



## Decoding Foucauldian Power in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath"

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**Abstract:** *The novel "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck is examined using the Foucauldian theory of power. In the study two characters are chosen: Jim Casy, an ex-preacher, and Tom Joad, who has recently been released from jail. Focusing on Foucault's theory of power, this study examines how these two people oppose the system in their relationship to power. The repercussions of the power connection on the identities of the two characters are examined.*

**Key Words:** *Foucault's Theory, Power, John Steinbeck.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

According to Michel Foucault, power is not something that should be held exclusively by governments, institutions, or a specific group against an individual. However, Louis Althusser, a renowned Marxist critic and thinker, claims that people are similar to puppets controlled by the system's invisible wires, which wants to impose its will and ideology from the top down. In actuality, in such a system, the institutions and the state oppress the people. Because of this, individuals are unable to live as they like. Falsifying Althusser's assertion, Foucault makes an effort to transcend repressive notions of power. He opposes the notion that power leads to oppression in his book *Historie de la Sexual*; for him, even the most extreme forms of power can result in more than just repression and censorship—they can also be creative, resulting in the emergence of novel behaviors! It would be beneficial to define the term "power" in order to better comprehend Foucault's idea of power. Power, in general, is the capacity of an agent to impose its will over the will of the weak. Power is seen as a property in this sense. In opposition to this, Foucault argues that power is dynamic rather than static: Power is utilised and exorcised via netlike organisation; people are the carriers of power, not the places of application; it must be examined as something that circulates, or as something that only operates in the shape of a chain (Foucault, 1980). From this vantage point, power is no longer seen as a connection between the oppressor and the oppressed but as a system, a web of relationships encompassing the whole society. As a result, people stop being the objects of power and start acting as the locus of power and resistance instead (Bălan, 2010). In contrast to Marxists, who see power as an oppressive force that compels people to submit, Foucault believes that "power is coextensive with resistance; productive, creating good results; universal, being found in every sort of interaction" (Foucault, 1978). In the first book of *Histoires de la sexual*, Foucault states that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Sidanius, 1999); this indicates that there is resistance wherever there is power, rather than just a simple master-slave connection, but rather a creative relationship. The identity of people will take on new power in light of Foucault's perspective on the notion of power and power relations, which challenges the long-accepted conventional master-slave paradigm. It has some similarities with social dominance theory, which is defined as "the theory of intergroup interactions that focuses on the preservation and stability of group-based social hierarchies" (Williams, 1989). Each person, in turn, does not have a fixed identity when the interaction between individuals from various social groups relies on power relations and power turns out to be a topic of negotiation. Power is dynamic, an unstable element that may always be challenged.

### 2. Foucault's Theory of Power :

In terms of Foucault's theory of power, while discussing identity, we often refer to people as if they had certain characteristics as objects inside themselves: they have an identity, and we assume that a person's genuine identity or character can be found at their core. We believe that everyone has a core identity and attributes underneath the surface that define who they really were, are, and will be. Additionally, we say that certain individuals have varying degrees of



power, which indicates that they have varying degrees of ability to get what they want from "other people and the community at large" (Foucault, 1979). In opposition to this idea, Foucault claims that individuals lack a true sense of self. Through actuality, identity is a dynamic, transient creation inside a person that is transmitted to others in your interactions with them; it is not a permanent thing.

An excellent example of examining the power struggle and the identity that results from it is *The Grapes of Wrath*. This is the tale of a typical American family that was forced to leave their house due to changes in the social and natural environment. Some of the concepts from Foucault's ideas on power relations and identity are used by John Steinbeck in his emphasis on the social and environmental circumstances in 1930s America during the Great Depression. Some questions should be posed in relation to the issues of power and identity in this book: Do the farmers have the capacity to oppose the power initially? Do they easily abandon their homes and farms as a result of social power? Do the people demonstrate their opposition and avoid uniting as one? or turn into puppets at the whim of the dominating system's forces? To determine whether the institution and the state are fundamentally oppressive, permanent, and solid as Althusser, the Marxist critic, believes, or whether they are fragile and have great potential for change, and even if they can become productive rather than destructive, this study focuses on the characters of Tom Joad and Jim Casy and their reactions to power to test Foucault's theory of power and identity (Steinbeck, 1939). The logic of power, or how individuals relate to one another, is the subject of this study's second section. On the one hand, one person attempts to enforce his will like a state, while the person who is intended to be the target of the action is, on the other hand, if the recipient resists, it is discussed to determine if that resistance is effective or not.

### 3. Power as in "The Grapes of Wrath"

The Joads' oldest son, Tom, has been away from home for four years. He had committed a murder and was now incarcerated at Mc Alester. He now has parole and is free to reunite with his family. Tom approaches a motorist at the start of the book on his way home: "Could ye give me a ride, mister? Didn't you notice the No Rider sticker on the windshield, the driver retorted? Sure, I've seen it, but sometimes a man will still be a wonderful guy even if some oligarch forces him to wear a sticker. In addition to not being a decent man, the driver is now required to carry a tag if he continues to refuse. By accepting the hitchhiker, he demonstrates that he is a kind person and is not someone who any wealthy fool might abuse. He is aware that he is in a difficult situation, but he is unable to find a way out and yet wants to act morally. He took another look at the eatery. As he gingerly climbed onto the truck, the driver replied, "Scrunch down on the running board till we go around the corner." According to Foucault, power is not something that can be held; rather, it is something that acts and shows itself in certain ways; it is more of a technique than a physical object, according to Foucault. Because power is a network of interactions, we may state that it is incorrect to assume that the subject is deferential to the exercise of power. According to the Marxist theory of power, it is clear that the system has successfully imposed its will on the oppressed, or the object, in this case the driver, who is the passive object. It is also clear that the system has compelled the driver to refrain from lifting the passenger. The Marxist theory of power is, however, called into question with the arrival of Tom Joad. According to Foucauldian theory, power is not a group's possession but rather "coextensive with resistance, constructive, having good results, omnipresent, being found in every sort of interaction." (Foucault, 1979). In his interaction with the driver, Tom Joad demonstrates that where there is power, there is always someone who opposes it. When the truck driver notices the No Rider label on the windshield, Tom Joad cleverly carries him by saying: "Sometimes a person'll be a decent guy even if some wealthy bastard makes him wear the sticker." (Foucault, 1979). This is one way that people might rebel against the government, the system, or an institution to show that they are more than just puppets controlled by the unseen wires of industrialization or the system as a whole.

It is noteworthy that Tom Joad not only aggressively resists the system's dictates but also encourages the driver to participate in his game and disobey the rules set up by the system. Tom challenges Marxists' belief that power is fixed and moves through a single, well-defined channel; instead, Tom demonstrates that power is dynamic and productive rather than static and passive. Following Tom Joad's inspiring remarks, the driver now submits to the new power while also rebelling against it, which may be explained via the relationality of power. Tom Joad's identity in the narrative is constantly shifting due to power dynamics. He embraces a variety of positions. He is a murderer somewhere; he killed someone for selfish reasons, not to aid the needy, and now that he is a stranger in this connection, we will see him sacrifice himself in the future for the greater good, taking on a Christ-like role. Due to drought and bank force, Tom and his family are ostensibly obliged to act in accordance with the system's or, more generally, the government's wishes when they are forced to leave their home and relocate to California. According to Foucault's theory of power, men are



thus required to oppose when power is used. The Joad family, along with several other families, decides to go to California, the Lost Paradise, in order to live. While migrating, they come into contact with the brutal actions of the system, which seeks to take advantage of them and their labour while providing them with little more than a piece of bread to live on.

This starkly contrasts with Marxism, whose detractors usually assume that the downtrodden have no free choice and must accept their fate as it is dealt to them. Marxist opponents claim that such power consists of censorship and oppression; the downtrodden do not fight since doing so would be pointless and ineffective. In this system, power is seen as a property that belongs to the powerful, but in power, it is more like an inheritance; no one else has the right to lay claim to it or even be able to discuss it. The Foucauldian theory of power, which holds that productive power arises through conflict between the more and less powerful, is refuted by Tom in *The Grapes of Wrath*, proving the opposite to be true. Instead of being destructive and passive, this kind of power becomes vibrant and constructive.

#### **4. CONCLUSION :**

In literature, discussions of power relations and identity have long been prevalent. The Marxist philosopher and theorist, Althusser, believes that power is held by the strong, and that, as a result, the weaker people are nothing more than puppets who must submit to the dictates of the institutions and system. Michel Foucault, a French critic, disputes this notion and claims that since power is not a permanent or stable concept, it cannot be kept or controlled by governments, systems, or organisations. On the other hand, power in a relationship of power is dynamic, and because of this, it may be useful. This understanding of power relationships cannot be oppressive or unpleasant. In reality, it may be advantageous and fruitful since it appears anywhere there is resistance and in all types of relationships. In accordance with this view, no one person would have a set identity since power is fluid, unstable, and subject to constant challenge.

In literature, particularly American literature and the novel genre, the concepts of power and identity should be seen as crucial and significant. When it comes to dealing with "some of the new social control techniques employed to displace certain individuals to the margins of society," (Beckett, 2008), Althusser has faith in the idea that the system has the power at its disposal, controls, and monitors the rest of the people who are destined to be seen as puppets. However, Michel Foucault asserts that power should not be hoarded or preoccupied with by governments, systems, or institutions since it is not static and immovable; rather, it should be in a dynamic circle and be seen as generative, which has nothing to do with being destructive or oppressive. This means that resistance manifests itself in a variety of fresh ways and may be seen everywhere. Going deeper into each person leads to the conclusion that each person lacks a secure identity since the power is unstable and difficult as a result. Based on Foucault's theory of power, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel in which the characters of Jim Casy, an ex-preacher, and Tom Joad, a recently released prisoner, are of outstanding importance and can be viewed through the concepts of power and identity since they stand against the system and facilitate the unification of the migrants. The resistance in this book ultimately gives way to production, and at that point, the power dynamic also has an impact on the identities of the main characters. The story is about a society where people's identities and their power are closely linked.

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