

THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Titis Setyabudi

English Department, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta

Email : titissetyabudi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This is an analysis of John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath conducted using structuralism approach. The result shows that the meaning of family in The Grapes of Wrath has two supporting dimensions. First, a family is nuclear family consisting of a father, mother and children. They live as a household and in one house. Sometimes, they consider extended family particularly grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and others. Second, a family is a group of people with same backgrounds and problems. In The Grapes of Wrath, the meaning of family dramatically is gained from their family bond and togetherness at Route 66.

Key words: *Family, Structuralism, The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas tentang analisis novel John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" dengan menggunakan pendekatan Strukturalime. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makna dari keluarga dalam novel "The Grapes of Wrath" mempunyai dua dimensi penunjang. Pertama, sebuah keluarga merupakan inti keluarga yang terdiri dari seorang ayah, ibu dan anak. Mereka hidup dalam sebuah rumah tangga dan dalam satu rumah. Terjadang, mereka mempertimbangkan anggota keluarga yang lebih besar seperti kakek, nenek, paman dan yang lainnya. Kedua, sebuah keluarga merupakan sekelompok orang dengan latar belakang dan masalah yang sama. Dalam novel "The Grapes of Wrath", makna sebuah keluarga secara dramatis diperoleh dari kebersamaan dan ikatan keluarga mereka di Route 66.

Kata Kunci: *Keluarga, Strukturalisme, The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck*

1. Introduction

A family is a small institution within a larger social institution. The family has important role to build the larger institution. From the family, it emerges values that are applied in a society. It also creates leaders of institution such as

social, religion, and nation. Further, some influential ideas toward people will emerge from the present of the family.

The role of family is very important. In Javanese culture, there is a slogan '*mangan ra mangan sing penting ngumpul*'. In other

words, it is better to be united as a family although it is in poverty. There are some definitions of family as follows;

“Family is a social unit, consisting minimally of a married couple and the children that couple may have. Families, as we define them, are as members of a family (particularly the parents and their young children) usually live in a common household and acknowledge certain reciprocal rights and obligation, especially with regard to economic activity.” (Ember, 185)

While in Oxford Advance Learner’s of Current English, a family is “Group of parents and children; group of living things (plants, animals, etc.) or of languages, with common characteristics and a common source.” (308).

Family is something worth that it is deserved to be an idea of creating creative works. Steinbeck wrote his novel inspired by this phenomenon. This is described on one of his novels *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The novel written by Steinbeck tells about a group of migrants represented by Joad family that have to leave their home-land, Oklahoma to California because a great depression and distortion of authority. In fact, the Joads struggle very hard to anticipate the condition; the family keeps staying in togetherness in any situation. At the end, the Joads with the rest of the family still live in a group upon the bitterness.

During the journey, the Joads experiences unexpected moments. First, it is the death of grandpa. He has to leave Oklahoma together with the Joads, although the other members of the family have to force him to go to California. In the journey, the family have to be willing to see a fact that he dies before the Joads reaches California. Grandpa can not be separated from his home land; leaving without his home land means he loses part of his live.

The description is a disaster for America.

Not only physically America collapse but also mentally American people are humiliated. They are forced to be evicted and chased away from their homeland. This is what they have to be experienced unwillingly. This bitter experience is something worthy to be denied. It should be written in unforgettable writing work. Steinbeck realized it and he wrote his novel inspired by this phenomena; to be humiliated and migrants. Peter B. High says that “Steinbeck is really telling the story of a great national tragedy through the experiences of that one family, *The Joad* (1986: 164).

In this research, the writer further studies about the role of a family in case leaving their land. The family with whom should be live happily in their own land are subjected to considerable ridicule from natives. In their previous land, landowners hires them for unfair wages. They have the experience because they can not pay their owe to banks and unfortunately the banks do not care about the hardship of the depression and unsuccessful harvest.

In the *Grapes of Wrath* presents the fact above. The Joad family is exactly like the picture of the hardship. The readers are invited to feel the bitterness of the Joads in detail; one by one occasion. As the example, they must loose members of the family because of the death and while others are leaving for the family because they can not live with the depression.

Further, the banks and the authorities seize their lands for the guarantee. Meanwhile, the government does not protect the people. They neglect the Oklahoma people. The government lets the banks seize their lands, houses, lives and even the future.

The role of the government is never coming to them. So that, the people rethink and redefine about the role of families. The family now defines as more than just a family relationship; parents and children and it is a group of people with common sources and problems. From this, they create their own government

in order to actualize their thoughts and ideas.

To analyze the novel, the writer uses structural analysis toward the novel as a literary work. A novel is structurally built up by the author as a wholeness.

“Karya sastra adalah sebagai fenomena yang memiliki struktur yang saling terkait satu sama lain. Kodrat struktur itu akan bermakna apabila dihubungkan dengan struktur yang lain. Struktur tersebut memiliki bagian yang kompleks, sehingga pemaknaan harus diarahkan kedalam hubungan antar unsur secara keseluruhan. Keseluruhan akan lebih berarti dibanding bagian atau fragmen struktur” (Suwardi. 2003: 49).

In analyzing a literary work, particularly a novel, it does not only examine it as the partial elements such as characters, themes, foreshadowing, and others but also it puts them into one piece and gives new points on the story.

According to that, problems formulation can be identified as;

What is the role of a family in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

The study about *The Grapes of Wrath* has been done by, first, Herawaty's *American Experience in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (1994) interprets and makes clear Steinbeck's vision toward the suffering life of American migrant workers in 1930s through the spirits of American experience such as recasting the myth of the west, Jeffersonian agrarianism, Emersonian transcendentalism as well as Christianity in the form of biblical allusion, as they are reflected in the novel.

Second, Hazairin Eko Prasetyo (1987), a graduate student of American Studies Program, in *Impact of Capitalism on American Society: Reflected in The Great Gatsby for The Upper Class And in The Grapes of Wrath for The Lower Class* describes the

characters and social interactions in both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are typical of the times when they come into existence. He explains further about the danger of capitalism, which is competitive in its nature, in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. This kind of lesson, for instance, gaining wealth and social status on one hand, and dispossessing farmers on the other, certainly has something to do with a particular level of a society's economic and social development. This leads number of rich people compete one another to get the best position in the society and tend to be selfish. Their success directly affects the general society because the poor who become the losers of the competition, in a sense also become the victims.

Studying characters on one character is important in order to reveal what the character reveals. Some aspects will be known as the result of the character's reaction. In this study, the present of sequence between characters and others intrinsic aspects are absolutely important. To do the study, the writer uses a structural approach.

The approach in analyzing *The Grapes of Wrath* is a structural approach. This approach is first introduced by an anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. The root of the approach is linguistic structural Saussure which studies about phenomenon in life such as mystic, ceremony of religion, and some other controversies. The phenomenon is assumed as a system openly to be analysed using the linguistic which stresses on mystic and ceremony of religion as a created sequence from various elements.

Structuralism can be used to analyze everything while it uses a language as its media. Structuralism is appropriate to analyze a literary work as fact it is built from thoroughly language. As its trait which stresses on a sequence of relationship among different elements, it also focuses on a system behind the literary work. In other word, the system will be one of the

structuralism focuses on. The system creates the present of a literary work and it is important.

2. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative method. The data of the research are texts which contain words and phrases or sentences in *The Grapes of Wrath* written by John Steinbeck and published by Penguin Book, Second Edition, 1983.

Other resources concerning with the research are some books that deal with American family, dictionaries in term of finding some definitions of family, and sources related to family matters in general.

The technique of data collection of this research is documentation. Furthermore, the step of doing data collection is reading the novel repeatedly. By doing this, the writer can understand the content of the novel well and other supported sources. Then the collected data are made into a group of categories. Data analysis uses descriptive and literary interpreter by making classifications and categories toward elements of novel structure such as plot, character, setting, point of view, writing style, and tone which build the center theme of the story on the whole.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Family in *the Grapes of Wrath*

This part will reveal the meaning and role of a family in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Here, the meaning and role of the family are discussed on structure analysis which gives a small portion on the background of a literary work. If there is a finding related to the meaning and role of a family, it will be from the novel itself.

It is possible to say that this novel's theme is family is a fort to survive. From hundreds of pages, the word 'family' presents a hundred-fold. There will be one word of family in every five pages. A family is appropriate when it is a theme for the novel. Though, a theme can not

be formulated by presenting the word 'family' repeatedly in a literary work. At least, there is a stress on the word 'family' from its repetition.

3.1.1 The Meaning of Family

The meaning of family in *The Grapes of Wrath* has two supporting dimensions. First, a family is nuclear family, consisting usually a father, mother and children. They live as a household and in one house. Sometimes, they consider extended family particularly grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and others. On chapter eight in the novel, Tom and Casey meet Tom's family. The whole family stays together because the day is the last day for the family live in. They will go to California the next day.

Old Tom laid his hammer gently on the floor and put his nails in his pocket. He swung his leg over the side and dropped lithely to the ground, but once beside his son he seemed embarrassed and strange. "Tommy," he said, "we are goin' to California. But we was gonna write you a letter an' tell you." And he said, incredulously, "But you're back. You can go with us. You can go!" (TGOW: 77)

Second, a family is a group of people with same backgrounds and problems. Concerning with this meaning, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, there are migrant families living together in such areas and in Route 66.

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 was one dream. And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awestruck through the night and filled a hundred

people with the birth- joy in the morning. A family which the night before had been lost and fearful might search its goods to find a present for a new baby. In the evening, sitting about the fires, the twenty were one. They grew to be units of the camps, units of the evenings and the nights. A guitar unwrapped from a blanket and tuned and the songs, which were all of the people, were sung in the nights. Men sang the words, and women hummed the tunes (TGOW: 213).

The word of family has redefined when the migrant families stay together in Route 66. Those families support each other, they live in togetherness and everybody is the member of family. There is no one person alone. They live for helping each other.

3.1.2 The Role of Family

In the novel, the function of family is a place for members of family in getting warmth. Soon after releasing from a jail at the beginning on the novel, Tom firstly goes home. Even though he has to have a ride on a truck, he does it for the reason of the family warmth.

The questions of the driver had the tone of a subtle examination. He seemed to spread nets, to set traps with his questions. "Lookin' for a job?" he asked. "No, my old man got a place, forty acres. He's a cropper, but we been there a long time." (TGOW: 8)

The warmth will be among the family if the members of family know what their role in the family is. Some words even are useless for the definition when each other knows and respects the role in the family. Everybody feels comfort with his or her role.

And then all of a sudden, the family began to ... function. Pa got up and a lighted

another lantern. Noah from a box in the kitchen, brought out the bow-bladed butchering knife and whetted it on a worn little carborundum stone. And he laid the scraper on the chopping block, and the knife beside it. Pa brought two sturdy sticks, each three feet long, and pointed the ends with the ax, and he tied strong ropes, double half-hitched, to the middle of the sticks (TGOW: 113).

Each member of the family with their own role is elucidating a machine with its parts which are running and working together. This is what it is called for the very best and ideal family condition so that the warmth can be reached.

In vice versa, the dream will ruin if there is a big force beyond the family imagination. In fact, the dream built by the Joads and the Oklahoma family is ruined by the disaster of the banks which force them to leave their farmlands. Those families have to replace their dream by moving to California in uncertainty.

The light was sifting rapidly over the land. And the movement of the family stopped. They stood about, reluctant to make the first active move to go. They were afraid, now that the time had come afraid in the same way Grampa was afraid. They saw the shed take shape against the light, and they saw the lanterns pale until they no longer cast their circles of yellow light. The stars went out, few by few, toward the west. And still the family stood about like dream walkers, their eyes focused panoramically, seeing no detail, but the whole dawn, the whole land, the whole texture of the country at once. (TGOW: 123).

The hardship begins soon after the Joads and the other families live as migrants. It also happens to the meaning of family. The role frequently has changed. Noah and Joad leave the

family because they can not anticipate with the depression. Pa Joad as well the children cedes his position as head of the family to Ma during the journey.

The second role of the family is Ma Joad to be important a character of the family. The very bad condition of the Joads creates Ma Joad to be a helper for the family. She becomes the center of the Joads. Without Ma Joad on the family, there is no family bond until the end of the story, "She walked for the family and held her head straight for the family" (13.169).

The big role of Ma Joad toward the family has given a new definition. The Joads still remind themselves that the family bond is important than their individualism whether when they have to leave homes and the farmlands, when the members of family are still complete, and or the whole family of the Joads are in a family ties. They are not like Will Feely who is hired by the authority to destroy farmer's houses with the tractors. He is just thinking about himself. After the fact, people become easily to act individualism.

Ma Joad has a big influence to get the togetherness back. She makes others realize that they can not live alone without helping other people. This is not about a family in short term but it is a family in a large meaning.

The stout woman smiled. "No need to thank. Everybody's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd a give us a han'."

"Yes," Ma said, "we would."

"Or anybody."

"Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do." (TGOW: 491)

The role of Ma Joad who regains the meaning of a family is the closing of the story. This part is very dramatic and has its romantic

view while there is aspect of Steinbeck's realism.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (TGOW: 501-502)

Those families are weak. In the weakness, they realize that they face the same problem whereas the government has abandon them. Referring to the condition, a redefinition of a family emerges. While the new definition is coming, the new role of the new family follows.

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. (TGOW: 213).

This new family encourages a hope for other migrant families, and it will be the third function of the role of the family. The new one becomes an institution with its complexity. Consequently, there are leaders, making new rules, and such supported things. Those equipments are made for protecting their people and the new society.

At first the families were timid in the building and ... tumbling worlds, but gradually the technique of building worlds became their technique. Then leaders emerged, then laws were made, then codes came into being. And as the worlds moved westward they were more complete and better furnished, for their builders were more experienced in building them. (TGOW: 213)

The new institution has a role to accommodate the needs which is trusted onto them as founders. The institution is made based on the same backgrounds and problems in order to solve their problem.

Next, it is impossible to build up the institution without having a leader. In this case, Jim Casey, he tries to give a new definition toward the concept of a holy that an experience about God is here on earth, and among human beings. It is not an imaginary. He uses his capability to organize the migrants.

“Every kid got a turtle some time or other. Nobody can’t keep a turtle though. They work at it and work at it, and at last one day they get out and way they go off somewheres. It’s like me. I wouldn’t take the good of gospel that was just layin’ there to my hand. I got to be pickin’ at it an’ workin’ at it until I got it all tore down. Here I got the sperit sometimes an’ nothin’ to preach about. I got the call to lead the people, an’ no place to lead ‘em.” (TGOW: 29-30)

The institution is described as a miniature of a real government. They know that the real government can not guarantee their live and even can not protect them. In the miniature, they actualize thoughts and ideas. These families need a government. A society is needed to protect and care for the need of people.

The families moved westward, and the technique of building the ... worlds improved so that the people could be safe in their worlds; and the form was so fixed that a family acting in the rules knew it was safe in the rules. (TGOW: 214)

When an organized institution has been made, some contributions of the society are a must to keep the existence of the institution. The strength of it is supported by the contributions of the society. If there is good understanding about it, the institution will run well automatically.

And as the cars moved westward, each member of the family grew into his proper place, grew into his duties; so that each member, old and young, had his place in the car; so that in the weary, hot evenings, when the cars pulled into the camping places, each member had his duty and went to it without instruction: children to gather wood, to carry water; men to pitch the tents and bring down the beds; women to cook the supper and to watch while the family fed. And this was done without command. The families, which had been units of which the boundaries were a house at night, a farm by day, changed their boundaries. In the long hot light, they were silent in the cars moving slowly westward; but at night they integrated with any group they found. (TGOW: 215)

From the fact above, there are some roles of a family in *The Grapes of Wrath* both in surface and deep meaning. The first is a family is a place for warmth. Second, this family on the novel gives a chance to Ma Joad to be a leader of the family. Third, a family redefines as a wide range term. The family is created because of the same background and problem and with whom the society trusts their

hopes. Besides that, the family is a miniature of a real government and a place where the society actualize their thoughts and ideas. These families need a government to protect them and care for the needs of the people.

4. Conclusion

Structural analysis which is used in this research is as a tool to answer the problem formulation in the previous page. Besides finding the elements that build the structure of the novel, elaborating the role of each element is worthy working. So that, structural analysis is not a study of putting a part of the building of the novel but it gives a new meaning, paradigm, to the novel itself. Then the literary work will always be actual to be read.

Theme is important as a part of the story because it unifies all elements of the story elements. Theme of *The Grapes of Wrath* is family is a place to survive. The family is a tool for survival. The Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* proves that they can live for survival with a family bond though there are two members, Noah and Connie, leave the family with their own personal reasons and nowhere to be found.

Mostly the characters on the novel care for the family. They are born to redefine the

institution namely 'family'. The character of this is Tom Joad Junior. He dedicates his life for the family and neglects his individualism. Whenever his brother Noah and his brother in law Connie leave for their personal business, he keeps staying with the family.

Another element which supports the story building is chronological plot. Next, the novel uses several different places based on the nomadic life of the Joads during the journey as Sallisaw, Oklahoma; Route 66; Central California (Bakersfield, Hooverville, Weedpatch, Tulare). Further, the dynamic effect fully on the story is acquired from point of view. They are the dynamic life; the way of their challenge toward the hardship, and nomadic life of the Joads.

The meaning of family in *The Grapes of Wrath* has two supporting dimensions. First, a family is nuclear family, consisting usually a father, mother and children. They live as a household and in one house. Sometimes, they consider extended family particularly grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and others. Second, a family is a group of people with same backgrounds and problems. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the meaning of family dramatically is gained from their family bond and togetherness at Route 66.

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