



CLASS STRUGGLE AND ECONOMIC DISPLACEMENT IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH: A COMPARATIVE MARXIST ANALYSIS WITH CONTEMPORARY LABOR CRISES

¹Dr. Kanwal Zahra

²Muhammad Dawood

³Dr. Muhammad Javed Iqbal

¹Associate Professor, Centre for Languages and Translation Studies, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

²Lecturer, Air University Kharian Campus.

³Lecturer, Centre for Languages and Translation Studies, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

This research immerses The Grapes of Wrath by (Steinbeck (1939) into a Marxist interpretation that studies the economic turmoil affecting both working classes and displaced populations in the Dust Bowl era. Historical analysis shows a comparison between the past conditions of labor and the current labor challenges, which include unstable employment and modern forms of work alongside automation and the worldwide movement of workers. Workforce analysis, socioeconomic findings, and literary text assessment reveal extensive parallels between these two historical periods because both experienced vast employee movement and industrial labor changes, and business models focused solely on maximizing profit while disregarding worker needs. In The Grapes of Wrath, the “monster” banks and agribusiness force tenant farmers from their land, while platform capitalism, through its displacement of workers and destruction of security systems, operates in a similar fashion. Marxist criticism of Steinbeck, along with Marxist theory of labor exploitation and academic insights on present-day precarity, make up the basis of analysis. Qualitative content analysis of the novel and comparative research in labor literature demonstrates that capital still exploits labor forces and maintains a system of surplus workers. A comparison showcases the differences between 1930s Americans moving from dust areas and current international migrant patterns, and the shift from manual farm equipment toward computer automation. This paper demonstrates that Steinbeck’s proletarian tale continues to be applicable because it highlights modern labor dislocation as well as ongoing class struggles in capitalist societies.

Keywords: Marxist theory, class struggle, economic displacement, gig economy, migration, platform capitalism, Dust Bowl, contemporary labor crisis

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Corresponding Authors*:

INTRODUCTION

The *Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939) portrays the powerful narrative of farmers who became homeless during the Dust Bowl era because of droughts, as well as economic failures and intrusive capitalist practices. The novel serves as a prominent work of American literature, which illustrates the intense class dispute between dispossessed tenant farmers and banks and corporate agribusiness during the Great Depression. The novel serves as a Marxist critique against capitalism by showing how financial institutions and private interests create human misfortune for the lower-class working population. This research paper investigates two principal elements. The *Grapes of Wrath* depicts class struggle and economic displacement from a Marxist viewpoint. The novel presents certain social conflicts along with specific interrelationships which demonstrate Marxist concepts of exploitation and alienation. Also, the novel's historical labor and economic conditions compare to contemporary global labor crises. This research analyzes present-day employment fluctuations in service sectors between technological advancements and migrant workers using Marxist methods to determine their connection to Dust Bowl job market conditions. The research uses a comparative analytical method. A review of Steinbeck's novel, along with Marxist literary criticism, establishes *The Grapes of Wrath* within discussions about class and ideological interpretations. It presents essential features of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, including the record-breaking unemployment rate (approximately 25% nationwide), together with Oklahoma residents moving to California, which directly connects to the storyline in the novel. Labor issues of today are examined through statistical data and academic research in the field.

The finalization of this section by integrating all presented information to demonstrate both common elements and divergences among the studied sources. It presents the major analogies showing how farm laborers became superfluous due to mechanized tractors in the 1930s, much like how modern automation technology makes numerous occupations redundant. The analysis relies on Marxist theory, which incorporates surplus labor together with the reserve army of labor and class consciousness throughout the investigation. The research merges studies of literary criticism with economic studies of labor economics. The literature review analyzes Marxist interpretations of the *novel* together with research about present-day labor vulnerability. The research combines qualitative methods through analyzing Steinbeck's text with synthesizing academic research and statistical data. Through his writing, Steinbeck created narratives about exploitation and protest, which continue to match the present-day battles for labor rights despite globalization. The research establishes a relationship between the bank of '*The Grapes of Wrath*' and modern platform companies and global capital by studying enduring capitalist techniques that both exploit workers while generating unstable job environments.

This article explores class conflict and economic dislocation in *The Grapes of Wrath* by applying Marxist analysis and comparing it to current labor market challenges influenced by globalization and technology. It considers how capitalist exploitation stretches through time, inquiring into the degree that which labor, migration, and ideology, as depicted by Steinbeck connect us to today's gig economy and neoliberal narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM AND STEINBECK

Marxist literature serves as a social tool to present and control relationships between individuals while depicting conflicts between classes, together with ideological frameworks.

The Marxist literary theory regards literature as an instrument that reflects and molds social relationships while showing class disputes and ideological systems. Novels contain hidden methods through which readers view the world, according to Eagleton, while these methods either reveal or conceal dominant power structures. *The Grapes of Wrath* functions as a cultural text that exposes the social conflicts between different classes during its historical period. Steinbeck's political beliefs have sparked ongoing discussion among scholars because his sympathy toward workers fails to manifest directly into revolutionary advocacy. Every academic researcher agrees that the novel displays the way capitalist institutions oppress poor farmers. Steinbeck intended to reveal the dominance and financial superiority and authoritarian control, and oppressive aspects of the industrialized agricultural system in California (according to DeMott, 1992). Marx shared the same opinion that capital transforms labor to become commodified while simultaneously accumulating wealth for a small elite group. *The Grapes of Wrath* uses its alternating family story segments with external commentary chapters to establish this critical message. (Landry, 2010) Alongside Cunningham (2010) points out that the inter-chapters transform the Joad family narrative into a wider depiction of economic conditions in society. According to scholars, the bank functions as a “monster” which transcends human ability to control it, symbolizing capitalism’s abstract power. Steinbeck scholar William Rose commended the author’s revelation of noble intentions within communist workers in his novel, even though the author did not support a Marxist revolution. The existing analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals its critique of capitalist labor exploitation through its complex portrayal of working-class attitudes.

DUST BOWL LABOR HISTORY

The historical background of the story plays an essential role. During the late 1930s, the Dust Bowl stood as “one of the greatest environmental and economic catastrophes in U.S. history” because extended dry spells and depleted soils drove hundreds of thousands of farmers from their land. Research by McCloskey (2024) shows that between 1930 and 1940, approximately fifty percent of Dust Bowl area male household leaders relocated within their same region, and thirty-three and a half percent shifted to different states. The nationwide Great Depression caused unemployment rates to soar past 25% as displaced farmers entered an overpopulated labor market, which was also affected by machinery adoption, leading them to compete for minimum-wage jobs. The ownership of extensive farmland territory in California belonged to both agribusiness and banking institutions. Steinbeck used his novel to illustrate actual tensions where his migrant characters were compelled to work for “corporate agricultural companies” before ending up in “corporate farms,” which symbolized the unequal distribution of wealth.

THE MARXIST CONCEPTS OF CLASS STRUCTURE, COMBINED WITH LABOR SYSTEMS AND PRECARIZATION IN MODERN SOCIETY

Through its fundamental concepts, Marxian analysis reveals essential insights that address *Grapes* and the present-day working environment. The generation of capitalist profits depends on surplus value, which represents the difference between the total worker labor and compensation amounts. Every day, business operations focus on acquiring maximum employee work output at minimum wage rates. Gig economy workers face precarious employment conditions because Uber, for example, extracts 30% of each fare payment, therefore providing no wage compensation for 30% of driver work time. (Klein, 2019) explains that disputes about unpaid labor hours serve as “the backbone of the class struggle”. In *Grapes*, the Joads, together with other workers, perform agricultural labor

while banks and landlords receive the profits. Marx noted the importance of a reserve labor force: capitalism keeps an extra workforce of unemployed or underemployed workers who serve as a tool to lower the bargaining power of other workers. As (White, 2018) observes, the idea of the modern “precariat” obscures that precarious employment has existed since capitalism’s rise; what was exceptional in the mid-20th century (welfare state, unionized full employment) has given way to a new normal of insecurity. Today, mass migration and deregulation have created a global reserve army on an unprecedented scale. Marx also predicted that machinery would supplant labor, making workers “conscious linkages” to the production process, and even function as a “weapon” against workers by suppressing strikes. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, tractors are mentioned as ominous harbingers (“a combination of mechanization has left farmers without income or land to cultivate “Today’s AI and robotics extend this trend: AI-driven automation displaces service and manufacturing jobs, intensifying the capitalist imperative noted by Marx, where machinery is “inimical to the worker and the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes”.

The concept of “precariat” by Standing describes various unstable groups, including casual workers and migrant populations, and interns and others whose individual situations prevent collective solidarity. According to Williams (2013), capital increases precarity through its expansionary phase to restore class power imbalance that serves their economic interests. This scholarly perspective guides our examination of the novel’s historical labor struggle in relation to modern divided class structures.

CONTEMPORARY LABOR STUDIES: PRECARIITY, GIG ECONOMY, AND MIGRATION

Modern labor research has revealed crucial transformations which have occurred during the last few decades. Young workers and those earning minimum wage experience the greatest impact from the rising trend of non-standard employment through temporary contracts, part-time work, and dependent self-employment. Businesses throughout Western countries transfer work responsibilities to independent employees who do not have access to standard labor protection rights. Research conducted by the ILO and other institutions demonstrates that a substantial number of platform workers accessed through web platforms come from migration backgrounds (17%), along with young workers under unstable contractual arrangements. Specific evidence can be found in (Ozimek, 2021), who discovered that freelance and gig work was performed by 36% of U.S. workers during 2020–21, which added \$1.3 trillion to the economy. The rates of gig work operations remain lower in developed markets (1–4%) than in emerging markets (up to 12%) throughout Brazil, China, India, and Indonesia. This indicates a growing trend of precarious employment through business adoption of flexible work models across the world.

The introduction of automated systems through AI systems creates a new crisis. The creation or disappearance of employment due to technology remains a topic of academic disagreement; however, Marxist theory suggests that capitalist economic conflicts might arise. The observation of Carney, along with other scholars, demonstrates that a “deficiency of effective demand” could emerge when machines claim most human jobs because workers would no longer exist for purchasing products. According to Marx, the introduction of technology would diminish human work duration (“labour time ceases to be its measure”), triggering a distribution crisis in capitalism. Modern manufacturing adoption of robots and technological advancements in service industries through algorithms and artificial intelligence technology (driverless vehicles and automated

customer service, along with AI coding systems) continue to strain employment positions and compensation for workers. Through the gig economy, algorithms take charge of employee operations, thereby reducing work autonomy yet pretending they deliver entrepreneurial freedom to workers. The world has experienced a dramatic increase in labor migration throughout the period. By 2023, the worldwide forced displacement of people stood at 117.3 million people according to official numbers. According to IOM (2024), data shows that approximately 281 million international migrants existed in 2020, representing 3.6% of the worldwide population. From a Marxist perspective, workers who migrate from low-wage countries give their labor power to capital so capital can extract surplus value through these workers' work. Labor mobility works today as an exploitation system through unequal exchange while serving the same purpose as nineteenth-century industrialists used to recruit Irish and colonial workers.

Marxist theories provide an understanding of contemporary labor issues because they reveal seams of class conflict present in fresh variants of older systems. The available literature demonstrates that *The Grapes of Wrath* holds productive value for examining present-day conditions. The novel presents themes about dispossession and exploitation together with solidarity, which match contemporary arguments on precarity and globalization. Our approach to performing this comparison will be explained in detail in the following section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology follows qualitative comparative approaches based on Marxist theory. *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck serves as the main source from which we extract thematic elements of class structure, alongside exploitation and displaced populations, through textual analysis of its complete chapters. The analysis of literary elements through the Marxist theoretical framework uses Marx's and Lukács', Eagleton's, and contemporary critics' ideas to examine class relations and ideological aspects. The analysis uses secondary material to demonstrate how the time period of the novel relates to current conditions. The study includes a literature-based comparison that uses historical records and statistical information about the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, as well as academic evaluations of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck and contemporary economic research and sociological studies on precarity and automation and labor mobility (ILO reports, World Bank studies, Marxist commentaries). Qualitative content analysis is performed on academic texts about Marxist literary criticism and labor theory to obtain essential concepts from those sources. The research data collection process included organized searches of academic publications from JSTOR and Google Scholar and official reports from the ILO and UN institutions. The combined data of Steinbeck's written material with statistical data, and scholarly research interpretations. During the eviction scene analysis, reference both Steinbeck's original text, which appears in McCloskey's discussion, and official statistics about farm ownership loss. The research has two main limitations: it uses secondary data analysis of labor data and lacks direct interviews with stakeholders regarding the analysis of the novel. Given the difference between the scope of a historical novel and global phenomena, a qualitative synthesis method is suitable.

DATA ANALYSIS

DUST BOWL ERA: CLASS STRUGGLE IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

Within *The Grapes of Wrath*, the author presents Southern Oklahoma as a devastated region where independent tenant farmers lose their homes through bank and agribusiness agents' forceful removals. According to (McCloskey,2024), the representatives of banks

alongside their corporate farming association clients are dispossessing tenant farmers of their land throughout Oklahoma. The use of this language about banks using eviction agents reveals the systematic nature of the economic crisis. During a prominent scene in the story, Steinbeck shows the tenant Tom Joad hearing bank inspectors declare, "It's not us... It's the monster... Men made it, but they can't control it." It's the monster... Men created this system, yet they cannot direct its operations. According to Marx's theory, capital functions as a "monster" once it operates because it establishes itself as an uncontrollable power above human control. The bank institution carries out farm foreclosure operations with relentless determination, even though people deeply disapprove of its actions. Steinbeck shows through his narrative how capitalists (bankers and land barons) control land resources to achieve maximum profit while viewing human life as unimportant. The Joad family's loss of land results not from natural misfortune alone but from this class structure. Steinbeck reveals exploitation through his description of migrant worker camps in his narrative. People earn meager wages at both official employment sites known as work camps and the informal camps called Hoovervilles. A character expresses astonishment because the work never demands the effort it should, since day laborers must battle intensely for survival. Steinbeck presents an intense competition for low wages through his inter-chapter where he shows that grape pickers must work with teams to earn between eight and ten dollars per day (p.89).

The workers' shared fight for better pay represents the fundamental principle that Marx identified between labor and class warfare. Marx documented how capitalists work to extend daily work hours to acquire additional unpaid employee work. Through the physical draining of malnutrition and overworking, the Joads, the author illustrates their struggle in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Jim Casy, the ex-preacher, considers how the power imbalance works during his thoughts about organizing workers by stating "those who 'don't breathe air... they breathe profits'" (Steinbeck 1939: p. 34, cited in McCloskey). Through his rhetorical strategy, Steinbeck makes the capitalists appear less than human because they survive by exploiting the work of others. The literary analysis of embedded ideology within narratives in *The Grapes of Wrath* matches Marxist literary criticism principles. Critics identify *The Grapes of Wrath* as an expression of capitalist labor exploitation because Steinbeck never proclaimed himself a Marxist writer. The book showcases working people developing social consciousness without promoting a specific revolutionary path.

Through Casy's guidance, Tom Joad advances towards Marxist consciousness-raising by announcing that he will be present at every battle where people fight for food. I will be present at every fight that allows hungry people to obtain food (Steinbeck 1939: 361). The promise Tom makes (which Steinbeck stopped narrating before the future events) indicates the beginning of a union between workers that resembles socialist activism. The Dust Bowl serves as the basis for *The Grapes of Wrath* to present its message about class struggle. Steinbeck displayed his support for workers through his exploration of institutional suppression. Through its depiction, Marx reveals that capitalism transforms human essential needs and work into conflicts that revolve around exploitative practices. The background events shaping the story reveal how banks taking over farms through foreclosures, combined with mechanical tractors destroying sharecroppers' labor and migrant camps being cheapened through racial violence, show the basic causes of the Joads' downfall. This narrative construction brings to light the systemic aspect of the crisis whereby banks become impersonal, institutionalized agents instead of oppressing individuals. Steinbeck pipes up this notion when Tom Joad overhears a bank inspector

assert, It is not us... It is the monster. People have created it but are unable to control it.” The monster, here is the independent power of capital, which, according to Karl Marx's theories, when it is released, will become a ruling structure, that is no longer in the service of humanity, but rather in its slavery. Based on this reasoning, lenders do not foreclose when it is necessary, but because a foreclosure system forces them to it in search of profitability.

The novel clearly shows the overriding interest of profit-motivated interests going beyond the welfare of human beings. As families are forced out, land is not abandoned but is put to mechanized use, where tractors do the work, which indicates that labor is not appreciated because it is human but rather the usefulness to capital. The tractor is a symbol of the Marx theory of alienation of technology, where the technological invention, rather than emancipating man, contributes further to the enslavement of man through economic exploitation. Steinbeck demonstrates that it is not the circumstantial fact that lands were taken over by the Joads, but rather, a symbol of the hierarchical approach provided in a differentiation between the classes, with the property owners still being in power and the laborer as a disposable asset. The work camps or the so-called Hoovervilles of migrants act as the microcosms of capitalism. The wage is on a subsistence base, the employment is sporadic, and thousands of families compete for low-level jobs. Through an intercalary chapter, Steinbeck speaks about grape pickers whose cooperation is important in enabling them to obtain a daily salary that ranges between eight and ten dollars a day (p. 89). This fierce labor competition reflects Marxism's perception of the reserve army of labor, that surplus workers enable the capitalists to keep wages low and stop unionization.

These workers deal with physical exhaustion, malnutrition, and social degradation on a daily basis. Steinbeck is trying to show that such degradation is not just a byproduct of capitalism, but that it is part of capitalism. This is dehumanization that lies deep in the system and is eloquently expressed by one of the characters (a former preacher, Jim Casy, now a labor activist) who states: They breathe in profits instead of breathing in air (Steinbeck 1939, p. 34, cited in McCloskey). By doing it, Steinbeck underlines that capitalists are people who do not act morally anymore; they have become creatures whose purpose of existence is to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Even though Steinbeck never publicly positioned himself as a Marxist, Marxist concepts are alive in his work because he denounces exploitation, the growing consensus consciousness of solidarity, and the emerging society. The philosophy that Casy preaches causes Tom Joad to become a revolutionary. His last promise, uttering words: “Wherever there is a fight so hungry people can eat, I will be there” (Steinbeck 1939, p. 361), expresses the idea of his elevation as an instrument of united rebellion, a direct reference to the notion of socialist protest efforts, though the novel does not go as far as the promotion of an active revolution. Moreover, Steinbeck criticizes the institutional support of capitalist systems, too. The law enforcement, which is discussed in the novel as a vigilante of corporate interests, will often be pursued to put down labor organizing, indicating that the state further solidifies the class structure instead of improving it. This relationship resonates strongly with present-day class conflict where unions are resisted by politicized governments and major commercial enterprises, or protest is criminalized, or, where increasingly, since the advent of new technology, precarious labor arrangements are used to protect profitability.

The labor system racism is not disregarded either. The capitalist split and racial division within the working class due to the racial segregation at the camps is evident with the racial pecking order in the camp where white laborers prevail over colored workers,

such as Black and Latino. A bit indirectly, Steinbeck shows how the problem of racial injustice is one of class suppression so that the oppressed could not unite their efforts against the struggle. The character of the Dust Bowl and the human price shown by Steinbeck are still relevant. Automation and privatization of land, overflow of labor, and institutional violence, which expelled the Joads, are still manifesting themselves in the labor crises of the present day. Accommodating the growth of the gig economy, not secured in terms of employment, health insurance, or adequate pay, is similar to the day laborers depicted by Steinbeck in his work as insecure. In much of the globe, the working conditions of agricultural laborers remain unfavorable, the wages are meager, and the working processes are exploitative in nature, and some of these are under corporate farms, which resemble the structures of oppression that were captured by Steinbeck in 1939.

CONTEMPORARY LABOR CRISES: PRECARIETY AND GIG WORK

The current international workforce demonstrates variations of traditional class relationships. The exploration of modern aspects of labor, which include uncertain employment, together with online apps, and widespread population shifts. The academic community identifies two crucial concepts related to work instability. (White, 2018) Together with other analysts, note that the post-war period's employment stability was not the norm since uncertainty remained the dominant feature throughout capitalism's historical development. The "gig economy" perpetuates this precariousness. The workers of Uber, Lyft, and Deliveroo receive no benefits because their companies classify them as independent contractors. (Klein, 2019) explains that these independent contractor myths trap workers into broken contractual arrangements. The technology platforms subject drivers to severe conditions because they provide no promised hours and use secret rating systems to deactivate drivers and limit expense reimbursements. Workers engage in brief task competitions that mimic the frantic work competition among Dust Bowl migrants who sought harvest wages. Modern Marxist critics argue precarious workers do not create a unified class structure since they exist as different socially divided subgroups inside the worldwide working population. The concept of precariat proposed by Standing (2011) failed to define this situation, while critics state that capitalists purposefully break down worker unity through such segmentation. The Joad family shows a clear family unity through their shared battles despite their informal social status in the novel. The modern employment system separates workers who perform gigs because they do not share any common physical workspace. Working class collectivism exists through delivery driver walkouts and digital support systems, and court decisions that grant employee status (such as UK and Californian rulings). The atomized nature of modern conflict between workers and capital continues to use the exact "labor against capital" framework.

Gig economy operations serve as a modern technique for capitalist control since the contemporary labor model demonstrates capital's constant hunt for excess employment. Platforms generate value through their role in labor intermediation by retaining parts of the earnings that belong to drivers who use their vehicles for work. The implementation of this system duplicates the fundamental principles that Marx defined in his analysis of technology as capital. The novel portrays Steinbeck's tractors to have replaced farmworkers in a parallel fashion to how current algorithms both distribute work assignments and monitor employee activity. According to Marx, the functioning of machinery creates situations where workers become unnecessary and act as a hostile force against them. The modern platforms resembling gig work enable employers to maintain control by creating an on-demand flexible workforce that can be easily replaced. Due to the speed of

technological change, the deregulation of labor, and the globalization of the economy, class relationships in the contemporary global labor system have continued to take new forms. The so-called gig economy has become a characteristic framework that characterizes labor precarity in recent decades. Such a system provides jobs that are digitally mediated and flexible; however, it lacks long-term security, collective bargaining rights, and benefits. The outcome is a disintegrated working population exposed to circumstances that are much more akin to the dust bowl migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a cutthroat struggle to survive that is perpetrated through the systematic exploitation.

The so-called post-war stable employment reality was rather an outlier, according to White (2018) and others in the field of labor studies. Security has never been a fundamental premise of capitalism, but precarity has. Such ambiguity has been compounded by the emergence of app-based labour platforms like Uber, Lyft, and Deliveroo. Such firms categorically define workers as independent contractors and thus avoid the costs of health insurance, paid leaves, and employment security. This is a mythical contract that favors capital at the expense of workers because, as Klein (2019) reveals, it is a mythical classification. The current role of algorithms resembles that of managers: they delegate responsibilities, they evaluate performances, and they fire employees based on arbitrary rating factors. This new algorithmic control is a repeat of what took place in the Dust Bowl period. Similarly, as in the present context, workers are being pushed towards the wind. In the same way that mechanical tractors put tenant farmers out of work in the Steinbeck story, the algorithmic systems in use today serve to push workers further out of the labor rights protected by laws and destabilize the employment security system. Platforms are the digital landlords who own nothing of the means of production, but make a profit by exploiting workers who are expected to procure their vehicles, smartphones, gasoline, and data plans.

The desperation of the competition among the gig workers to be hired to perform small amounts of work matches the situation of the Steinbeck migrants of the harvest, who typically far exceeded the reserves of job opportunities. The same thing can be said about the principle of the reserve army of labor, which is already true about Marx today: an abundance of labor makes the capitalist press down wages and be able to substitute workers without much opposition. Gig economy employees are as atomized and secluded as their fraternal ancestors in the Californian fields, and it is harder to organize resistance. This group of insecure workers was given the term *precariat* by Marxist theorist Guy Standing (2011). Nevertheless, it is suggested that the term could not reveal the complexity of the gig work to its fullest extent (proponents). These workers are not united into one class but are still divided based on geographic, platform, ethnic, and legal status. This lack of solidarity is not coincidental; it is an intentional characteristic of capitalism, which staves off solidarity and undermines collective bargaining. By contrast, the Joad family, driven out by the capitalistic system and reduced to poverty still has a common sense of their class identity and as a family, but it serves as sentimental and ideological core of the resistance in the novel. The new gig workers, with no shared physical environment and formal labor relationships, find it hard to develop the same cohesion. There are, however, signs of contemporary collectivism emerging: delivery driver walkouts, app-based courier strikes, legal victories in California and the UK of gig workers being given rights of an employee, and the emerging online mutual aid networks all represent a scaled-back consciousness of common exploitation, but one that is on the rise.

The technological aspects of contemporary work are also comparable to the imagery given by Steinbeck. Technological alienation in *The Grapes of Wrath* was represented by tractors, which were run by the workers who ravaged the land of fellow workers. Algorithms occupy this alienating function in the modern economy: they not only eliminate the role of human management but also depersonalize the labor relations. As Marx noted, the experience of capitalism is less likely to involve the experience of workers as subjects, as the ends of machines, and such tendency makes them less allied with their productivity. The use of platform technologies makes this dynamic even stronger, as workers are reduced to points on a scale in a dashboard, which is not controlled by humans but by code.

The point is that the gig economy is an updated version of the capitalistic thinking: to promote productivity and reduce the load. The outcome is a pool of proletarians who are at the disposal of employers, lack a connection, are cheap, and can be discarded. However, similarly to the visions of Steinbeck in his emergence of a sense of class through mutual suffering, today the gig workers are emerging to express their complaints, question the law definition, and develop new types of labor unity.

GLOBAL LABOR MIGRATION

Labor migration throughout the world today has surpassed the number of Dust Bowl migrants who relocated. Contemporary capitalism functions through the extensive employment of international migrant workers who work at low wages. UN data indicates that by 2023, there were 117 million individuals forced to leave their homes in addition to hundreds of millions who migrated economically. According to Marxist interpretation (Ness, 2024), labor power moves across regions from poor areas to rich areas where workers create capital value at reduced wages. Millions of migrant farmworkers, together with construction workers and service workers, send their remittances back to northern countries. Just like the Dust Bowl migrants who traveled to work farms in *The Grapes of Wrath* time period, there are present-day agricultural workers from Latin America and Southeast Asia employed in Western agriculture. The Okies encountered hostile treatment through both verbal abuse through "Okie" slurs and through violent acts by vigilantes, as described in the novel. Modern migrants encounter both hostility and unfavorable living situations. Migration of labor in the world today is many times more extensive and intricate than the internal displacement that was experienced during the Dust Bowl period. Whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* was all about transnational flows of people within the United States, dominated by the migration of tenant farmers, modern capitalism relies on a mass and complex system of transnational movement of labor in the sense that millions of people cross national borders to secure jobs, usually in insecure and exploited terms. Data provided by the UN shows that, as of 2023, more than 117 million people were displaced forcefully, and hundreds of millions were also migrating voluntarily, under an economic need. This constitutes not just a humanitarian problem but an aspect of structural capitalism in the world. The international flow of work, in a Marxist worldview, as Ness (2024) suggests that is inherent in capital trying to find new cheap labor reserves and surpluses of value anywhere it can properly obtain them. Work is not in a free flow; it is guided, intoxicated, and commonly forced with inequalities. Capital, however, is free to move across borders in pursuit of profit, and workers are left stranded to legal and social insecurity. Unfair allocation of labor value has led, as Marx inferred, to the movement of the Global South workers to rich nations where they are employed at half-rate wages to generate optimum capital accumulation for their employers. The movement of modern migrant labor workers, particularly from Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia,

contributes to the labor-intensive work in agriculture, construction, and domestic work in the Global North, just as the Dust Bowl migrants who are seeking jobs in California fields did. Yet, in contrast to the case with Joads, who lost their home in one and the same nation-state, nowadays migrants frequently pass state borders, which become a spot where they can meet with legal limits, social discrimination, and increased social control. The illegality of their status contributes to their employment condition, as most of them are undocumented (illegal) or bound to employer-sponsored visas, which do not allow them the freedom to protest or to shift.

The Grapes of Wrath represented the discrimination, denying employment, and vigilante violence that the Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath* experienced. Contemporary migrants are also faced with a similar experience- xenophobic rhetoric, poor working conditions, unpaid wages, and unhygienic living conditions. The dismissive word Okie historically acts to perform the same purpose as other anti-immigrant slurs currently do, to dehumanize the laborers and to rationalize their exploitation. Modern sociopolitical rhetoric on migration, as demonstrated by Steinbeck on the basis of language reinforcement of social strength line, creates moral hierarchies of deservingness to continue establishing work division in a capitalist system of labor. Moreover, lots of modern migrants are forced to pay huge rates to labor recruiters or be debt bonded at the moment when they join the labor state with a heavy financial debt. Even the phenomenon of remittances, which so often gets labeled as an indicator of success, is a reminder of a displacement by the system-families torn apart by borders so that their members could economically survive. However, inside this grim structure, there is still resistance and solidarity. Unions in the United States, Canada, and Europe of migrant farmworkers have started to organize in order to get decent pay, legal status, and the improvement of housing. The internet has also enabled migrant laborers to exchange information on punitive bosses and unfavorable conditions, creating a global network of solidarity among laborers across borders.

This is like the philosophical development of Tom Joad and Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, whose individual progress metamorphoses into collective awareness. According to modern manuals such as De (Genova, 2013), "deportability," i.e., the ever-present threat of deportation, is in itself a vehicle of capitalist control, with the benefit of enforcing discipline over transnational labor without needing to rely on direct coercion. In Steinbeck, this control resonates with the police and the guard at the border, who guarantee the security of property rather than people.

Finally, the idea that global labor migration is a divergence from the logic of capitalism is to be revised today: it has become a major component of this very logic. Labor is constrained by race, boundaries, papers, and classes, as capital can be mobile and adaptable to the extent that labor cannot. Though the story of the Dust Bowl migrants that Steinbeck tells about is an early precursor to labor mobility in oppressive circumstances, the vehicles of oppression that drove them have now become more and less visible alike. Nonetheless, the fundamental contradiction holds true, that the movement of labor is required to have access to the life-giving commodities, and in so doing, labor itself is exposed to displacement, exploitation, and marginalization, which occurs in the capitalist production cycle that Marx believed to be central.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The above discussions shed light on major similarities and differences between the 1930s labor upheavals of the Dust Bowl and the 2020s developments of the labor crisis. By

holding these two separate historical eras against one another in their dynamics of classes, migration currents, technological revolutions, and ideological constructs, we can discern a continuity of conflict between labor and capital even as it has been re-composed. Although the economic structures and technologies have evolved, the exploitation of labor by capital, which was the issue essential to Marxism, is still the main concern. In the United States Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, unemployment rose to an average of 25%, and as high in states that were both environmentally and economically battered, like Oklahoma. Combined with environmental degradation and catastrophic drought, and the mechanization of agricultural activities, the traditional tenant farmer occupations ceased to be, and families like the Joads found themselves dislocated. By contrast, in the 2020s, although the official unemployment rates were quite low (at least before the COVID-19 pandemic), the actual crisis took on the forms of underemployment, lack of job security, and the growth of precarious, gig, and freelance employment. As of 202021, about a third of U.S. employees were involved in nontraditional employment schemes, which may lack benefits, legal coverage, and other forms of future security. Big changes have also occurred in migration patterns. The response that Americans adopted in the 1930s was one of internal migration with displaced workers, who were termed as the Okies, moving westward to find subsistence wages. Migration has now become a fundamentally global process, and 281 million international migrants and 117 million forcibly displaced persons are recorded as of 2023. These new immigrants, similar to the Joads, are motivated by economic inequalities, environmental dislocation, violence, and failing farmlands. However, they need to contend with border regimes, immigration enforcement, and systemic legal precarity, in addition to the Dust Bowl migrants, particularly, in the Global North.

Relations in labor during the Great Depression were informal and disintegrated. Both banks and agribusiness corporations fought against tenant farmers, many of them going through a scenario that *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts, and there was minimal union backing. Also uncommon and suppressed were strikes and collective actions. Similar issues are also experienced by the modern tech and platform-based workforces today, as indicated by (Cant, 2020) and (Scholz, 2017), who explain how they struggle with algorithmic control and data-driven surveillance in places that lack human managers and are instead run by digital systems. The end effect is a highly fragmented workforce in terms of platform, nationalities, and legal notions of employment, which makes it much harder to unionize through the traditional organizing that used to be the standard. Labor restructuring in both periods has been facilitated by the application of technological innovation. The mechanization of the countryside in the 1930s with tractors and the combine harvester made much of the work of the agricultural labor force redundant, displacing it into insecure urban and industrial employment. This is a new age of labor-replacing technologies that has arrived in the 2020s as a result of the combination of AI and machine learning with the digitalization of the economy, no longer restricted to farming or factory work, but applying now to clerical, creative, and service labour too. Machineries and automation, as per Marx (1990), are not impartial activities but, in the camouflage of capitalism, they have become a means to cater to the interest of capital by demoting human labor and dominating workers.

With the changes taking place in technology, there are specific changes in ideology. Under the New Deal politics, the Dust Bowl period encouraged a vision of a self-reliance-cum-social welfare. The aspect of the state step to save the economy and workers at least

partially appeared. On the other hand, the 2020s are ruled by the ideology of neoliberalism, putting an accent on deregulation, privatization, and flexible entrepreneurship. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism provides corporate interests at the expense of collective support structures, resulting in an individualized, competitive, and economically vulnerable workforce.

Such ideological and structural impediments are expressed in resistance movements of the two eras. Tom Joad, the character created by Steinbeck in the 1930s, was the act of giving birth to the class consciousness as he changed into a unit of collective struggle, and he was once a lonely laborer. Industrial working-class mass action, unionization, and labor organization were associated with working-class solidarity. On the contrary, modern labor resistance is dispersed and mediated by computers. Gig workers tend to form networks online based on a forum, social media, or even through impromptu strikes and not conventional unions. Although such initiatives are effective, they are limited significantly by ambiguity in their contracts, unavailability of physical workplaces, and the intensive corporate support to thwart labor rights laws (Marx, 1990; Eagleton, 2011).

Still, there is continuity between these epochs. The two are revelatory of the manner in which a capitalist system during crisis or change reconstructs labor in a manner that maintains elite powers and further exploitation. The Dust Bowl population was not only displaced and humiliated, but it also left seeds of group resistance and a sense of social consciousness. There is a collection of new terrains of instability of modern gig workers, economic migrant workers, and freelance professionals, though their experiences also serve as the seeds of renewed discussions of labor justice, management, and international solidarity. More plainly, the comparative analysis confirms that the nature of exploitation, although it has changed, has its origins in the tools they use, e.g., the tractor gives way to the algorithm, bank to platform, the traction against the worker between capital and labor remains. Marxist criticism does not simply seek to trace these changes but to render visible the common continuities of resistance, alienation, and possibility that cross-cut both past and present crises of labor.

CONCLUSION

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* presents timeless class conflicts from the novel, which remain active in twenty-first-century society through technological change and global capitalist systems. Through his representation of the mechanized displacement that finance capital creates, Steinbeck demonstrated similar economic losses, which current-day platform capitalism alongside automation and deregulated labor markets produce (Steinbeck, 1939; Harvey, 2005; Srnicek, 2017). The pursuit of profit by capitalism throughout the 1930s and the 2020s generates employee disenfranchisement through farm tenant evictions that mirror the modern precarity faced by gig workers and freelancers (Cant, 2020; Scholz, 2017). Through Marxist interpretation, we can see how the economic power depicted as a "monster" in Steinbeck's writing finds its modern equivalent in algorithms and corporate hegemony (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002; Zuboff, 2019). Labor receives diminished value through systematic alienation in both situations while surplus workers exist as disposable resources (Marx, 1867/1990). Issues today, including casual labor employment and computerized management practices alongside climate change migration, demonstrate how structural problems of economic growth forced the Joad family from their home (UNHCR, 2023; Davis, 2006; Federici, 2012). Moreover, the ideological myths have merely transformed form: the myth of the "American Dream" previously used to explain Dust Bowl suffering now serves as the neoliberal idealization of

entrepreneurial freedom and flexibility in the gig economy (Foucault, 2008; Huws, 2016). Throughout these changes, however, the same fundamental contradiction between the relentless drive of capital to maximize surplus and labor's demand for security and dignity persists (Eagleton, 2011; Fleming, 2017). Finally, Steinbeck's portrayal of emerging class consciousness in characters like Tom Joad provides a critical analysis of contemporary labor resistance. While contemporary labor movements are more fragmented and technology-mediated, the demand for solidarity and structural critique is no less urgent (Cant, 2020; Scholz, 2017). This reading underscores that, despite technological differences, scale, and place, capitalism still displaces, exploits, and alienates workers geographically and generationally. Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* through a contemporary Marxist lens not only deepens literary analysis but also illuminates age-old labor crises, and the enduring "wrath" of the displaced becomes evident. When comparing the novel with the modern labor conditions, it is not just the regularity of economic displacement that stands out as belated in the face of what has already occurred, but the sense of collective belonging that both periods can reveal. The story by Steinbeck portrays the insecurities that a lack of land causes, not just in human lives, but through identities as well, and how displacement makes those stranded trudge through these unknown waters, be it geographic, emotional, or political. The contemporary work crises also produce a certain degree of social and existential unmooring when laborers in their improvised mobility between temporary gigs, nations, and even platforms have no real name or home. The result of this comparative analysis, however, is the realization of the human toll of economic systems where labor is considered ubiquitously malleable yet freely disposable. More than that of ideological criticism, the work of Steinbeck provokes moral judgment, an appeal to set labor at the center of social well-being and integrity. Literature, in this sense, may be seen as more than a reflection of structural injustice; rather, it is a substantive projection of culture that can maintain the memory of resistance as well as the potential existence of less unjust futures.

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