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The Grapes of Wrath and Egyptian
Earth: Two Political Novels

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The Grapes of Wrath and Egyptian Earth:
Two Political Novels

Abdel-Moneim Aly

Interest in studying the political perspective of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) has always been shown in previous studies of Steinbeck's work,¹ but no previous study has linked it with A. R. Sharkawi's *Egyptian Earth* (1954), a novel sharing the same theme. This study attempts to compare the two novels from a political perspective. Irving Howe contends that a political novel is:

a novel in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical profit.²

It is a novel in which ideas and ideology take the centre stage in the perspective of observation of the author. Both novels focus on the idea that the loss of land leads to a loss of dignity. The peasant for Sharkawi represents the Egyptian persona and stands for Egypt as a nation and a country. The Oklahoma farm labourers represent the honourable hardworking Americans and offer an 'objective correlative' for the American dream. Both writers upheld ideology over art in their novels. Thus the narrative technique is sacrificed to project ideology. In both works, art is encumbered by and sacrificed to ideology. This study tries to discuss these points and to show how far the two writers presented their material.

A.R. Sharkawi (1920-1987) established his fame with the interest he had in portraying, in his works, the life of the simple Fellahin or the Egyptian peasant workers. His famous novel, *Egyptian Earth (Al-Ardh)*, published in Arabic in 1954 and in an English translation by Desmond Stewart in 1962, is his testimony of such interest. There is much in the novel that could be compared with its American counterpart by John Steinbeck (1902- 1968), his magnum opus, *The Grapes of Wrath* in which he depicted the life of American immigrant farm labourers and their suffering during the depression.

The two novels are read as dealing with some of the political ideas and beliefs of their two authors. One could trace the quality of allusiveness that seems to pervade the former novel. Without suggesting that Sharkawi is a plagiarist this allusiveness means that in reading Sharkawi's novel one is irresistibly reminded of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.³ Both content and form would suggest that Sharkawi took Steinbeck's novel as a model for his work.

Steinbeck was a Popular Frontist when he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*: he railed against the "fascist utilities and banks" running California and was loosely affiliated with the [Communist Party] through the League of American Writers (of which he remained a member after the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact). Linda Wagner-Martin believes that Steinbeck's novel has a communist bias and "advocates communism as a specific political ideology."⁴ A.R. Sharkawi was for long, known to be a committed socialist who upheld the tenets and slogans raised by the Nasserite regime in the aftermath of the 1952 revolt against the monarchic and feudal system in Egypt. He was known to be the spokesman of the oppressed poor classes of Egypt.

For a long time before writing his magnum opus, Steinbeck believed that the only literature worth writing was the blatantly heroic, overlaid with message and sermonistic suggestion. Moreover, American readers of his days were not interested in fictional symbology and allegory. They wanted to see ordinary people like themselves transformed into extraordinary people through the twists of circumstance and event. By 1933, Steinbeck sought a new method, through writing a number of short stories that offered straightforward character studies. This style awakened in him an appreciation for the difference between naturalism and realism. As Thomas Kiernan argues, Steinbeck, "found that he could conceive 'ordinary' characters and transform them into extraordinary – in their own ways, 'heroic' – ones."⁵ That was exactly what Steinbeck tried to do in his major novels, especially, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The two writers go from the personal to the political. Both writers were much concerned with revolutionary ideas related to the fate of the class conflict and what an American critic called "militant humanism". *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about an old system dying and a new one beginning to take place. He wrote to his editor at Viking:

The fascist crowd will try to sabotage this book because it is revolutionary. They try to give it the communist angle. However, the Battle Hymn is American and intensely so... So if both words and music are there the book is keyed into the American scene from the beginning.⁶

Steinbeck predicted a drastic social change. However, this drastic change had never taken place and the revolution he foresaw had never happened. Thus Steinbeck's interest in the political meaning which he takes as a backdrop to his novel drove him to a dual intention as regards the structure and characterization of his novel. Whereas Sharkawi's main interest was to undermine the heavy legacy of the fallen monarchy of Egypt and uphold the tenets of the rising fledgling revolution and its socialist denomination.

Steinbeck tried to convey his socialist and radical views in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He has long advocated the necessity of social change as a maxim for the materialist American ethics. He wrote the novel after having seen the starving Oklahoma migrants in the valleys of California. Thus he acted as a witness to the suffering of the migrant families. As Stephen Railton remarks: "He wrote the novel in the belief to which the trauma of seeing the homeless, wretched families had converted him: that American society had to change, quickly and profoundly."⁷ From the aesthetic point view Steinbeck "would attempt to use the mass migration that had brought [the migrant farmworkers] to California from the Midwest as the vehicle for his subtextual study of group forces and dynamics."⁸

In *Egyptian Earth*, the reference to the political theme is conveyed early in the novel. The young narrator reminds us of Sidki who "ruled Egypt with fire and iron" (*Egyptian Earth*, p. 11). The students' demonstrations in Cairo used to shout "Long Live The Constitution! Freedom! Independence! Down with Sidki and his English masters!" (*Egyptian Earth*, p.11) The villagers have also suffered under the heavy hand of Sidki: "Sheikh Hassouna, the headmaster in the next village's school, had been transferred to a remote part of Egypt because of his support for the Constitution." (*Egyptian Earth*, p. 12) Even the village's "Chief Guard, Waseefa's father, Abu Suweilim, had been dismissed for the same reason." (*Egyptian Earth*, p.12) On the personal level, Waseefa had upheld bourgeois hopes from the start. Her father said earlier that he did not

want her to marry someone from the village. She “had set her mind on marrying someone who wore a *tarboosh*, like her sister’s husband” (*Egyptian Earth*, p. 18). At the end of the novel, Waseefa’s choice of Kassab for a husband may lead to the couple moving to town. This is the only hope possible. They can be seen through to prosperity through work in different workshops and factories. This has an echo in, *The Grapes of Wrath*, in Rose of Sharon’s dream to live in a town “to make it nice for the baby” (*GW*, p. 180).

Steinbeck presents some central motifs in his novel. One such motif is suggested early on in the novel by the sign on the truck in Chapter II. The ‘No Riders’ sign implies for Tom Joad that the “rich bastards” are the opposite of the good guy – that the rich are out to destroy the poor. This is suggested in the dialogue between Tom and the truck driver:

‘Didn’t you see the *No Riders* sticker on the win’ shield?’ ‘Sure – I seen it. But sometimes a guy’ll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker’.⁹

Steinbeck’s novel presents the story of the Joads and Casy together with many interchapters that describe general aspects of the setting. The setting moves from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to the Plains of California. Thus we have the problematic structure that distracts the attention of the reader. Then there is the problem with the narrative voice in the novel. However, as Barbara Foley contends:

The prophetic voice remarking upon the larger context and meaning of the Joads’ experience formulates insights about politics and history considerably more revolutionary than those achieved by even the most left-leaning of the fictional characters. Casy’s intuition that ‘all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of’ ... and Tom’s promise that ‘wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there’...remain within the discourse of a militant humanism.¹⁰

Sharkawi invented a village using his bitter memories and imagination; a village he lived in its labyrinthine and dilapidated alleys and whose peasants he thoroughly knew. In *Egyptian Earth*,

the setting forms an integral part of the action of the story. Sharkawi tries to give a panoramic view of life in Egypt at a certain time and place. The conflict in the novel is principally over the fertile land; the two sides being the feudal system led by the formidable Pasha supported by the tools of Government and the poor peasants of a village in the Nile Delta.

The farmers of Oklahoma are uprooted from their land early in the novel. They head west in the hope of finding another home in California. However, they were disappointed to face a more tragic situation in their search for security. Steinbeck put forward his vision through a subtle recurrent image which is established in the first chapter when the drought and wind in Oklahoma combine to uproot and topple the stalks of corn. This is seen on a larger scale in chapter 29 when the rain and flooding in California "cut out the roots of cottonwoods and [bring] down the trees."

However, Sharkawi failed to offer an unflawed narrative through presenting his young boy narrator at the first and last chapters and reverting to an elder elusive narrator for the major middle part of his novel. It seems that the author suddenly discovered that his child narrator would be incapable of presenting the socialist and ideological views he wanted to convey in his novel. The historical rebellion against Sidki Pasha was primarily led by the liberals who wanted a return to the so-called Charter of 1923. The peasants of the village of Sharkawi were thought of as outsiders to such a movement. Yet Sharkawi made the crux of the conflict in the novel one over land and irrigation laws. However he tried to introduce an agent of the rising bourgeoisie represented by the character of Kassab who arrived at the end of the novel to marry Waseefa.

The incidents of *Egyptian Earth* take place between 1932 and 1933 in the dark years of the reign of King Fuad, when Sidki Pasha, the then Prime Minister of Egypt, ruled over the country from his office in Cairo. In the first part of the story, the narrator puts that to the record:

For at that time Cairo was in a state of continual unrest.... I knew that a man called Sidki ruled Egypt with fire and iron, having first suspended the constitution in the interests of the English soldiers with red faces on the streets of Cairo, to bolster up his authority.¹¹

However, corruption had wreaked havoc even in the heart of the Egyptian countryside. The story is set in an Egyptian village which witnessed a real conflict among the poor peasants who cultivated the land and the opportunist class which exploited them through heavy taxation, laying hand on the land produce, controlling the irrigation times of crops and finally usurping the land from them. The struggle was mostly against the Government cronies for irrigation and protests against election lists with men and women who had long been deceased in some constituencies or objections for vote rigging that brought the Government candidate to Parliament. The struggle of the peasants in *Egyptian Earth* reached its climax when the Pasha asked for a road to be paved leading to his big ranch. This meant that many acres of land belonging to the poor peasants would be confiscated. Through this major crisis the author based his vision of the socialist realism. We know through the main narrative who the author had sided with.

Like his American counterpart, Sharkawi pits the dispossessed community of farmers who were driven from their bits of land against powers that were bigger than themselves. The American dispossessed community is driven from its land by the implacable march of industrial progress. The solutions offered by the two authors for the dilemmas facing their protagonists have similar directions. In order for the Joad family to survive the economic and spiritual displacement they should abandon the selfish materialism which they adhered to in the past. Sharkawi was more direct in offering his solution for the Suweilim family who have been deprived of their small piece of land. Waseefa is going to be married to Kassab who is the representative of the springing working class. Thus she is to be compensated for the loss of land by being one of the promising class of the future.

Sharkawi had a central plot for his novel, which is the story of the conflict of the peasants against the corrupt and treacherous government system. Several other stories were embedded in this main frame. The story of Waseefa and the story of the narrator were just two tales woven into the web of the main plot of the novel. By the same token, the story of the migrating Okies was put in the centre of Steinbeck's novel and had embedded into it other sub-stories such as that of Jim Casy and the Joads.

Steinbeck's work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the displacement of 500,000 small Mid-Western farmers in the 1930s, had been relegated to the sub-literary status of protest novel. Early on in the novel, we are made to believe that the rich are out to destroy the poor. Thus the tone is set for the episodes with the landowners both in

Oklahoma and California. Protest in the novel is undertaken by the two major male characters. Tom Joad and Jim Casy. Tom has just been discharged from prison on parole after serving four years in prison of his seven-year sentence for manslaughter. This has been his protest against the civil establishment. Jim Casy has lost his calling to be a preacher. He gives his reasons for this as he has realised that there "ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue" and that man needs to live and doesn't need preaching because just living is holy. In a sense, this was his protest against the religious establishment.

In many of his novels, his characters show signs of quiet dignity and courage for which Steinbeck has a great admiration. For instance, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he describes the unremitting struggle of the people who depend on the soil for their livelihood. This novel is probably his greatest success because he was able to combine these two ideas into one story: the never-ending struggle to survive and care for those dear to the 'Okies. As each character involved in the situation reacts, we are able to see Steinbeck's respect for the poor shining through. The 'never say die' efforts of Uncle John to stop the rising flood water is one example of Steinbeck's unremitting struggle theme. The constant effort of the entire Joad family to find work, though they are poor, oppressed and hungry, shows us that Steinbeck wants to stress their tremendous courage and dignity. The journey of the Joads has its ups and downs. Migrants are not always received with open arms; they are persecuted and looked upon as not even human. For them the promised land becomes the land of despair.

Essentially, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel of social protest. It was designed to inform the public of the migrant's plight. It is a plea for the land owners of California and the banks in the dust bowl states to be more tolerant. It shows how the migrants were made to starve by the California land owners and banks just so they could turn a profit. It shows many of the methods that they used to cheat the migrants out of their money and keep them from organizing their ranks to battle circumstances together.

To make his novel effective he has two different basic stories, one of the individual journey of the Joad family, and one for telling the general plight of the migrants. He shows the individual family to show that the migrants are really people and to bring their plight home to the reader. He tells the general story to show how it is affecting large numbers of people. He trades off each chapter, having one chapter telling the story of the Joads, and then the next talking about the migrants. He defeats the myth about Okies. The myth is as a

service station attendant puts it, "They ain't human." On the contrary, the Joads are probably the most humane people in the whole novel.

As the plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* progresses, the Joads proceed from self-interest to a concern for all the people in the world. This is accompanied by the disintegration of the smaller family unit which is replaced by the larger world family of the migrant people. This is emulated in Sharkawi's novel where we witness the disintegration of the Suweilim family with the imprisonment and death of the father. This was retrieved by the marriage of Waseefa at the end of the novel and the hope for her future happiness with her working husband.

The two novels diverge on one important issue. Each novel reflects on the social milieu of its characters. Tom Joad is just out of prison and a product of American ethics acquired in jail. He is violent, intolerant, quick in his response to danger and hard to control. Tom seems to have a noticeable lack of guilt or shame. As the action of the novel starts, we find out that four years ago, he had been involved in a fight with a man who knifed him. Trying to protect himself, he hit the man with a shovel and killed him. He spent four years in jail. When the Joads immigrated to California, he got infuriated when Casy was killed and so murdered one of the men who had killed Casy. For the rest of the story he lives in hiding.

In Sharkawi's novel, Abdul Hadi is the actual protagonist of the novel and is the counterpart of Tom Joad. Abdul Hadi is a product of the tolerant, stable and civilized Egyptian rural society. Abdul Hadi was dragged in a fight with Diab over watering their fields. Yet when a bigger danger threatens a poor helpless woman whose buffalo fell into the waterwheel pit, Abdul Hadi abandoned his fight and went to haul the animal and save it from drowning. In this he suppressed his anger for the sake of upholding his sublime code of ethics. He seems to have a deeply rooted sense of guilt and shame. That is manifest in the end of the quarrel especially in Abdul Hadi's feelings toward Diab. In fact, Abdul Hadi's anger at Diab's attempt to steal the water raised by the former from the water wheel was politically motivated. As Abdul Hadi questions:

Did Diab want to do with him what the Pasha had done with the village? For the Pasha's land too, was alongside the river, which gave him the right, he considered taking the village's water for himself. But a Pasha was ... a Pasha. Behind him, in the neighbouring town, stood the ranks of

those capable of sending men to prison.
... Why was Diab stealing his water ...
like the Pasha? Without permission?
(*Egyptian Earth*, p. 117)

Abdul-Hadi's anger is intrinsically directed at the Pasha and what he stands for. His fight with Diab is on outpouring with his long concealed hatred to the system and that is clear at the end of this episode when the two antagonists unite in saving the Massoud buffalo, or when they face a common catastrophe. Furthermore, the episode of saving the buffalo emphasises an important theme; that is, the theme of consolation in human solidarity. This is a repeated theme in *The Grapes of Wrath* as Steinbeck describes the attempts of the farmers to console each other after the long day's trek:

In the evening a strange thing happened:
the twenty families became one family,
the children were the children of all. The
loss of home became one loss, and the
golden time in the West was one dream.
And it might be that a sick child threw
despair into the hearts of twenty families,
of a hundred people In the evening,
sitting about the fires, the twenty were
one. They grew to be units of the
evenings and the nights. (*GW*, pp.177-8)

This is an obvious example of Steinbeck's belief in the necessity of the conversion of American society in a form of a commune under some type of law and order.

Another instance is the materialist, opportunistic attitude of some of the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* which is opposed by the disinterested and integrated position of the characters in *Egyptian Earth*. In the former, during the dilemma of the exodus of the Okies through Highway 66, we are told that: "Two hundred and fifty thousand people over the road. Fifty thousand old cars – wounded, steaming. Wrecks along the road, abandoned. Well, what happened to them?" (*GW*, p.111). Many of them fall victim to opportunist spare parts retailers. One retailer who tried to steal a customer's four dollars for a busted tire, addresses him in a typically business-like manner saying:

Take it or leave it. I ain't in business for my health. I'm here a-sellin' tires. I ain't givin' 'em away. I can't help what happens to you. I got to think what happens to me. (*GW*, p. 110)

Another example is the behaviour of Connie who is married to Rose of Sharon and who deserted her because he has no faith in the family's struggles to reach California. As Howard Levant writes: "His faith is absorbed in the values of "the Bank", in getting on, in money, in any abstract goal."¹² The process of driving the peasants off their land is succinctly revealed by the narrator. Pa Joad borrowed money from the bank and the bank took the land for the money. As the narrator tells us: "The land company – that's the bank when it has the land – wants tractors, not families on the land. ... this tractor does two things – it turns the land and turns us off the land." (*GW*, p. 138)

In *Egyptian Earth*, Sharkawi adheres to the Oriental Egyptian code of ethics. Kassab, the shoemaker who comes to the village towards the end of the novel and proposes to Waseefa, represents the values that Sharkawi is inculcating. Kassab's marriage proposal points to the moral survival of family values and measures its human expense. Kassab represents the new working class which is springing in the society with new values. He settles down with his wife and blows fresh wind to the sails of the family boat and gives a new hope to poor Waseefa.

However, there is a point of agreement that is commonly shared by both novels, that is, what could be termed 'the group concept'. Tom Joad has a great desire to join in with his family in its search for subsistence in California. He tries hard to defend the family interests. This parallels his mystical union or identification with the group. The final scene, in which Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a sick man is allegorically a part of that "group concept". It reveals her part in being a part of the group and the writer's intention that his characters had transformed from the grapes of wrath to the milk of human kindness. The novel's ending with Rose of Sharon's life-giving sign indicates the sense of optimism and the real power of brotherhood.¹³

There are various incidents in *Egyptian Earth* that shed light on the characters' adherence to 'the group concept'. That is very clear when Mohamed Abu Suweilim, Abdul Hadi and others were incarcerated as a result of their protest for the confiscation of their

land. Their protest springs, indeed, not from self-interest but to stop the unjust government men from taking the land of the village. The attitude of the villagers and their reaction to the imprisonment of Abu Suweilim and Abdul Hadi is also part of 'the group concept'.

Abdul Hadi's sentiments toward Diab after saving the endangered buffalo also reveals the fact that he as well as many of the characters in the novel are too much filled with the milk of human kindness rather than spite and hate.

The two novels share a common feature that each one of them could be called an epic narrative. Both novels express social despair and political indignation. Malcolm Bradbury wrote that two myths govern Steinbeck's book: "One is that of hopeful American westering, seen as the journey from bondage to the promised land; the other is of heroic evolution, mankind's vital journey from solitude to selfhood in community."¹⁴ The Joads family progress from aridity in Oklahoma to fertility and promised hope in California. However, they encounter much trouble and frustration and the novel end in despair engulfing the family with the floods.

Sharkawi's *Egyptian Earth* too is a story about the Abu Suweilim family that consists of the once Chief Guard of the village, his ripping daughter who turns the heads of all the young men in the neighbourhood and her cousin Abdul Hadi. However, Sharkawi's technique is more direct and simpler than the one followed by Steinbeck. As the novel starts, the Suweilims are quite happy; yet soon enough disaster struck their life as well as that of the villagers. The confiscation of their land for the construction of the road leading to the village (Pasha) or yeoman has endangered their livelihood and deprived them of their land. Abu Suweilim himself lost his job and was put in jail to be released later on and die defending his land. However, Waseefa who lost her father and the village suitors, is compensated at the end by marrying Kassab.

Through the eyes of the child narrator at the beginning of the novel, the characters of Waseefa and himself are given legendary qualities. They are seen as figures who are larger than life for the group of children who represent the audience. The narrator who is educated in Cairo could read and write, "say a few sentences in English, or joke in English". Waseefa could swim in the river:

She alone could climb the mulberry tree
and shake it so that we could eat the fruit;
she alone could make necklaces from
berries; and alone climbed Abdul Hadi's
frighteningly high sycamore, to come

down with a handful of fruit She would answer back any man who shouted at us when we played; if necessary she would insult them too.

(*Egyptian Earth*, p. 2)

Thus Waseefa has always towered over the smaller boys who even "examined her body with interest". She is here described as one of the Greek or ancient Egyptian goddesses in that she is different from everyone else; she is also more beautiful and daring. She could narrate to the small children what happened in her sister's wedding and "left out not a single detail". She even suggested that the children play "at weddings" or the wedding game, with herself as the bride and the child narrator as bridegroom and another girl as midwife. But the game did not reach its climax and was interrupted by the village *mufti*, the preacher of the mosque. The children had to collect themselves and run away but Waseefa and her mock bridegroom were taken by surprise. She was caught half-naked and the players were all undressed ready for the game; yet when the *mufti* threatened them, Waseefa was undeterred. She would shout back at the angry sheikh and refute his denunciation.

Waseefa is portrayed from the start as a girl of exceptional qualities. Even as a little girl she is depicted as a precocious girl who knows about the facts of life more than the other children. She is proud of her father's job as Chief Guard of the village. As a grown up girl she keeps her sense of dignity; yet she looks at the notion of love not as a romance but as something governed by the surrounding circumstances of the village life. She has lived for sometime with her sister who was married in the neighbouring town, and she always dreams of pursuing her own life in town. She even wears a coloured dress as a sign of being different from her peers. She is quite happy with the love of Abdul Hadi who is the village hero. However, she looks forward to marrying Mohamed Effendi, the closest villager to a townsman. We are told that:

Waseefa liked Abdul Hadi as he was the only person who could reconcile her sister with her with her husband when a quarrel broke out between them. And she knew perfectly well that he wanted to marry her, but she could not decide what she felt. She had set her mind on marrying someone who wore a *tarboosh*, like her sister's husband.

(*Egyptian Earth*, p.18)

She loves bonhomie and the easy life associated with the life of townspeople. She is ready to have an affair with the child narrator who promised to give her a bottle of perfume and because of his city connections. She is very happy when he gives her a ten-piastre coin. She is always worried about her living standard and the grim reality of village life. She always brags of the half-acre of land owned by her father and always looks down on those who own no land. However, when her father lost his property and is completely broke, Waseefa loses everything including her cherished dignity and she is satisfied with Kassab, the ex-cab driver in town.

The village of Sharkawi, which is the setting of the action and the Dust Bowl and the plains of California, are also similar to the settings of the epics. The setting in both novels play a major role in directing the fate of the characters. As A.T. Badr opines in his book, *The Novelist and Earth (Al-Ruwa 'ie wal-Ardh)*, that:

Sharkawi's village is neither submissive nor pliant, neither dead nor surrendering and waiting for its destiny. ... It moves automatically, acts, stands to its problems and tries to find solutions for them. Its people are no succumbing animals for sale and slaughter, nor are they merely models of ignorance, or rootless figures fighting windmills. They are real people facing real problems ... of flesh and blood, with their own identities, who love and hate, long for and dream of a better future, struggle and come out either defeated or victorious.¹⁵

These people would never let their land perish by thirst or by being turned into a road leading to the Pasha's palace. For instance, we know of Abdul Hadi's association with the earth or the piece of land he owns in the village:

The earth itself seemed to him a symbol of strength of that which will endure forever, and of honour! In all the night there was nothing to see. And yet he knew it all, he knew every inch of it, every detail. This land was his own life and his own history.

(*Egyptian Earth*, p. 40)

The significance of this passage is enhanced later on through the relationship between Abdul Hadi's dead father and the land. Such a link is inherited from father to son and to grandson. In both *Egyptian Earth* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, land has taken the form of Fate that strictly controls the lives of characters. Once a character has lost his/her land or is deprived of it, he/she consequently loses his honour, even though he was evicted from the land by force. In Sharkawi's novel, the poor *fellahin* were evicted from their land so that the despotic Pasha has a road leading to his mansion. In Steinbeck's book, the Okies were evicted for the 'bank' wanted the land. Their relation with the land was akin to the fetus and the umbilical cord. This is manifested in Granpa's sense of belonging to the land. Granpa has rejected the idea of being evicted from his land and resisted his family's efforts to take him away. When they cajoled him away, he did not stay alive for long; he died not far from his native Oklahoma, the land that he felt a part of. Casy summed up Granpa's link with his land: "Grampa an' the old place, they was jus' the same thing. ... He died the minute you took 'im off the place. ... He was that place, an' he knowed it.... He's jus' stayin' with the lan'. He couldn't leave it." (*GW*, p. 134)

In the Egyptian novel, land is equated with honour. Those who don't have land, have no sense of honour and are either prostitutes or pariahs of the society. Khadra has no land so she has no choice but to unashamedly sell her body even for a meal. Alwani, the poor Bedouin, who owned nothing and had no relations in the village, is in the same boat with Khadra. He, too, had no sense of shame or honour. Abdul Hadi sums this up: "Alwani and Khadra were of the same kind, both should consort together.... Both lived in the village without property or family." (*Egyptian Earth*, p. 39). Thus when Khadra was murdered and thrown into a ditch, no one wanted her body to be buried in their

tombs. The Omda too did not care to launch an inquiry into her murder case.

Abu Suweilim, Waseefa's father plays the role of both father figure and initiator of action. He controls Waseefa's as well as Abdul Hadi's reactions towards the important incidents. He goes to jail for being the apparent leader of dissent against the government decisions. This is seen in his words to Abdul Hadi at the beginning of the crisis over water rations. Speaking of the government men he says:

They'll take the water from us, will they?
We know for whose benefit! What a
black day this has been. ... First they take
away my position as Chief Guard, and we
are silent. ... Then they send Sheikh
Hassouna to the other end of Egypt, and
we say nothing. ... And now they will let
our crops die of thirst, and what do we
do? Have we become so impotent that
they can do with us whatever they like?

(*Egyptian Earth*, p. 53)

Yet when the government confiscates his land, he collapses despite his past history of struggle. He loses his dignity and seems ready to accept anything. He even accepts the collapse of his moral principles; and when his daughter Waseefa has lost her pride all of a sudden, her father accepts her marriage to an old man, Kassab, who is a stranger to the village. This change of behaviour on the part of the characters seems odd. The author imposes it on the action of the play, as it seems, for upholding the principles of political change. He is giving two cheers for the socialist tenets of the revolution and the new rising working class. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud considers this as a kind of agreement with Sharkawi's ideological planning of his characters.¹⁶

Sheikh Shinawi, the village *mufti* is portrayed according to the same lines of his counterpart in the American novel, Jim Casy; yet he plays a different role in the story. Sheikh Shinawi is the one who surprises Waseefa and the narrator playing at marriages. He invokes on them the wrath of God and the laws of adultery and fornication, though he knew pretty well that they were under age and had no idea what they were doing. Sheikh Shinawi is an opportunist who fools the poor peasants into signing a petition to the Prime Minister in Cairo though he has not read it. He agrees to be a tool of the government for a cheap price. Just as Khadra sells her body even in return for a cucumber, Shinawi sells his word and wishes that Allah protect him

from condemning the government for siding with the rich landowner, the Pasha.¹⁷

Both novels have an abrupt ending. Steinbeck ended his novel quite suddenly with a scene in which Rose of Sharon, after undergoing a still birth feeds a starved and dying man, a stranger, from her breast. The symbolism is powerful, but it is arbitrary in relation to the previous narrative. However, the ending caused a furore with the reading public. Steinbeck's editors at Viking were the first readers to object to the ending. Steinbeck defended the ending in a letter to his publisher in January 1939:

I am sorry, but I cannot change that ending. ... If there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, it must be quick. To build this stranger into the structure of the book, would be to warp the whole meaning. ... The fact that the Joads don't know him, don't care about him have no ties to him – that is the emphasis. The giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread.¹⁸

Steinbeck considered the act of feeding as a part of the novel's 'balance'. Though strange in itself it is one feature of Steinbeck's faith in selflessness as the one means by which men and women can transcend their circumstances in an unjust society. Commenting on the political quality of Steinbeck's novel Linda Wagner-Martin writes:

Steinbeck's fiction was political in that it had a clear message about inequalities, about hardship among people who had – often through no fault of their own – become the victims of the depression.¹⁹

The ending of *Egyptian Earth* is, in a sense, politically motivated. Kassab, who comes into the action as the *deus ex machina* in Greek drama, solves the economic and social problems of Waseefa. He is also a representative of the new emerging working class. He also stands for the hope that Sharkawi has in the socialist denominations of the Egyptian revolution which preached equality and social justice for all citizens of Egypt.

To conclude, both Sharkawi and Steinbeck in *Egyptian Earth* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have tried to convey their political beliefs and attempted to write two political novels which some critics called 'novels of protest' or 'novels of purpose'. The purpose of course was to record the political change that took place in Egypt after the July 1952 revolution in Egypt and to effect a social revolution in the USA though with no success. Both protest the lot of the poor in modern Egypt and America and both have valuable corrections and changes to suggest. However, Steinbeck failed to change the system in America. His novel as well as Sharkawi's offer answers for their adherence to the brand of politics which is the politics of consciousness.

NOTES

- ¹ Though most Steinbeck scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s seems to refute political reading of his work, which was a necessary project forty years ago, recent studies have reconsidered the political perspective of most of Steinbeck's works, especially, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The notable scholar W. French has advocated the apolitical nature of Steinbeck's works; see his *John Steinbeck*, NY.: Grossett & Dunlap, 1961; also his *The Social Novel at the End of an Era*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. P., 1966, and also his "John Steinbeck," in *The Politics of Twentieth Century Novelists*, George A. Panichas (ed.), NY.: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1971, 296-306; Sylvia Jenkins Cook, "Steinbeck, the People, the Party," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *American Fiction 1914-1945*, NY.: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, 347-359; Thomas G. Evans, "Impersonal Dilemmas: The Collision of Modernist and Popular Traditions in Two Political Novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Ragtime*," *South Atlantic Review*, 1987 Jan., 52: 1, 71-85; Cliff Lewis and Carroll Britch, eds., *Rediscovering Steinbeck: Revisionist Views of His Art, Politics and Intellect. Studies in American Literature* 3, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P., 1989; David Minter, "The Search for Shared Purpose: Struggle on the Left," *A Cultural History of the American Novel*, Cambridge UP, 1994, 181-195.
- ² Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, Greenwich, Conn. : Fawcett Publications Inc., 1967, p. 19; Howe's book was originally published by First Horizon Press, 1957.
- ³ Abdul- Rahman Al-Sharkawi's interest in American life and literature is emphasised further by his writing of other works that have American related subjects. His book of poems, entitled *From an Egyptian Father to President Truman* (1957), *The Statue of Liberty* (1967) a one-act play, and *A Letter to [Lyndon B.] Johnson* (1967) a book of essays, were published in Arabic but not translated into English yet, show such interest. All these works deal with political themes that question the American policy towards the Middle East.
- ⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Modern American Novel 1915-1945*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990, p. 117.
- ⁵ Thomas Keirnan, *The Intricate Music: A Biography of John Steinbeck*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979) p 182.
- ⁶ Quoted in Stephen Railton, "Pilgrims' Politics: Steinbeck's Art of Conversion", in David Wyatt (ed.) *New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 28.
- ⁷ Stephen Railton, "Pilgrims' Politics: Steinbeck's Art of Conversion", pp. 44-45.
- ⁸ Kerinan, Op. cit., p. 225.
- ⁹ Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (1939), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951, 1968, p. 10. Further references to the novel will be taken from this edition and will be cited in the text.
- ¹⁰ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 1993) p. 417.
- ¹¹ A. R. Sharkawi, *Egyptian Earth. (Al-Ardh)*, 1954, Tr. Desmond Stewart, London: Heinemann, 1964, p. 11. Further references to the novel will be cited in the text.
- ¹² Howard Levant, "The Fully Matured Art", in *John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 26.
- ¹³ Despite the fact that many critics have emphasised the abruptness of this ending and that Steinbeck had manipulated the incidents, yet one should take Rose of Sharon's move at its face value.
- ¹⁴ Maloccolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, p. 141.

- ¹⁵ Abdul-Mohsen Taha Badr, *The Novelist and Earth (Al-Ruwa'ie wal-Ardh)*, Cairo: Dar Al-Maaref, (1971); 3rd ed. 1983. pp.134-5. (In Arabic, translation mine).
- ¹⁶ See Fatma Moussa(-Mahmoud). *On The Contemporary Arabic Novel*, Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, p. 193. (In Arabic).
- ¹⁷ See Amina Rachide, "Novels about Earth: Value and the Relation between Time and Place." *Fusul: Journal of Literary Criticism (Literature and Ideology - Part Two)*, Vol. V, No. iv (July-August-September 1985), p. 208.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Keirnan, p.233.
- ¹⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Modern American Novel 1915-1945*, p. 117.

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