The Interplay between Place, Culture, and Ideology in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath:

A Reading in the light of Cultural Materialism

by

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Abstract:

A discursive formation that is aware of the danger of theories getting trapped by self-referentiality, and of postulates not addressing the truth of a given context, cultural materialism questions the modernist claims to timelessness and its tendency to set certain meanings as universal. Dealing with the particularity of incidents, cultural materialism introduces a type of cultural analysis that looks deeply into the worldliness of the lived experience, and the socio-economic and ideological background that has generated a cultural or an aesthetic production.

Inspired by Marxism, yet revolting against its deterministic tendency in sociological analysis, cultural materialism practises a genealogical method of cultural analysis that investigates the dialectical interaction between the residual, the emergent, and the dominant in an open-ended manner and away from preconceived lines of inevitability. The aim of the present research is to offer a reading of John Steinbeck's literary masterpiece The Grapes of Wrath in the light of cultural materialism. Culture, within the framework of the text, is a productive process and a part of the system of signification that codifies the lived experience. The Grapes of Wrath contextualizes the concept of ideology and subjects it to the incessantly changing nature of human community. The cultural materialist reading of the novel depends on Raymond Williams' seminal books: The Country And The City, Keywords, Culture And Society, and Marxism And Literature. As a cultural product of its specific historicist and ideological moment, the text will be studied on the level of its portrayal of the socio-economic and ideological predicament of the migrant farmers, and on the level of its being a discursive formation and an example of how a cultural materialist analysis should be conducted.

Keywords: place, culture, ideology, articulation, residual, emergent, dominant.

ملخص:

التفاعل بين المكان والثقافة والإيديولوچيا في رواية "عناقيد الغضب" لچون شتاينبك: قراءة في ضوء المادية الثقافية أ.م.د. عالية عباس محمد حسن مبروك قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات والترجمة

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تقدم المادية الثقافية نموذجًا من القراءة الثقافية والتاريخية للواقع تبتعد كل البعد عن النظرة الحداثية للحياة وللواقع وعن تلك النزعة الحداثية إلى تقديم المعنى الأوحد وتجريد الأحداث التاريخية من سياقها الزماني والمكاني، وتتعامل المادية الثقافية مع الأحداث بعيدًا عن كل أشكال التعميم، وتتفادى أن تقع فريسة للفرضيات الأولية والتي قد يشوبها الكثير من الأخطاء أو التبسيط المخل، وبناءً على ذلك فهي تقدم تحليلًا ثقافيًا وتاريخيًا يأخذ في اعتباره كل نقاط الاختلاف ويتعامل مع كل تفاصيل السياق من ناحية الزمان والمكان والإيديولوچيا والبعد الاقتصادي، ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تقديم قراءة لرواية "عناقيد الغضب" لچون شتاينبك في ضوء المادية الثقافية في محاولة لإلقاء الضوء على التفاعل بين الثقافة القديمة والثقافة الناشئة والثقافة المهيمنة في السياق والأيديولوچيا إلى تقديم قراءة جديدة لمفهوم الثقافة والمكان والإيديولوچيا وإلى إعادة صياغة لتلك المفاهيم من خلال وضعها في إطارها الزماني والمكاني ومن خلال البحث في كافة المتغيرات التي تطرأ على مجتمع بشري بعينه وفي لحظة بعينها.

الكلمات الدالة: المكان، الثقافة، الإيديولوچيا، تحديد الشكل الثقافي، الثقافة القديمة، الثقافة الناشئة، الثقافة المهيمنة.

1. Introduction

The interdisciplinary field of cultural studies is an intellectual domain that refuses the universal tendency of humanism and its claim that some ideas can be applicable to any spatio-temporal context. Meaning, within the framework of cultural studies, cannot be assimilated regardless of time and place, but is rather rooted in the intricately interwoven details of its cultural and socio-economic background. Cultural studies deconstructs the moment of modernist temporal stasis and does not allow cultural analysis to transcend the boundaries of its historical framework. It practises that type of cultural analysis that "tends to stress what is specific or unique - in terms of time, place, and ideology - to a given cultural and literary moment" (Habib 276).

Inspired by the mainstream sociology's success to "assign participant observation (PO) and case study work a legitimate place in the social sciences" (Willis 76, in Hall 1980), cultural studies pursues a kind of intellectual activity that accommodates differences and ruptures, and allowes moments of intellectual silence to highlight weaknesses and internal contradictions in any theoretical framework. Cultural studies, in spite of its being influenced by the sociological method of analysis, has objected to the way sociology has presented itself as a universal body of knowledge. According to Stratton, "Society' operates in sociological discourse as a hegemonic, all-inclusive, singular term, denoting a comprehensive, integrated totality" (363, in intellectual Hall 2005). As an discipline that resists cultural universalization and determinism, studies has transcended this universal tendency of sociology and has accommodated intellectual ruptures and counter discourses within its framework. Avoiding inclusion policies and fixed points of reference, cultural studies insists on contextualizing historical and cultural events and avoids repression of moments of discontinuities. The particular, within the framework of cultural studies, is there to comment on the universal and not to be contained within it.

Cultural materialism, as a subfield of cultural studies, establishes a kind of literary criticism that is anti-formalist and that does not acknowledge the autonomy of the text nor any claims to a timeless universal meaning. Transcending the limitations of canonical literature and the strategies of interpretation applied to it, cultural materialism investigates the pragmatic, and not only the theoretical, nature of the cultural and socio-economic issues communicated through literary texts. As a discursive practice and an open-ended intellectual discourse that merges the boundaries of many humanistic disciplines, cultural materialism refuses to "define itself in terms of a distinctive object, nor in terms of fixed theoretical axioms or orthodoxies" (Stratton 360, in Hall 2005). It rather embraces change as its underlying strategy of interpretation, and investigates the spatio-temporal context and the cultural and ideological forces that influence the production of the text. Cultural materialism, avoiding any deterministic analysis, explores the dialectical relationship between ideology, history, spatio-temporal specificities, and culture that interact inside the text, on the one hand, and that govern the production of the text, on the other.

The present research offers a reading of John Steinbeck's literary masterpiece The Grapes of Wrath in the light of cultural materialism. The literary text is treated as a cultural product of the socio-economic and historicist moment that has brought it into existence. Culture, within *The Grapes of Wrath*, assumes new meaning and new connotations that go beyond the official and the taken-for-granted definitions of the word. Culture is rather the live and down-to-earth representation of the actual life of the migrant people, their attitudes, temper, and language. The social predicament of the migrants, which is the main thread of the literary text, is that minor history that strives to survive in the face of hegemonic cultural and political strategies that were prevalent in the American society during the period of the Great Depression. The spatio-temporal details of the text are given prior importance as they are intricately related to the process of identity formation, and are, moreover, essential in introducing new definitions for ideology, power structures, and the process of acculturation. Of basic importance to the study are Raymond Williams' books that lay the basis for cultural materialism and function as a milestone in any cultural materialist analysis. Williams' The Country And The City, Keywords, Culture And Society, and Marxism And Literature are referred to in the course of this study, as they represent the fulcrum of cultural materialist analysis. As a cultural product of its specific historicist and ideological moment, The Grapes of Wrath will be studied on the level of its delineation of the socio-economic and ideological plight of the migrants, and on the level of its being a discursive formation and an example of how a cultural materialist analysis should be conducted.

2. Cultural Materialism: Place, Culture, and Ideology Revisited

Cultural materialism, as an intellectual discipline, is aware of the danger of theories being trapped by processes of selfreferentaility. It thus highlights the assumption that "a theory can only, ultimately, demonstrates its own assumptions, [and that] what lies outside these assumptions cannot be represented or even acknowledged" (Willis 77, in Hall 1980). Cultural materialism challenges the positivist way of reasoning and paves the way for new changes and assumptions to effect a change in the corpus of theories. Deconstructing the archaeological paradigms of thought, cultural materialism challenges the way the 'objects' are "perceived and understood through an internal organization of data, mediated by conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world" (Willis 78, in Hall 1980). These conceptual constructs are subject, within the cultural materialist analysis, to the historicity of the moment, to the perennially changing ideological forces, and to the dialectical nature of the cultural interaction.

As a worldly discursive formation, cultural materialism assigns place, culture, and ideology a distinguished place in its process of cultural materialist analysis. It, moreover, introduces them in a different manner, and through interdisciplinary relations with fields of study that were dismissed from academic and intellectual disciplines. In *The Country And The City*, Williams comments on the connotations of the country and the city pointing out the importance of place in determining ideology and social structure. He explains that,

Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times (1.)

This dichotomy between the urban and the rural presents itself as a key idea in cultural materialism and its method of analysis. Place, in a cultural materialist context, is not that tangible entity that is determined by man's behaviour, but rather the context that governs his social structure, and, hence, his identity.

In Keywords, Williams tackles the problematic nature of the word culture, and enlarges the scope of the definition to encompass more worldly and down-to-earth dimensions. He elucidates that culture is

the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development... the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general... [and] the independent and abstract noun which

describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (90.)

The minute details of everyday life of a certain group of people are thus fundamental in cultural materialist analyses. It is not only the superstructure and the aesthetic production that are the object of study within cultural materialism, but also the very simple details of the lived experience that actually determine the features of the cultural process.

Accentuating a radical break with the old definitions of culture, Williams, in *Culture And Society*, enlarges the range of different interpretations of the word culture. Relating culture to the process of industrialism that has radically changed the way of living in modern societies, Williams brings the important role of economy to the forefront and investigates its power to change the whole process of acculturation. For him, the questions raised by the word culture are questions "directly raised by the great historical changes which the changes in industry, democracy and class, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in art are a closely related response" (xv). Industrialism and economy, as the base that determines the community's superstructure, shape the cultural structures and add new meanings to the concept of social class, class struggle, power structures, and to the residual, emergent, and dominant culture.

Ideology exercises its power on culture, and, by virtue of its hidden strategies of power, creates an archaeology that is responsible for the tension between the residual, emergent, and dominant ideas and beliefs. In *Marxism And Literature*,

Williams defines ideology as follows:

(i) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group; (ii) a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge; (iii) the general process of the production of meaning, and ideas (55.)

Within the framework of cultural materialism, ideology is used interchangeably with the play of power, and is held responsible for the dialectical tension between the residual, emergent, and dominant ideas. Ideology, moreover, reveals the importance of the residual and the emergent, on the one hand, and their pinpointing the internal contradictions within the dominant, on the other. A cultural materialist analysis thus is courageous enough to highlight moments of false consciousness, and to create dialogical encounters between different discourses without a priori hypothesizing or preconceived deterministic points of inevitability.

3. Spatio-Temporal Reality in The Grapes of Wrath

As a literary masterpiece that delineates the heartbreaking predicament of the tenant farmers in America during the Great Depression, The Grapes of Wrath articulates the lived experience of the tenant farmers through a highly realistic portrayal of the spatio-temporal context. The word articulation, that is used in this research, is an essential concept within the framework of cultural materialism. Articulation is not only the process of verbalizing phenomena, but it is also "critical for understanding how cultural theorists conceptualize the world, analyse it and participate in shaping it" (Slack 113, in Hall 2005). Through the vivid description of all the minute details of the place, the text provides the reader with the actual history of the migrant farmers at that time. From the onset of the text, the reader is in contact with the ecological deterioration due to the fact that the southwestern States were hit by years without rain. "In the roads where the teams moved, where the wheels milled the ground and the hooves of the horses beat the ground, the dirt crust broke and the dust formed. Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air" (Steinbeck 4). The migrants' lived experience is intricately interwoven with the physical components of the place, and that explains why the first chapter is totally devoted to a description of dust invading the houses and the farms.

The concept of the landscape, in the text, is radically changed and historicized. According to Williams,

The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation. It is possible and useful to trace the internal histories of painting, landscape writing, landscape gardening and landscape architecture, but in any final analysis we must relate these histories to the common history of a land and its society (120, 1973.)

In The Grapes of Wrath, the landscape is historicized and is symbolic of the inhumane conditions of living suffered by the Joad family. The landscape tells women about the moment in which men might collapse: "Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn... And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men – to feel whether this time the men would break" (Steinbeck 6). In spite of the beauty of nature in California, the landscape doesn't imply observation and does not allow the reader to experience this moment of modernist temporal stasis. Commenting on his folks' response to the beauty of the landscape in California, Tom says, "An' Granma would a remembered an' seen the first home she lived in. They was too ol" (Steinbeck 313). The landscape is related here to the way the migrants interact with it, and not to a posited outer reality that is timeless and universal.

The spatio-temporal reality in the text functions as a means of stressing the danger of the binary opposition between the city and the country. According to Williams, "The Industrial Revolution not only transformed both city and country; it was based on a highly developed agrarian capitalism, with a very early disappearance of the traditional peasantry" (2, 1973). The city/country binary opposition is thus highlighted as the new social order that is generated through capitalism that relegates farmers and that looks at them as the second unprivileged term of the binary opposition. The text provides the reader with a clear portrayal of the negative impact of capitalism and the new social structure it has generated. "The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle" (Steinbeck 135). The binary opposition between the city and the country is foregrounded to the reader in order to explicitly *articulate* the fact that literature should participate in social reform and in preventing social animosity between different classes. Talking to the people who drove the tenants out of their farms, Pa says, "We could have saved you, but you cut us down, and soon you will be cut down and there'll be none of us to save you" (Steinbeck 118).

Place, within the framework of the text, concretizes the phenomenon of spatial displacement and links it with the state of social conflict that appeared in the American society at that time. According to Williams, the idea of being dismissed from one's land is as old as Virgil himself, and thus "the contrast within Virgilian pastoral is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and eviction" (17, 1937). The spatio-temporal reality, represented through the text, with all the minute details of the place presented to the reader, introduces a minor history that questions all the claims to equality and equity that are made by the American government. Commenting on Grampa's death, Casy says, "Grampa didn't die tonight. He died the minute you took'im off the place" (Steinbeck 199). The homeland for the tenant farmers is not only a place in which they live, but also a life, a mode of being, and a minor history that questions the justness of the American hegemonic culture. Life and social stability are lost with the loss of homeland. Tom says, "There ain't nothin' left, we had pretty nice tools. There ain't nothin' left" (Steinbeck 55). With the forced displacement inflicted on the migrants who come from Oklahoma, there arise a new social order, class prejudice, and class conflict. The boy in the gas station displays this class prejudice against the migrants. He says, "The goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do" (Steinbeck 301). Strategies of social segregation and discrimination began to be implemented by the official authority. The policeman says to Ma, "You're in California, an' we don't want you goddamn Okies settlin' down" (Steinbeck 291). The word "Okies" is connotative of an insult directed towards any American citizen leaving Oklahoma and heading to California in search of a better opportunity and good conditions of living. The repetition of the word throughout the text signals class war and an inhumane type of class legislation. Functioning as a minor history that deconstructs the American hegemonic culture, the spatio-temporal reality in the text is also an intellectual content through which one can think of the hidden play of power that can inflict relations of subjugation and dominance.

4. The Discourse of Culture and Ideology in The Grapes of Wrath

The Grapes of Wrath presents to the reader a cultural and an ideological framework that functions as a discursive formation and a moment of difference. It articulates these moments of cultural and ideological silence through which "social differences are kept alive and well, and through which they are able to exert constant resistances... to the equally constant attempts of the dominant to make their social power as effective as possible" (Fiske 219, in Hall 2005). The very realistic and detailed description of the place and the details of the journey of the Joad family to California are the history of the unseen and the discourse of resistance that pinpoint the aporia within the dominant culture.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the reader encounters a cultural framework in which industrialism and capitalist economy are key factors in governing people's life. According to Williams, industrialism is "the acknowledgement of a series of very important technical changes, and of their transforming effect on methods of production" (xii, 1996). Industrialism and capitalist economy are then the dominant that has radically altered the living conditions of the tenant farmers: "The owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were. A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that" (Steinbeck 43). The bank is that monster that "has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die" (Steinbeck 44). The tension created here is between the hegemonic structure represented through the bank, and the social residual, represented through the rural economy, that faces the threat of extinction. The text thus introduces a cultural process that is imprisoned within a cultural system that is governed by the dominant, and, furthermore, highlights the residual and the emergent features that are "significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the dominant" (Williams 122, 1996).

With the inhumane conditions of living imposed on the migrant people by the capitalist economy, a new state of alienation appears. Alienation, within a cultural materialist context, is intricately interwoven with an understanding of capitalism and the labour process that has effected a deeply rooted sense of estrangement within individuals. Alienation, within the context of capitalism and the strategies of subjugation of workers, becomes a double one. The workers "are doubly

alienated; first by the transformation of the core of human activity, namely the labour process, its meaningless actions, and second, through separation from the products of their own labour" (Barker 5-6). The migrant people, suffering the atrocities of forced displacement, head to road 66 that is "the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership" (Steinbeck 160). They are, thus, doubly alienated; dismissed from their homeland and becoming "a propertyless proletariat [who] must sell their labour to survive" (Barker 5). Alienation, within the text, becomes a way of living, and the reader is invited to look deeply at the emotional state of estrangement and the social distancing suffered by the migrants that are a consequence of the inhumane labour process of the capitalist economy. For the tens of thousands of migrant people on the road, there is nothing but social animosity, refusal and alienation: "The whole United States ain't that big. It ain't that big. It ain't big enough. There ain't room enough for you an' me" (Steinbeck 163).

With the absence of social stability and the migrant people's loss of a center and a fixed point of reference, many ideologies begin to emerge from those who represent the dominant hegemonic culture, on the one hand, and those who represent the residual and the emergent, on the other. In The Grapes of Wrath, ideology has a problematic nature. Ideology means:

The mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of

thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works (Hall 25-26, in Hall 2005.)

Ideology, moreover, means: "The way in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a 'material force'" (Hall 26, in Hall 2005). The text creates dialogical encounters between the dominant, that propagates the distorted ideology of calling the migrants "Okies", and the residual and the emergent, that try to bring under the spotlight the moments of "false consciousness" (Hall 30, in Hall 2005).

With the diasporic mode of being and the atrocities of forced displacement, the migrants began to articulate ideologies that can define their lived experience and produce a way of understanding the world that is radically altered by industrialism and capitalist economy. Aware of the fact that their intimate relationship with their homeland is expelled by the dominant culture and considered unjustifiable, Casy, the preacher, suffers a state of ontological uncertainty and when asked by Ma to pray for the dying Grampa, Casy says, "I don't know what to pray for or who to pray to" (Steinbeck 187). With the collapse of religious certitudes, there arises a new ideology that guides the preacher and functions as a center for him. Casy says, "I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing" (Steinbeck 110). Casy's ideology of the one big soul and the importance of social solidarity becomes a source of inspiration for Tom who realizes

the importance of getting immersed in political activism to attain the rights to a dignified life to all the tenant farmers. In The Grapes of Wrath, different ideologies are presented to the reader through dialogical encounters and relations of power. Al's pragmatic philosophy and Noah's symbolic escape to nature and to life by the river are contrasted with Ma's belief in the importance of the family, and with Rose of Sharon's mature development and her desire to rescue the dying man, through breastfeeding him, in spite of her painful personal losses: "Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously" (Steinbeck 619). In this last powerful scene of the book, ideologies conceived and practised by the migrants are rewriting history, the history of the marginalized, the poor, the subjugated, and those who are dismissed by the dominant hegemonic culture.

5. Conclusion

Dealing with culture as a productive process and with ideology as an awareness of man's lived experience and the system of representation that governs it, cultural materialism introduces a type of cultural analysis that investigates the historicity of the moment and the incessantly changing ideological fabric of the cultural framework. Refuting causality as a deterministic way of reasoning, cultural materialism favours genealogical renderings of reality and syntagmatic structures that welcome intellectual ruptures and moments discontinuities. Within the context of a cultural materialist analysis, intellectual silence and minor histories are the worldly exterior forces that attack the theoretical axioms and pinpoint their internal contradiction. Functioning as a discursive formation that does not acknowledges posited outer realities, cultural materialist analysis addresses the worldliness of the cultural and socio-economic system, and concerns itself with whatever is neglected and hidden.

The text as a discursive formation that recontextualizes the concepts of place, culture, and ideology, transcends the boundaries of the historical recording of the plight of the migrant people in America in the period of the Great Depression. Through the genealogical rendering of the discursive relations that are in function between place, culture, and ideology, *The Grapes of Wrath* brings to the forefront the hidden dimension of the aforementioned concepts, on the one hand, and the way they exercise their power in determining man's life on the other. The way the text *articulates* the hidden tension between place, culture, and ideology epitomizes how theorists introduce the concepts that shape man's lived experience, and contribute in determining the linguistic system of signification that ultimately governs man's social code of behaviour.

The cultural materialist reading of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, presented in this research, deals with the text as a cultural production that situates the lived experience of the migrants in opposition to the dominant hegemonic culture that has subjugated them. It investigates social practices and historical moments in which people's consciousness intermingles with ideological dimensions, in an attempt at foregrounding moments of false consciousness that deconstruct

archaeological The the dominant's structures. cultural materialist reading of the text has, moreover, studied the book in terms of its being a discursive formation, and an example of how a cultural materialist study should be conducted. It has pointed out how The Grapes of Wrath is a cultural production of its socio-economic and ideological background, on the one hand, and how it succeeds in being an example of a cultural materialist analysis, both on the epistemological and political levels, on the other. Epistemologically, the text succeeds in articulating the structures of dominance and the play of power that were in function in the American society at a specific historical moment. Politically, the text manages to act as a moment of silence, a minor history, that foregrounds relations of hegemony and subordination within a particular socio-political formation. Succeeding, epistemologically and politically, in bringing the hidden strategies and the play of power to the forefront, The Grapes of Wrath enlarges the scope of cultural analysis, accentuates the importance of the spatio-temporal reality in cultural materialist analysis, and takes the dialectical interaction between the residual, the emergent, and the dominant to the wider field of socio-economic practices and historicity.

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