In the case of Tom, he assumes his mission which is to help everyone. Tom had been an active voice in his family, and a leader; his position was even more important than his father's, who in one of the family gatherings complains about the new situation where a woman is the leader of the family. Because it is hard for a man to lose his position of leader to his wife. Generally in male fiction, the effects of female dominance are disastrous, but Steinbeck provides a heroine, Ma Joad, who has the capacity of leading the family in an age where the prejudice against women was stronger than today. Her wisdom reflects the change not only in herself, but in the whole society that was in a process of recognizing women's capacity to replace men in several aspects.

Ma Joad is a powerful woman, she sees two deaths in a short period – Grandpa and Granma; her son Noah abandons the family; young Tom Joad runs away because of his murders; her husband is a limited man who is destroyed when the social situation places upon him responsibilities that he is unable to carry out; her son, Al, wants to leave the family and live on his life; and Connie abandons Ma Joad's pregnant daughter, Rose of Sharon, who ends up losing her baby. But Ma Joad continues and survives all these changes, and becomes the central force of the family.

Steinbeck's characterization of Ma Joad is a complete and positive characterization of a woman. She embodies the myth of the pioneer woman, and she is a symbol for positive motherhood. She is strong, but is never allowed to pursue what might seem to be the implications of a female character: fragility. She becomes a leader, but does not transcend what Steinbeck wanted to praise: her role of mother and wife.

The changing role of women in *The Grapes of Wrath* is also reinforced by Ma Joad's older daughter, Rose of Sharon. This woman is introduced to the reader with the same care her mother is. Her descriptions and attitudes build up the aura of superiority that involves her, and this idea is also stated by the way her hair and head are described: "Her hair, braided around her head, made an ash-blond crown" (P.129). Her pregnancy functions as an excuse for not being helpful, since she does not show any kind of commitment or affection to her baby, one possibility is that she might represent nature itself, that is, she is a living being that just reproduces; she does not have neither emotional affection nor any kind of commitment to her baby. She somehow anticipates the current modern condition of children who are most of the time born without affection. The words used to describe Rose of Sharon denote the difference from the woman before and after pregnancy. Before pregnancy she seems to have more sexual appeal to her husband. The narrator stresses a change in their relationship by saying that "Her round soft face which had been voluptuous and inviting a few months ago, had already put on barriers of pregnancy..." (P.129). Her husband, Connie, misses the way their sexual life was before the pregnancy, he becomes aware that life would never be the same for them anymore. For her husband, she loses the sexual appeal and acquires the image of the Madonna.

Rose of Sharon, has a childlike behavior, and through the description of the changes that pregnancy brought her, the implicit message is that woman as a mother would be an idol on a pedestal. She suddenly transcends the world of human beings, to reach a higher degree as a mother. As a woman she was provocative, however, as a mother she is not seen only as a woman anymore, but as another category of human beings that must be respected and protected. Instead of being touched and looked at; she acquires features of a symbol, especially for her husband.

The relationship between Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad is that of a mother who teaches, and a daughter who learns, for Ma Joad's function in the novel is also to teach her daughter how to be a mother, and to perpetuate the species, but while Ma Joad is centered on the family, Rose of Sharon is self-centered. Although Ma Joad is a symbol of the male and female break of the roles, she is also a reproducer of the current social system that puts the female in the position of passivity and the male in action.

Rose of Sharon faces many problems in the exodus to California, especially losses, and almost everything seems to affect her only because of the baby. She complains about the hard things she faces all the time. However, her great preoccupation about the baby is indeed about herself, and her narcissism appears to be a process of alienation, and a necessity of attention, for the baby takes her sexual regular desire and the beauty of her body. On the other hand, she takes the best of it, that is, a lot of attention from the community.

Rose of Sharon becomes the queen of the family; everybody wants to protect her. Her attitude towards "the baby," provokes a shift in men's attitude towards women in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for in the beginning of the narrative, women were considered inferior, however respected as mothers. When the Joad family decided to

go to California, "...Uncle John have preferred not to sit in the honor place beside the driver. He would have liked Rose to sit there. This was impossible, because she was young and a woman" (P.130). This attitude represents the hierarchy that the group follows, however, throughout the narrative, Steinbeck seems to make his characters understand that there is no place for prejudice towards women, since both male and female were stuck in the same world and faced the same misfortunes. Finally, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon get a place beside the driver, breaking the patriarchal ritual that imposes selfish rules against women.

Rose of Sharon is a naive girl, almost a child who needs to be protected. She has no hopes of doing anything in California, but she dreams through her husband's dreams, as she says in the passage that follows:

Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact'ry. An' he's gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an' maybe later have his own store. An' we'll got to pitchers whenever. An' Connie says I'm gonna have a doctor when the baby's born; an' he says we'll see how times is, an' maybe I'll go to a hospiddle...I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff  
(P.224).

Rose of Sharon does not think about herself acting, her dreams are passive, she sees herself always receiving from her husband. Connie just describes his plans for a new better lifestyle that would affect her, but he never consults her about what she expects from the future world, probably because he believes that he could read her off like a page of a child's story-book. But due to gender relation in this environment, it is much more probable that being woman and a wife, her opinion is unimportant.

One of Ma Joad's task is to teach her daughter, and one of the lessons is that there are things in life that must be performed without anybody's help, like the ritual and even rite of passage that is pregnancy:

When you're young, Rosasharn, ever'thing that happens is a thing all by itself. It's a lonely thing. I know, I 'member, Rosasharn." Her mouth loved the name of her daughter. 'You're gonna have a baby, Rosasharn, and that's somepin to you lonely and away. That's gonna hurt you, an' the hurt'll be lonely hurt, an' this here tent is alone in the worl', Rosasharn...They's time of change, an' when that comes, dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin'..(P.285-86).

Ma Joad also teaches her daughter about the course of life, warning the girl about terror, joy and loneliness, even pain, which is part of the continuity of life. Her role is to prepare Rose of Sharon to be a grown-up woman like herself, a generous mother, who cares not only for those with whom she has a blood link. Rose of Sharon is somehow the embodiment of the idea of femininity: she is powerless, passive, and docile, even her name of a flower represents her fragility. Rose's senses of accomplishment are linked to the image of her husband, who becomes her only source of strength. It is through him that she hopes to overcome her limitations. She puts in Connie's hands her happiness and fulfillment.

BEAUVOIR (1980) says that man is a kind of link between the woman and the universe, and as a matter of fact, Connie is this link to Rose, he is the one who is supposed to work, provide, fight, act, and give her a deep sense of existence. Rose of Sharon's effort to motivate her husband to go on fails and Connie leaves her. He fails in building up Rose's idealized world for them, because in the industrialized world, there is no place for such a childish wife, who does not have anything to offer her husband, not even economic help, like Ma Joad who also started to work in order

to help. After his departure, Rose of Sharon "...got up and went into the tent. She lay down on the mattress and rolled over on her stomach and buried her head in her crossed arms" (P.372). Ma Joad is there to comfort her daughter; both women are losers of men who abandoned them. Rose of Sharon refuses to believe that Connie went away, she wants to believe that his absence is due to his desire to buy some books about radio, however, as time goes by, and he does not come back home, she starts to be in a growing, but temporary, process of depression.

Rose of Sharon complains about being alone, and her mother uses a strategy to comfort her daughter, she gives her earrings to Rose of Sharon, although her daughter is not pierced. Rose of Sharon's childish behavior seems to change after being cut, as in a rite of passage the earrings are a symbol of Ma Joad's role that some day will be performed by her daughter.

GLADSTEIN (1986-82) analysis of the fact of Rose of Sharon being cut to wear the earrings, says that "...Rose of Sharon must bear the pain of having her ears pierced. Symbolically, she must suffer to prove herself ready to assume Ma's responsibilities and position." And this is what happens.

Rose of Sharon gradually changes after that rite; she decides to work in the field with the rest of the family, however she was so weak that fainted. Day by day she becomes more sensitive and worried about having a baby in that miserable condition. She is about to lose her baby, even though she still wants to go to the field and pick cotton, because she realizes that she must help the family, once her brother Al wants to leave it, and the family will lose more people to help. Nature seems to be solemn to Rose: the rain falls, and the men decide to make a ditch in order to protect her, Ma Joad and Al's girlfriend's mother from drowning. All these events take place at night, which will be the most terrible in Rose of Sharon's life, but after all the

suffering, her baby is born dead, and Uncle John is the one who buries it, in fact he puts the baby inside of a box and sets it in a stream, in a symbolic act of revolt against their helpless position in the world:

Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. That's the way you can talk. Don't even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain'tgonna find out. Go on down now, an' lay in the street. Maybe they'll know then" (P.608)

Uncle John's words reflect that it was a social sin that killed Rose of Sharon's baby, not a theological one; he suggests that the dead body of the baby will tell people the nature of its death and what really caused it.

Old Tom Joad carries Rose of Sharon in his arms, Uncle John carries Ma Joad's younger daughter Ruthie, and she carries her younger son Winfield. Al decides to stay with his girlfriend, but the rest of the family leaves and finds a barn where there is a starving fifty-year old man with his son. The boy is desperate because his father is starving to death, but shares a blanket with Rose of Sharon who has just lost her son. It is a world of losses that is portrayed in this scene, however, the importance of the universal family is stressed, since sharing is the most important of all actions. After seeing the desperate situation of both father and son, Ma Jaod and Rose of Sharon look at one another, and the girl realizes the necessity of those people; then she performs one of the most controversial scenes in literature, which is the final scene of the novel:

Then slowly she lay beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and Bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and Pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved



gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously (P. 619).

This scene has created lots of controversy. Many critics have complained about the scene. Critics, like LEVANT, complains about Rose of Sharon's process of transformation for the holy role of mother, even Steinbeck's editor Pascal Covici tried to make the author rethink the scene. However, Steinbeck wanted the scene to be a symbol of survival, and of the maternal love that is given to all people. According to him the scene is an indicator that Rose of Sharon finally is ready to succeed her mother as a matriarch. Another point that reinforces her change comes from the treatment in relation to her, for throughout the narrative she is referred to as a "girl," while in this last scene the narrator emphasizes the equal status of Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad "...and the two women looked deep into each other" (P.618).

Throughout the narrative Ma Joad is the nourisher, but in the last scene she becomes the instigator, since she influences Rose of Sharon's decision. Steinbeck has used two women as the symbols of hope in his novel who take care and bear up, when men are defeated by the economic chaos. But in such condition, presenting Women as a holy mother by Steinbeck seems impractical and controversy for the readers.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck establishes a break in the pattern of naturalistic writers who tend to be pessimistic, because they generally can not "...believe that things can work out well if the characters cannot discipline themselves and exercise some control over the world around them" (FRENCH, 1987:72).

Some critics state that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a pessimistic novel, indeed it is from the economic point of view, but concerning people's improvement as human beings, it is doubtless, an optimistic novel, for while men's essential quest is for economic recovery, they acquire what French called 'the education of the heart' and a

profound sense of community and brotherhood. Steinbeck's point of view was quite modern, for he chooses two illiterate women as symbols of renewal and strength and presented them as more than a normal human being.

In his masterpiece, Steinbeck also analyzes the conflicts, the needs and the fear of poor illiterate white women, who are marked by the most dreadful loss that a woman can suffer: the loss of their children and husband. Steinbeck states that women can change better than men, so they are always ready to face the hazards of life. Through this attitude the writer breaks the previous shadow of misogyny that surrounded him in his early fiction.

### **Chapter – III: Conclusion**

As I have attempted to show in this thesis, the migratory movement depicted in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* contributes to the establishment of new relations and social values. In the face of loss and desperation, the migrant families find in union and mutual help the strength they need to survive. Individualism is gradually replaced by collectivism, and the family structure is reorganized in order to bring everyone together.

In their struggle for survival, the migrants learn that they have to leave old values behind and embrace the cause of the whole group. In this context, the Joads undergo a profound process of education, and Ma Joad emerges as the new head of the family. Ma Joad's first description allows one to perceive her physical firmness and mental strength. These attributes are essential—but not sufficient—in her transcending the housewife function in the family in order to play a more important role in the Joads' lives. Even though Ma is already described as a strong woman at the beginning of the novel, she is not capable of entirely breaking with the patriarchal rules before the family sets off on their journey to California. With the emotional instability of the men in the family and the acquisition of new values, she soon emerges as the one responsible for the Joads welfare. Ma becomes the new decision maker in the family because the circumstances allow her to do so. The changes around Ma Joad, then, figure as the causes of her inner transformations. These transformations, consequently, are important to her most striking actions in the novel.

In order to have Ma Joad's transformations investigated and understood, I have established an outside-inside analysis of the novel, from the historical context in which the narrative takes place to the specific changes observed in Ma Joad.

The troubled 1930s brought unemployment, extreme poverty, and starvation to many real American families. The consequences of the Great Depression were larger for the families who lived in the plains, for they also had to face the Dust Bowl phenomenon and the loss of their lands. With no place to stay, these families had to risk a new life in the western states, especially California, the “promised land.” The real families who had to leave their homeland found no more than harshness in the west, and, it is within this context that Steinbeck presents the Joads and other fictional families.

The migrant families depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath* undergo a process of extreme loss and desperation that forces them to change their attitudes. The men, used to rule over their families, feel displaced when their lands are taken away from them. Their feeling of connection to the land is so intense that they become paralyzed by their new condition. The land is part of their body and their soul and, for that reason, they feel impotent. Women and children, for their part, still have their usual roles to develop in their families. Initially without action, the migrant men lose control over their families but soon recognize in togetherness the strength they need to face their problems. The families, then, draw on collective experience to build new social relations and values that allow them to keep on existing as a larger group. The Joads do not behave differently from the other families in the novel.

First portrayed in a patriarchal model, they are individualists and do not see the importance of union for their struggle for survival. The appearance of the preacher Jim Casy represents the beginning of the changes in the way the family faces their world. Not knowing exactly what he himself means, Jim Casy teaches the Joads the significance of collectiveness, represented by his concept of “Holly Sperit.” Preparedness figures as an essential factor in the family members’ transformations.

Starting from Tom and Ma, the Joads learn that they have to abandon selfishness if they are to overcome the obstacles of their journey. For Ma Joad, the social changes also mean her transcendence to a more effective position in the family. With Pa's loss of control over the situation, Ma Joad has to stay firm and decisive in order to guarantee the welfare of her folks. With time, she also learns a different concept of family, which includes everyone in the same situation as the Joads, and takes up more determined behavior towards the condition of loss. As the Joads' new decision maker, Ma is capable of rupturing the patriarchal rules and ideology. She transfers to herself in the novel, and demonstrates how devoted Steinbeck is to her construction and to the novel as a whole. Ma Joad represents thousands of real women and people who had to adapt their lives in order to fight for better living conditions during the economic downturn of the 1930s.

Moreover, the characterization of Ma Joad and her family is the way Steinbeck finds to share with his contemporary reader the necessity of adaptation to break with the unfairness of the capitalist system of his time. The process of social transformation to which Steinbeck devotes his novel is cyclical and depends on the action of each and everyone. Stimulated by the harsh changes around them, the Joads are obliged to change their thoughts and attitudes, and to react to the harsh changes in order to bring harmony into their lives again. The transformation of the Joads into more collectively minded family is the start of the larger change with which Steinbeck is concerned. Railton suggests that rather than "Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin," Steinbeck's novel "is best identified with a different list: Winthrop, Edwards, Emerson, Whitman," for its main focus is on the inner change of people as the means of "social salvation" (45). The main characters first go through a deep inner process of transformation that allows them to act towards the difficulties of their journey.

The process of inner transformation undergone by Ma Joad leads one to believe that it is possible to break with the inequities of society, starting from the family sphere, if internal readiness is also fulfilled. Ma's physical firmness and mental strength are not enough to come out of patriarchal rules and ideology. Spiritual vigor is the third factor necessary to this. Ma's spiritual growth occurs at the same time she experiences the most austere obstacles in her particular journey to the west and learns the lessons taught by Jim Casy.

It is worthy of mention that *The Grapes of Wrath* is more than a novel about social transformation. It is also a novel about personal inner changes or as Railton points out, a novel about "conversion" (29). My analysis of the Joads' changes, especially Ma's and therefore leads to the conclusion that the integration of internal readiness and external action is the first step to the overcoming of social instability of the oppressive system portrayed in the novel.

Finally, while analyzing and going through the change in Steinbeck's characters in the novel, there are different instances where Steinbeck has highly praised the Women characters in the novel i.e at the last scene of the novel where Rose of Sharon was breast feeding a fifty years old man who was suffering extremely by starvation. Though that was the time when the starvation was extreme and everyone was the victim of it, the main aim of this scene by Steinbeck is to overestimate the female virtue and to establish them as goddess of earth and also as a universal mother who is responsible for the survival of all.

As the modern feminist point of view, today's society is equity based society and in such context praising women excessively as Goddess and at the same time dominating and comparing them with Witch or devil, both are not acceptable. Women should be treated like a normal human being who must feel hunger, pain, happiness

and each and every feeling that a normal human being can feel. She can't go beyond it and can play the role of universal Mother at the time of dissertation and feed her universal child as she herself is a victim of it. So this is the point where contradiction takes place between we as reader and Steinbeck's perspective because of his impractical ideology. This issue can also be the future topic of discussion for the student of research.

In this way though my research bring forward the issue of matriarchy and analyze gender relation in the text from feminist perspective, as a reader of 21<sup>st</sup> society I can't be fully agree with the complete matriarchal society presented by Steinbeck and the way he overestimated matriarchy and reject all the aspects of patriarchy. The main reason behind this is, any system completely in itself is not perfect because every system seek complete control upon the other in opposition which can create another problem in our society.

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