



***CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH: THE CULTURAL
UNIVERSALITY OF TRAGEDY FOLLOWING IMPROVISATION IN A SCENE OF
(ECONOMIC) CONSTRAINT***

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Abstract

On the surface level the two stories seem like chalk and cheese, not worth comparing; what could one Zulu man's quest for his son in Johannesburg and one American family's quest for survival in California have in common? However, if one looks closely, one will identify certain common themes which shouldn't go unnoticed, especially if one sees the two novels in light of Paton's remark: "I read for the first time John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and would soon adopt his style of rendering conversations, indicating by a preliminary dash that a speech was about to begin, and omitting all inverted commas. The novel made a deep impression on me..." (*Towards the Mountain*, Part I of his two-part autobiography, 1980).

Through a comparison of the thematic and technical similarities in the two works, I hope to prove that there are no cultural boundaries, no cultural specifics, to what follows from people's reactions to their dire economic circumstances. Indeed, tragedy and death/ suffering are the only inevitabilities of improvisation in a scene of (economic) constraint.



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Injustice of the Social System

Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry and the Beloved Country* expose an unjust social situation by integrating and intertwining narrative fiction and history. With *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is the unfairness of the Great Depression and the land ownership takeovers to the poor of Oklahoma. The Joads are forced to leave their home in Oklahoma for California as a result of a land ownership takeover and have little to no financial security that is required for such an endeavour. In *Cry and the Beloved Country*, on the other hand, it is the unfairness of the apartheid regime and general prejudice to the blacks of South Africa. It is poverty and destitution that drives Absalom Kumalo to go from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg in search of employment, to fall in to bad company and be driven to stealing and murdering in the desperation to make ends meet.

Motif of the Journey

Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* are based on a journey, the journey in either case begins at one end of a barren agricultural landscape and at the other end is the promise of a better future which once reached only proves to be a mirage. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads leave barren Oklahoma in search of sunny California to better their economic prospects. However they soon find themselves shunting from the Government camp to the peach camp and to the cotton camp with little to no work, barely being able to make ends meet.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, it is Absalom who journeys from the rural Ndotsheni, Ixopo to lucrative Sophia Town, Johannesburg in search of employment and better economic prospects, much like Gertrude Kumalo, Stephen's sister before him. However, both lose their way in the big city. Gertrude turns to prostitution and Absalom to thievery and murder in their hunt for financial security. Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, Paton's novel shifts some of the onus on to the characters, the paths Gertrude and Absalom choose are of their own volition and virtue or lack of it. With Steinbeck, his characters are purely victims of circumstance.

Inter chapters and Lack of Quotation Marks

Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* have inter chapters. Steinbeck interrupts the main story line, of the Joad family and their journey to California in search of employment, with chapters that describe the landscape and the people in a more general way. Here he gives us an idea of the broader social, cultural and geographical setting. *The Grapes of Wrath* in fact begins with an inter chapter: "TO THE RED COUNTRY and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The

plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks...” Paton, too, gives us chapters of description of the hills of Ixopo and the city of Johannesburg. He too begins with an inter chapter “THERE IS A lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass- covered and rolling, they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carris brooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys in Africa.” The contrast of red and green is what strikes us the most when comparing the two chapters. Chapters 1 of both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* are vivid and full of colour.

The lack of quotation marks in either of the texts also points to a similarity of style. Conversations are often marked with a preliminary dash and no finality to mark the end of a given speech, often merging speech with the general narrative.

The Bible

Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* use parables and instances, in some cases even language drawn from the Bible, in particular the Old Testament and the Book of Exodus. Primarily, the influence of the Bible is seen in the structure of the novel itself, it is built on the idea of a quest. The Joads are seen journeying to their Promised Land, the state of California, which offers not only wealth and employment but a refuge away from the bull dozers that threaten their habitation in Oklahoma.

Stephen Kumalo, on the other hand, is journeying to his Promised Land, Johannesburg, which promises wealth and employment and the return of his son.

The names of the characters, in both the novels, are equally significant in light of the Bible. Jim Casy of *Grapes of Wrath* is not only a preacher (or a former preacher as he likes to call himself) his initials also correspond to those of Jesus Christ.

One of the unusual names in *Cry, the Beloved Country* is Absalom, that of Stephen Kumalo’s son. According to the Bible, Absalom is the son of David. After his sister Tamar was raped by Amnon their half brother, Absalom waited two years then avenged her by sending his servants to murder him at a feast. Absalom fled to Talmai, to his maternal grandfather, King of Geshur. Only three years later, was he fully reinstated in his father’s favour and returned to Jerusalem. Thereafter, he wrested his father’s kingdom from his father. Absalom was killed at the battle of the “Wood of Ephraim”. Caught by his head in the boughs of an Oak while he was riding under it, Joab, the King’s commander, avenged David by killing Absalom. David laments saying “Would to God that I might have died for thee, Absalom, my son, my son!” (Samuel 18:22)

Absalom Kumalo, on the other hand, murders Arthur Jarvis, an innocent and ironically the very man who was fighting to better the situation of the black youth like Absalom.

"Stephen" Kumalo is another significant name. The Stephen in the Bible was a head of the early church. His job was to handle the complaints of the members. A brave man, he became the first Christian martyr when he was stoned to death for his beliefs. The Stephen of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a similar intermediary trying to be the voice for his son Absalom and trying to save him from the consequences of his actions while not condoning what he did. He is also in some way parallel to Jim Casy in that he is an umfundisi (Jim Casy is a preacher) and that he has a cause to which he is devoted, that of the upliftment of the blacks and revival of the land he loves (Jim Casy stays back at the government farm to fight for economic justice by protesting the wage cut). "John" Kumalo is another interesting name. There are two Johns in the Bible. One is John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, a preacher who attracted huge crowds. The other John is an apostle, the quick-tempered son of Zebedee and brother to James, an equally quick-tempered man. Both brothers, originally fishermen, became leaders in the early church. The John of *Cry, the Beloved Country* exhibits some traits of both Johns. He is a powerful preacher like John the Baptist and is quick tempered like John the apostle. "Matthew" Kumalo is the last name with Biblical ties in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The Matthew of the Bible was a tax collector during the time of Jesus. People hated tax collectors for routinely extorting additional money for their own use. Jesus made Matthew an apostle nonetheless. Mathew Kumalo is of course the most hated character in the book as the instigator of the crime against Arthur Jarvis.

"Arthur" Jarvis is a name with particular importance in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Arthur suggests King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and Camelot of the Medieval English Legend. Arthur, like Jesus Christ, had a mission in life and devoted disciples. Arthur Jarvis too has a mission and ironically it is devoted to a life free from apartheid. It is ironic in light of the fact that his murder was instigated by the very people he was trying to save, the blacks.

Imagery of Birth and Death

Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* use imagery centering on birth and death and the idea that death underlies the process of birth or rebirth. Birth and death are themes that find reflection in the theme of the quest. In *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joads seek a new birth with their journey to California. It is the same with Gertrude Kumalo and Absalom Kumalo who seek an escape from the poverty of their home back in Ndotsheni with their journey to

Johannesburg. This theme is given special significance with the birth of a baby, common to both the novels. In *The Grapes of Wrath* it is Rose of Sharon who is expecting for the most part of the novel and who gives birth to a still born in the final chapters. This coupled with the wash out of the dam and rising water levels highlights the tragedy of the dire economic straits that the Joads, in particular, are in, and more generally, that the people of America were in at the time of the Great Depression during the 1920s. With *Cry, the Beloved Country* we have Absalom Kumalo's son who is born to his nameless fiancée, we also have Arthur Jarvis' son who has "a brightness inside him" and who wants to learn Zulu from Stephen Kumalo. Paton peoples his novel with the future generation and therefore renders a more humane, hopeful narrative, despite the death of Absalom at Pretoria and Margaret Jarvis at Ndotsheni. Moreover, the final scene promising that the wronged fathers Stephen and James will work together to rebuild the nation offers more permanence of hope when compared to the hopelessness of Rose of Sharon's selfless act of breast feeding the homeless and starving man in the barn as the waters rage around them.

Conclusion

Truth be told, the title of this essay was inspired by Butler's definition of Gender as "improvisation within a scene of constraint". I have rephrased it to read "improvisation within a scene of economic constraint" My hypothesis is that across cultures nothing productive comes from trying to improvise, or to escape from a scene of economic constraint. There seems to be no satisfactory answer to poverty as provided by either Steinbeck or Paton when the economic conditions of the country do not permit the betterment of the destitute.

Desire and Recognition drive us to search for improvement nonetheless. However, all fail in the process; the Joads fail and so do Gertrude and Absalom. This is because they are victims of their political, economic and social contexts (much like gendered humans are) and it is these that dictate their actions which even though directed to change, these circumstances fall short of doing so by virtue of being victimized by the same circumstances.

Let me qualify this a little; The Joads in Steinbeck's novel try to break out of the cycle of exploitation created by the Great Depression in America by shifting from Oklahoma to California but the fact remains unfairly that in order to be successful at this they need the means and the wherewithal that they are in search of. It is the same with Absalom and Gertrude; they leave Ndotsheni for Sophia Town and Johannesburg to improve their economic circumstances, however, caught in the trap of poverty fail to see that they need not only some means with which

they may improve their means to begin with, but also a more congenial attitude toward their race if they are to succeed. It is a vicious circle of economic constraint that traps the protagonists of both the novels; no amount of improvisation seems to be able to constructively lift them out of their road to their bleak fate.

In some sense they are also conditioned by their political, economic and social circumstances, by the scene of constraint they are born in to. The Joads, for example, are conditioned to be individualistic, being born into an American background; an individualistic culture. Rather than stick together in hard times, the family breaks away, first Connie goes away, then Noah, even the family that befriends them comprising of Wilson and Sairy break away when times get tough and finally even the Wainwrights' relationship with them seems weak with all the initial opposition to the Aggie- Al match. The tragedy of the still born baby and bust dam only heighten the failure of these familial relationships. With Absalom and Gertrude Kumalo, they are more conditioned by their Zulu background and the low expectations of the white community for the blacks; in that sense, their eventual actions (Gertrude turning to prostitution and Absalom to thievery and murder) spell out a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts.

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