Matriarchy, Patriarchy, And Community: Moving From "I to We" In Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath

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John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, focuses on the desperate situation of the Joad family and migrant workers after displacement and economic hardship in the wake of the Great Depression. *The Grapes of Wrath* opens in Oklahoma with the Joads fleeing west from their barren land, in search of jobs and food in California. Moving west, they join a torrent of people who share their situation and are in desperate need of food and shelter. After their arduous trip, the Joads and fellow migrant workers arrive in California where they struggle to find work. When they do find employment, the wages they earn barely provide sustenance. At every turn, the family and workers are exploited and betrayed by a
hierarchical social structure—based on private property and patriarchy—that no longer sustains their needs. My intention in this essay is to explore Steinbeck's critique of this social system and, more specifically, to explore the role of Ma Joad, as she becomes the central vehicle of Steinbeck's critique.

I. CRITICAL CONTEXTS

When first published in April 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* and John Steinbeck met mixed reviews. These initial reviews fell into three basic camps: political, theological, and stylistic. Published on the heels of the Great Depression amid a socialist fervor culminating in the birth of labor unions, the largest group of reviews focused on the book's political themes. In his article "Hungry Caravan," published in *The Nation* in April 1939, Louis Kronenberger wrote:

*The Grapes of Wrath* has, overwhelmingly, those two qualities most vital to a work of social protest: great indignation and great compassion. Its theme is large and tragic and, on the whole, is largely and tragically felt. No novel of our day has been written out of a more genuine humanity, and none, I think, is better calculated to awaken the humanity of others. (23)
Many of Kronenberger’s contemporaries concurred with his review. Philip Rahv wrote, “The book is at the same time a detailed exposure of dreadful economic conditions and a long declaration of love to the masses” (31). Reviewing *The Grapes of Wrath* for *The Commonweal*, James N. Vaughan comments,

[The Joads] are representatives of the seventh American generation of solid people who are driven to destitution and death by the forces of “capitalism.” In the day of their distress no help is extended to them. On the contrary they are regarded with fear and loathing by possessors of property. The loathing which they inspire in the Californians on whom they descend arises from fear that they constitute a threat to property....The impact of this book is very powerful. Whoever reads it will find he has gained a better total grasp on the need in this country for rectification of any and all conditions which now or hereafter may correspond in any degree with the terrible plight of the dust bowl tenant farmers. (33)

Malcolm Cowley also recognized the novel as a social critique and an instrument of change. He, like many of the original reviewers, compared *The Grapes of Wrath* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book that “roused people to fight against intolerable wrongs” (29).
For the same reason that Steinbeck’s political and social critique won praise from some, it also caused a strong negative reaction among landowners and conservatives, as David Cassuto explained in a later article:

The migrants’ struggle became a national *cause celebre* and the novel’s verisimilitude was debated at the highest level of government. The Hearst-Chandler-Copley yellow press pilloried the novel and its author throughout California. Only after a *Life* magazine exposé and Eleanor Roosevelt’s endorsement did the tide of public opinion begin to turn in Steinbeck’s favor. The rage and furor from agribusiness conglomerates and their allies arose because *The Grapes of Wrath* shook the very foundations of the water-based oligarchy. (92)

Stanley Kunitz, in “Wine Out of These Grapes,” pointed out that seven months after its publication *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned in Kern County, California, the setting of the second half of the book.1 The Associated Farmers “hoped to forbid circulation of the book thruout [sic] the whole state [California]” (36). The strong reactions, both for and against the book, grew from the fact that

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1 John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, California, a central location in agricultural California, the setting for the second half of the novel. Throughout his early life, Steinbeck was constantly in contact with the migrant workers picking produce in the area (Motley 398). There is an account of Steinbeck as a struggling young writer strapped for cash working in the fields alongside migrant workers (Benson 52).
many recognized its authentic portrayal of the migrant workers’ situation in America and its explosive nature. Kunitz pointed out that many reviewers and politicians recognized the authenticity of the situation Steinbeck portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

...we are ashamed, terribly ashamed, but not of the book. What we are ashamed of is that it could be written about our country, that it had to written, that the conditions, the abuses, that it describes actually exist....If the rumblings in Washington are any indication, “something is going to be done about it.” You cannot muzzle a good book. You cannot keep the truth from being told. (36)

Clearly, *The Grapes of Wrath* created a “stir” on the political scene. People began to question the capitalist system based on private property and became aware of the desperate situation capitalism had created for their fellow Americans. In “Degrees of Meditation and Their Political Value in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” contemporary critic Michael G. Barry identified the novel’s “radical” vision:

Steinbeck wants to make clear that behind his socialist movement is not a grand philosophy of Utopianism, but one of need, need to avoid inimical conditions. The people will join communally when they are forced to. Radical change
Along with the political reviews, a number of the “critics of 1939” identify *The Grapes of Wrath* with Christian themes. For example, Charles Angoff, writing for the *North American Review*, compared Steinbeck’s writing style with that of the Bible, and he identifies the novel’s characters with Christ’s communion: “with the patience of Christ, [the Joad’s] keep on going, helping one another to the last bite of bread and the last drop of milk” (34). James Vaughan, E.B. Garside, Ralson Matheny, and Kathryn Vogel, all agree with the Raleigh *News & Observer* review, which stated, “It is the [novel’s] beautifully written descriptive passages which remind one of the Bible that are most effective in setting the stage for the family’s tribulations...” (136). Characters are similarly seen to represent Christian themes. From publication, reviewers and critics claim that the preacher Jim Casy resembles Christ. In the *New Republic*, Malcolm Cowley identified Casy as a preacher who, “can’t stop preaching” and who later becomes, “a Christ-like labor leader” (28).

Common to all 1939 reviews—whether they acknowledge the novel’s political nature or explore its Christian themes—are stylistic comments; reviewers either praised Steinbeck’s style
profusely or criticized him savagely. In his review, "In the Great Tradition," Charles Angoff wrote that *The Grapes of Wrath* should cause rejoicing in that part of Hell where the souls of great American imaginative writers while away their time, for at long last a worthy successor to them has appeared in their former terrestrial abode. With his latest novel Mr. Steinbeck at once joins the company of Hawthorne, Melville, Crane, and Norris, and easily leaps to the forefront of all his contemporaries. (33-34)

Conversely, Philip Rahv, who praised the novel's political themes, harshly criticized Steinbeck’s style. Rahv stated, *The Grapes of Wrath* fails the test of craftsmanship. Its unconscionable length is out of all proportion to its substance; the “ornery” dialect spoken by its farmers impresses one as being less a form of human speech than a facile convention of the local-color schools; and as to problems of characterization, Mr. Steinbeck does not so much create character as he apes it. (31)

Like Rahv, Art Kuhl criticizes Steinbeck’s characterization:

“Everyone, even the major characters, begins to be part of a chorus that is singing Steinbeck’s message; characterization goes by the
board. As a result the people who were not developed early are not
developed at all” (38).

The Grapes of Wrath received its sternest criticism for the
language and actions of Steinbeck’s characters. Some reviewers
regarded the ending of the novel as lewd because Rose of Sharon
breast-fed the stranger in the barn to save his life. For similar
reasons, The Grapes of Wrath was banned in Buffalo, New York,
because “vulgar words are employed by characters in the book”
(Kunitz 35). The Kansas City Public Library called the novel
“obscene” and removed it from their shelves (Kunitz 36). In that
same vein Kuhl, perhaps the most biting 1939 reviewer, calls The
Grapes of Wrath “vulgar and a bit dirty at the edges” and is
surprised that Steinbeck’s imagination “would stoop to go through
so low a door” (42). Kuhl’s Catholic World review declares the novel
“propaganda.” And of the novel’s ending, Kuhl writes, “He really
doesn’t need pornography to make his books sell, and he may come
back to straighter roads in the days ahead. He may in fact come to
be what he has been called, America’s great novelist. He is not yet
great today” (42).

Perhaps Kuhl would be dismayed at the continuing critical
attention paid to The Grapes of Wrath. The three basic
themes—political, theological, and stylistic—that dominated the
early reviews of *The Grapes of Wrath*, are still present in more recent criticism. The overwhelming majority of critics continue to focus on the political aspects of the book, exploring its denunciation of capitalism's lethal and dehumanizing effects on the lives of ordinary people. While some critics argue against a political reading of the novel, political criticism has had a profound effect on how the novel has been viewed since 1939.

As times changed, the political critique, once one of urgent calling, became a historical commentary illustrated by critic Leonard Lutwack, who, in 1971, writes of *The Grapes of Wrath*:

An exploited group discovers that it is being exploited, that it is, indeed a new class in society, the proletariat: individuals within that class discover the manner of that exploitation and grope for the means to combat it, or at least protest it; and the reader of the book...discovers that an alarming world of economic condition is...making itself felt in America. (63-64)

Theological criticism becomes more detailed and refers directly to passages in the novel, unlike the general description of

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2 Jackson J. Benson, in his article, "The Background to the Composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*," wrote, "[Steinbeck] would become the most prominent social-political novelist of the period, although he, himself, would remain largely apolitical. Above all things he was interested in finding a good story. Although Steinbeck was not much interested in politics, his wife, Carol, was. Contrary to the Republican views of all the rest of his own family, John had early in life developed rather generalized, liberal sympathies, but his wife had become, during the early years of the Depression, a rather vehement and outspoken political radical" (52).

Tom listens to his [Jim Casy’s] Emersonian ramblings about “The Holy Spirit” and “the Human spirit” which consist of “all men an’ all women we love” and about the “one big soul” which everybody is a part of (33). This philosophy undergirds the entire novel, removing it from realism and placing it among romantic or visionary works. (145)

And in “Poor Whites: Joads and Snopeses,” published in 1991, Abby Welock, like 1939 reviewer Malcolm Cowley, identifies Jim Casy as a Christ figure:

Depicted now as a Christ figure, he [Jim Casy] sacrifices himself twice for the Joads and for the workers. The second time he is murdered by the Snopesish law enforcers, but not before he tells them, in effect, that they know not what they do. (68)

The stylistic criticism, biting in 1939, changed dramatically and Steinbeck’s style has been given a name, or more specifically, names: naturalism, “anti-naturalism,” realism, “drama of consciousness,” and post-modernism. In the 1989 article “Steinbeck and Modernism (A Speculation on His Contribution to the Development of the Twentieth-Century American Sensibility),”
Warren French writes of post-modernism and Steinbeck:

There is a widespread feeling...that whatever direction Post-Modernism takes, the growing emphasis will be on consciousness-raising techniques and the implications for a bankrupt industrial culture of transcendentalist philosophies, especially of Eastern origin. Should this speculation indeed prove true, John Steinbeck may be seen on the strength of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row* as one of the significant prophets of Post-Modernism, as Edgar Allen Poe, for example, was a remarkable precursor of Modernism. (161)

While the emphases of past criticism remains in the present, there is also a new and dynamic element in contemporary criticism: feminist criticism. The explosion of feminist criticism over the last twenty years not only adds another dimension to *Grapes of Wrath* criticism, it influences how critics look at the novel's political and religious themes as well. Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn identify two major foci in feminist scholarship as, "deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked..."(6). The critics go on to discuss the sources of power in society and explain, "cultures may define woman's nature and
In many discussions of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as in other novels, the role of its female characters went almost unexamined, until feminist critics began "reconstructing female experience previously hidden." Furthermore, as a result of feminist criticism, feminine characters and roles are investigated from the woman's perspective rather than the "male perspective." Consequently, feminist critics have looked more closely at the female characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, especially Ma Joad, illuminating their central role.

My own exploration of the novel mirrors this larger contemporary feminist shift within criticism. Originally, I intended to examine the novel's labor themes and its impact on both the labor movement and the public's perception of that movement. Yet, upon reading *The Grapes of Wrath* a number of times, I found myself drawn to the character of Ma Joad and her role as the central force in the Joad family; indeed, as the central positive force in the novel as a whole. The importance of Ma's character increases throughout the work until she embodies the values that I believe Steinbeck meant to impart to his readers, namely, the matriarchal values of

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3 There is a large body of feminist criticism concerned with *The Grapes of Wrath* which explore the sources of prestige and network of beliefs that influence gender relations. For example, in "Mother Earth and Earth Mother: The Recasting of Myth in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*," Joan Hedrick explores the limitations inherent in placing specific gender within categories. Hedrick writes, "As long as women are defined as mothers and men as sons, the infantilization of men is virtually assured" (141).
solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence that the novel identifies with the mother—a matriarchal social system. Steinbeck indeed seems to be contrasting the matriarchal social organization with the patriarchal, private property system that lies at the center of our modern capitalist society. Steinbeck portrays the community that develops as a result of Ma Joad’s maternal influence as an antidote to the class division and suffering, neglect, exploitation, and violence that is promoted by a patriarchal, private property system, or what Zillah Eisenstein calls “capitalist patriarchy.”

Ma Joad stands as the rallying point throughout the whole novel. Human survival and human relationships, the novel suggests, depend on the matriarchal values embodied in Ma Joad.

For political critics, the role of women in the novel is most often considered to be relatively unimportant. Yet, I would argue that Ma Joad stands as the rallying point for human survival. The novel represents women living in concert with nature as the source of life and of all nurturing relationships, while, in contrast, most male characters are portrayed as individualistic property owners, whose relationships with people and nature are both competitive and antagonistic. For the landless migrant workers, referred to as “Okies” by the property-owning Californians, capitalist patriarchy

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4 From this point on, I will refer to a patriarchal system based on private property as capitalist patriarchy.
fails, leaving them with no means of survival. Under this strain, the patriarchal family reverts back to its more fundamental matriarchal origins to avoid the destruction brought on by the failure of the capitalistic system.

In the struggle for survival, power is restored to women, specifically Ma Joad, and the family survives because of their specifically maternal gifts. Ma acknowledges no difference between herself and her family. She perceives family and the community as extensions of herself; their bodies are her body and are sustained through her. In the end, through Ma's guidance, the Joads reject the quest for individual private property by coming to the realization that the family is most important and its sustenance the primary goal. In the novel, Ma's maternal power is represented as the source and model of an alternative to the capitalist patriarchy that has turned lethal. The communal values associated with matriarchy extend beyond the family to the larger society, which also needs the solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence matriarchy provides in order to survive the destruction and division inherent in capitalist patriarchies.

One recent article in particular—"From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's role in The Grapes of Wrath," by Warren Motley—has been instrumental in helping me explore the significance
of Ma Joad in the novel. Motley claims that Ma Joad “emerges as a central, cohesive force” (397). For me, Ma emerges as the pivotal character in the novel, embodying its most cherished values. Like Motley, I believe that as the novel progresses, the structure of the Joad family “shifts from a patriarchal structure to a predominantly matriarchal one” (397). While Motley focuses almost exclusively on this shift as it occurs within the Joad family, I extend his discussion of the values of solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence evident in matriarchy to examine their implications for the broader community in which the Joads live. When solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence are applied within the larger society, the existing power structure, organized around capitalist patriarchy, is radically altered. In this matriarchal society, all members are of consequence and society promotes everyone's well-being. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck advocates a society based on solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence as the only social system that will sustain all humanity.

II. MATRIARCHY, PATRIARCHY, AND ROBERT BRIFFAULT

In “From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Warren Motley writes that Steinbeck could not accept the “human wreckage” that was left along Route 66 and in
the fields of California during and following the Great Depression. In his struggle to make sense of the migrant workers’ situation, Steinbeck
turned to those scientists and thinkers who believed that cooperation rather than competition was the basis of both evolutionary and social progress. They strove to heal what they saw as the post-Darwinian split between scientific thinking and ethical experience. Steinbeck read Jan Smut’s *Holism and Evolution* and talked of immersing himself in the works of Jan Elif Boodin, author of *The Social Mind*. In analyzing the shift from patriarchy to matriarchy in the Joad family, Steinbeck’s reading in the *The Mothers* is particularly important. (398)

In the decade before Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, anthropologist Robert Briffault had become well-known for his work *The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins*, which was published in 1931.5 In *The Mothers*, Briffault holds that matriarchy is society’s original structure; thus, even though patriarchy has in more recent times replaced matriarchy, Briffault claims that people respond to difficult times by naturally reverting back to matriarchy.

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5 In 1931, Briffault condensed the original three-volume edition (1927) of *The Mothers* into one volume that, as Briffault states in the Preface to the 1931 edition, “I have deemed it preferable to confine myself to the discussion of the main thesis which chiefly attracted attention in the original work.” I use this condensed version in my discussion of Briffault’s theory.
for survival. Briffault favors matriarchy as a cooperative, non-hierarchical system based on community and family.\(^6\) As the work's title suggests, it is the mother—in her role as giver and nurturer of life—that is both the source of and the model for the positive relations that should operate within a community. Briffault writes:

Tender emotions and affection have then their origin not in sexual attraction, but in maternal reactions. Just as the transferred affection of the female for the male is a direct derivative of maternal feelings, so all feelings of a sympathetic, compassionate, altruistic character, which are in direct contrast to biological impulses, are almost entirely absent in animals, and are specific characters of human psychology, are extensions of maternal reaction. They owe the mere possibility of their existence to the development of maternal feelings. (51)

For Briffault, the human ability to live together in community is a result of maternal feelings. Positive, higher-level relations among people result from solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence—all values with their root in matriarchy. Not only are women, in their

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\(^6\) Briffault believes that, oftentimes, matriarchy is regarded as the opposite of patriarchy (Motley 399). Instead of men controlling women, the roles reverse and women subjugate men. Briffault calls this view of matriarchy “Amazonian patriarchy.” Briffault's description of matriarchy is radically different from the modern view of patriarchal, hierarchical system where simply the gender of the powerful differs. In Briffault's matriarchal system, “relationships between people are based on cooperation rather than power” (Motley 399).
role as mothers, the source of positive, higher-level relationships among people, but “woman” becomes a symbol for what is most human, most essential in society.

Briffault proposed that the first social groups “evolved from biologically linked maternal clans of brothers and sisters rather than from patriarchal families based on sexual bonds” (53).

For Briffault,

The social instinct, the love of company which has developed in the very highest forms of life, is a specific development. All familial feeling, all group-sympathy, the essential foundation, therefore, of a social organization, is the direct product of prolonged maternal care, and does not exist apart from it. (57)

Briffault cites Lafitau, a missionary visiting the tribes of North American in the nineteenth century, as giving perhaps the best description of matriarchy:

It is in the woman that properly consists the nation, the nobility of the blood, the genealogical tree, the order of generations, the preservation of families. It is in them that all real authority resides; the country, the fields, and all the crops belong to them. They are the soul of the councils, the arbiters of war and peace. (194)
In the matriarchal system, family groups are formed around the biological links of the maternal clan whose leader is usually the oldest female and from her leadership is passed from mother to daughter. Women own the property but hold it in trust for the entire maternal group. When a woman marries, her husband may or may not live with her clan, but it goes without question that she and her children will remain living within the mother's clan (Briffault 227). All children born in matriarchy are legitimate and automatically belong to their mother's group. According to Carroll College Professor Murphy Fox, this automatic clan acceptance in matriarchal systems is due to the fact that the mother is the only parent whose identity is absolutely guaranteed. As a result, members of matriarchal societies trace their lineage through their mother's side and carry their mother's name. The father and husband have no claim to the children and no responsibility towards them. It is, instead, the mother's brother who assumes responsibility for providing food for the clan through hunting and for training the young men.

The matriarchal social order described by Briffault is "based on cooperation rather than power." All clan members work together to ensure the survival of the group; and because the clan is formed along blood lines, every member is totally committed to the continuation of the group. Motley writes,
Matriarchal cultures, Briffault observed, are “nothing if not egalitarian.” The concepts of authority and domination are “entirely foreign to primitive humanity” because the economic advantages on which power rests do not exist. Although labor is divided in matriarchies—men take charge of the hunt and women of the camp—the division is not explosive. Both men and women work for the community; “the sexes are interdependent and it is upon mutual dependence that the association which constitutes society is founded.” (400)

Matriarchal societies, then, are characterized by divisions of labor based on cooperation. Neither male nor female clan members are sustained by their own work. The needs of all group members are met through the joint activities of clan members. Activities are coordinated to provide all with the necessary means of survival (Briffault 1). Because everyone contributes, all members are essential to the community’s continuance, and all are viewed as equals and necessary to the community. A woman is independent “because of, not in spite of her labour” (Motley 400).

Most fundamentally, Briffault finds in matriarchies “solidarity almost inconceivable and unintelligible to those who have, like ourselves, developed amid the conditions and ideas created by the
strenuously competitive and suspicious individualism of modern societies" (59). A critical aspect of this social solidarity is the particular idea of the individual that exists within the matriarchal system. For people living in a matriarchal society there is no real distinction between the individual and the group. A member of a matriarchal group regards an attack on a clan member as an attack on themselves. In matriarchal societies, clan members' conception of individuality is indistinct, "which permits complete identification with the group" (Briffault 64). Members, then, do not think of themselves in terms of ego or individual interests, "but in terms of group-feeling and group-interests." Briffault found that in matriarchal societies "an individual has no personal rights to the game, fish, or vegetable food which he [or she] may obtain" (60). In this egalitarian atmosphere, no person is richer than another because everything is divided equally; in a matriarchal system private property simply does not exist, and, in consequence, there is no wealth-based power that can used to manipulate or control another person.

According to Briffault, the change from matriarchy to patriarchy began with the domestication of animals, which gave individuals the opportunity to possess an animal rather than hunt it. Wealth became tied to the domesticated animals, which were
handled by men. Thus, a social system organized around men individually owning private property replaced one in which women held land communally. This trend, which Briffault claims took place over a relatively short period of time, continued to evolve with the development of agriculture and became more pronounced with the introduction of trade and industry.

For women, the shift from a matriarchal, communal property system to a patriarchal, private property social order involved a loss of position, equality, and clan orientation to the structure of the patriarchal family based on sexual coupling (Motley 401). Women lost the independence they had enjoyed in matriarchy. Briffault writes,

> Women, instead of being the chief producer, became economically unproductive, destitute, and dependent. The contrast between the toiling primitive woman and the idle lady of civilization, which has been mistaken for an indication of enslavement of the former and the freedom of the latter, marks the opposite relation. It is the primitive toiler who is independent and the unemployed woman who has lost her freedom and is destitute. (248)

In Briffault’s matriarchy, women were autonomous due to their ability to work and produce. The patriarchal, private property
system robs women of their industry and makes them dependent on their fathers and husbands. The very nature of women is changed in this situation. Isolated from their former industries and left dependent on males, women turn to their only economic value left: their sex. Briffault explains:

The woman who was no longer economically self-supporting became competitive in terms of the only value which remained to her, as an instrument of luxury and pleasure. Women cultivated her attractiveness, her body, her beauty, her adornment. (249)

Rather than being perceived as the source and symbol of society's most fundamental values, women become objects, valued merely for their sexuality. Matriarchal marriage based on cooperation was "unconnected with sexual objects" (250); in direct contrast, patriarchal marriage assumes a different character, "a purely sexual aspect and becomes the chief form of sexual relation" (250).

In matriarchal societies, women have the choice of whom to marry and the option to divorce and remarry if a husband is unproductive. Under matriarchal conditions, issues of virginity and feminine virtue are unimportant because women freely chose husbands and sexual partners and all offspring are accepted, through their incontrovertible identification with their mothers, as
legitimate clan members. Sexual restrictions are placed on neither men nor women. The opposite is true in patriarchy, where in the early stages women were kidnapped and carried away from their clan by men in search of wives. Later, as patriarchy became ingrained as society's structure, women, through the bridal dowry tradition were traded between fathers and sons-in-law. Under patriarchy, men expect their brides to be virgins and sexually modest, while no such limitations are placed on men, who are free to engage in premarital sex and, even after marriage, are more free from the limitations of sexual chastity absolutely visited upon women.

This insistence on female chastity is tied to capitalist patriarchy that stemmed from agrarian society. Whereas, in matriarchy offspring are accepted on the basis of their maternal identification with a clan that shares all resources, in patriarchy, legitimacy is assigned through the father and is required to assure that land will continue to be owned by the direct male descendent of the father (Briffault 253). Capitalist patriarchy isolates father and eldest son—who is designated heir—from the family because other children are less important, except as workers. The father's name is passed to children to identify them as belonging to him and his land. Women who give their names to their children are considered
"harlots" and their children bastards because they lack the "legitimizing" link to their father's name and his possessions (Briffault 254).

The clan is lost in patriarchy along with the maintenance of biological family links through the mother. Essentially, the man, or father, displaces the woman, or mother, as the center of the family—and "family," once synonymous with clan, is no longer identified with a larger network of kin, but shrinks to the small, isolated unit centering around an individual man. As Briffault puts it, in patriarchy

"Family" is understood to connote a group consisting of father, mother, and children. It is round the father that the group is formed. He is the provider and protector of "his" family. The mother rears his children. The behavior of the group, its movements, its place of abode, are determined by the father. His is the authority which presides over the social group; he is the centre of it. The constitution of the family is, in short, patriarchal. (99)

Within the patriarchal family, everything and everyone belongs to the father. For Briffault, the patriarchal family is "founded upon property, the dominance of the husband in that family and the subordinate position of the wife rests ultimately upon the economic
advantage of the former and the economic dependence of the latter” (158). Essentially, in capitalist patriarchy, property-owning men control the sexuality of women and their family members to consolidate their private property.

Briffault’s description of private property and the family echoes the earlier writings of Karl Marx, who explained the impact of private property on the family in The Communist Manifesto,

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain...The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting the more, by the actions of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and then children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour. (qtd in Eisenstein 10)

Of course, the effects of the patriarchal, private property system extend beyond the family. As a patriarchal system displaces matriarchy, people become increasingly defined in regard to their property holdings instead of in regard to their clan. Motley writes that “the holding of personal and real property separated individuals
both economically and psychologically...the acquisition of personal property...brought about the development of individualistic feelings” (Motley 401). A new notion of the “individual” is encouraged by these new socioeconomic developments. In contrast to the blurring of boundaries between individual and community that characterizes matriarchy, individuals within the patriarchal, private property system perceive themselves as separate from their community. Their relationship with others in the community becomes more competitive and antagonistic. Though all cooperative and group ties are not abandoned, “individualistic feelings” are the most central value in the social order developed in the capitalist patriarchy. In matriarchy, the ties of mutuality and cooperation were reinforced by the recognition that the labor of everyone is essential to the survival and prosperity of the group. In patriarchy, these ties change radically and become more instrumental, strained by self-interest developed in the “strenuously competitive and suspicious individualism” born of patriarchy (Briffault 59).

The matriarchal system was necessary in a time when, without any surplus of food, people had to cooperate to secure sustenance and protection. In such conditions the “go it alone” patriarchal mentality would have resulted in the end of humankind. Patriarchy can only develop when there is a surplus of goods that
can be bartered with other groups to attain wealth. Thus, Briffault suggests that if the “surplus” necessary in patriarchy disappears and survival again becomes the most fundamental issue, humans will naturally revert to a matriarchal system:

...since patriarchies are based on masculine economic dominance, society could theoretically return to a matriarchal stage if our “forms of industry and wealth-production [were] to revert to the dimensions of household industry...in an economic catastrophe, one might expect to see “the predominance of women...to a large extent...automatically restored.” (Motley 401)

It is likely, says Briffault, that in such a basic transition, some patriarchal aspects would remain intact, but overall the society would see a resurgence of women as key figures of family cohesion and as authors of a renewal of communal values.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck represents a disintegrating patriarchal system based on private property returning to matriarchy in the face of economic catastrophe. According to Motley, “Steinbeck shows how the shock of dispossession suffered by the Joads undermines the frontier patriarchy and throws the family back to a more primitive economic and social stage” (402). And for Steinbeck, as well as his source Briffault, this “more
primitive" stage is the more desirable: "The practical lesson which
the true history of the relations between the sexes does seem to
point is that mutual cooperation between them and social equality
are more conducive to the smooth working of social organization
than any form of sex antagonism" (Briffault 314).

III. MATRIARCHY, COMMUNITY, AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH

As The Grapes of Wrath begins, we see patriarchy as the
dominant form of social organization. The family patriarch, Grampa
Joad, and his sons, Pa and Uncle John, represent the individualistic,
competitive mentality that operates in a capitalist patriarchy. Yet,
the patriarchal system portrayed in The Grapes of Wrath,
historically present in the social context of the 1930s, is failing
and no longer provides for the basic needs of the Joad family. As
this socioeconomic system fails, maternal power and the
matriarchal system is restored through Ma Joad.

At the novel's opening, all the male characters are tied to the
land, which serves as the center of their lives. When Grampa arrived
in Oklahoma he fought the Indians and took the land by force. He and
his sons consider the land as belonging solely to them and their
heirs. Pa inherited Grampa's land, and Uncle John, Grampa's second
son, left the nuclear Joad family as an independent individual to buy
his own land, find a wife, and begin his own family. The family of John's childhood and the family of his adulthood are independent of each other. John's wife dies and he is left without a family of his own. John is close to his brother's family, but the only thing that truly belongs to him is the land he owns. When the bank forecloses on Pa Joad's land, which he has inherited from Grampa, he and his family move to Uncle John's land along with Grampa and Granma. It is only a matter of time before the bank forecloses on Uncle John's land, so the land lies dormant and the men have no work.

The patriarchal, private property system is obviously strained by economic downturn, financial difficulty, and drought conditions. Symbolic of patriarchy's "bankrupt" state are the people and land that are left barren and sterile. Life, both human and plant, is no longer sustained by the patriarchal system. The drought, a historical fact, becomes in the novel a metaphor for the economic, social, and spiritual condition created by the patriarchal, private property system:

The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread any more. The surface
of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust...the dirt crust broke and the dust formed...The people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air and covered their noses from it. And the children came out of the houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. (1 & 6)

It is obvious that Steinbeck places men at the helm of capitalist patriarchy in The Grapes of Wrath. "Men stood by their fences" to view the crops' ruination (my italics). Yet all individuals, both male and female, fall beneath the force of the impersonal "machine" that the failed capitalist patriarchy has become.

For the Joads, the solution is found in Ma Joad and the values she personifies. Ma Joad embodies Briffault's ideas of maternal nurturing and matriarchy values of solidarity, cooperation and interdependence. As Carol Steinbeck commented to reviewer Richard Astro, Ma Joad is "pure Briffault" (Motley 398).

The reader first encounters Ma in Oklahoma when Tom arrives home after being paroled from prison. From Steinbeck's description, Ma's importance to the family is evident:
Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone. (79-80)

The family's coherence and sustenance are built around Ma; she is a goddess, a healer, the citadel of the family. This passages reveals
much about how Steinbeck viewed women, their role in the family, and their strength and commitment to the family. It is obvious that without Ma’s influence and constant vigilance, the family would crumble. Steinbeck bases the authority and power of women and nature in their ability to create and sustain life. For Steinbeck, women and nature are bound together—nature too is a feminine entity, a mother:

...suddenly they saw the great [Californian] valley below them. Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road, and, “Jesus Christ! Look!” he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses.

“I want to look at her,” Al said.

Pa sighed, “I never knowed they was anything like her.”

(250)
The sight of California, symbolic of the family’s transition to life-sustaining matriarchy, contrasts sharply with the barren land of the opening representative of sterile capitalist patriarchy. It is significant that, for Pa, the land is feminine.

Even though Ma is described as the citadel of the family, patriarchy still rules at the outset of the novel in terms of who possesses the power to make decisions. Her contributions and
values are regarded as essential, yet she is not consulted about
decisions concerning the family’s future. The domain over which she
presides is regarded as less important than the property issues
associated with the male domain. So, it is the Joad men who
possess the authority to make the important decisions. The most
important family decision, early in the novel, is the decision to
strike out for California. Steinbeck illustrates the patriarchal
family system in the following description of the “Squatters
Circle”:

The family met at the most important place, near the truck.
The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck
was the active thing, the living principle...this [truck] was
the new hearth the living center of the family...Pa walked
around the truck, looking at it, and then he squatted down in
the dust and found a stick to draw with...Pa squatted there,
looking at the truck, his chin in his cupped fist. And Uncle
John moved toward him and squatted down beside him.
Their eyes were brooding. Grampa came out of the house
and saw the two squatting together, and he jerked over and
sat on the running board of the truck, facing them. That was
the nucleus. Tom and Connie and Noah strolled in and
squatted, and the line was a half-circle with Grampa in the
opening. And then Ma came out of the house, and Granma with her, and Rose of Sharon behind, walking daintily. They took their places behind the squatting men; they stood up with their hands on their hips. And the children, Ruthie and Winifred, hopped on one foot beside the women.... (108-109)

The image is clear—men constitute the inner-circle of decision makers, and women, placed on the periphery, are subject to them. It is ironic that, though they gave life to all but two of the men in the circle, the mothers are not allowed to discuss the situation as equal members of the family. Ma is consulted only about the supply of food and, on her suggestion, Jim Casy is accepted into the group:

Tom got up from his hams and went toward the house, calling, "Casy—oh, Casy!"

"Calling me?" Casy asked.

"Yeah. We think long as you're goin' with us, you ought to be with us, helpin' to figger things out."

Casy got to his feet. He knew the government of families, and he knew he had been taken into the family. Indeed his position was eminent, for Uncle John moved sideways, leaving space between Pa and himself for the preacher. Casy squatted down with the others, facing Grampa enthroned on the running board. (111-112)
Ma and Granma’s authority in decisions outside the family is exceeded not only by their sons but by male non-family members. It is significant that in the decision-making process the women are relegated to the same position as the children.

In the squatters’ circle the family is divided. The men are isolated, not tied to each other but to the truck. Patriarchal ties to the land are severed, cut by foreclosure. The truck now takes the land’s place as the center of male activity; because it enables them to leave their present situation, it serves as a symbol of patriarchal independence and individualism. The squatter’s circle convenes to make decisions a number of times on the trip, but falls into disuse when the Joads reach California.

Initially positioned outside the circle, Ma offers suggestions and advice to the men but does not initiate or make any decisions about the family’s future. While the patriarchal system was firmly in place, Ma was bound by the decisions made by men in the squatters’ circle.

Beginning in Oklahoma and accelerating as the family gets closer to California, patriarchy is undermined by its inability to supply the family’s basic needs. No longer are the Joads concerned with owning land or finding a white cottage with flower boxes, for their most basic survival needs of food and shelter outweigh such
desires, which reflect goals and values defined by capitalist patriarchy ideology. A few weeks into the trip we see a major crack in the armor of patriarchy when the squatter's circle decides to send most of the family and the Wilsons ahead in the truck while Tom and Jim follow a day later after fixing the Wilson's car. Ma opposes the men's decision to split up the family, because her abiding concern, always, is to keep the "fambly" together. She implicitly acts upon, and defends the matriarchal values of solidarity, cooperation and interdependence:

Ma stepped in front of him [Pa]. "I ain't a-gonna go."

"What do you mean, you ain't gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family." Pa was amazed at the revolt.

Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. "I ain't a-gonna go," she said.

"I tell you, you got to go. We [the men] made up our mind."

And now Ma's mouth set hard. She said softly, "On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me." She moved the jack handle gently again. "An' I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'. I'll light into you...an' I'll
knock you belly-up with a bucket. I swear to Holy Jesus’ sake I will...”

The jack handle flicked hungrily back and forth in Ma’s hand. “Come on,” said Ma. “You make up your mind. Come on an’ whup me. Jus’ try it. But I ain’t a-goin’; or if I do, you ain’t gonna get no sleep, ’cause I’ll wait an’ I’ll wait, an’ just the minute you take sleep in your eyes, I’ll slap ya with a stick a stove wood.”

The whole group watched the revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break into fury. They watched his lax hands to see the fists form. And Pa’s anger did not rise, and his hands hung limply at his sides. And in a moment the group knew that Ma had won. And Ma knew it too.

Tom said, “Ma, what’s eatin’ on you? What ya wanna do this-a-way for? What’s the matter’th you anyways? You gone johnrabbit on us?”

Ma’s face softened, but her eyes were still fierce. “You done this ’thout thinkin’ much,” Ma said. “What we got lef’ in the worl’? Nothin’ but us. Nothin’ but the folks. We come out an’ Grampa he reached for the shovel-shelf right off. An’ now, right off, you wanna bust up the folks—”

(184-185)
When all else is lost, the family remains as essential source of security for its members. Ma's main goal is to preserve and nurture the family. This is the first instance in the novel where Ma confronts the patriarchal structure head to head and asserts her maternal authority. Pa does not force Ma to submit to the patriarchal will as he would have on the farm.

As the patriarchal structure typifying their agrarian life unravels, Pa, confused and struggling to make sense of the family's predicament, begins to depend naturally on Ma's more certain—unquestioned and unquestioning—matriarchal values. On a less obvious level, Pa is unable to assert his patriarchal authority because the land from which he derived his authority is lost. The domain over which Ma has always presided, such as providing for basic physical and emotional needs, now—in their desperate situation—assumes the greatest significance, and with it, Ma assumes a new position of authority. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Ma does anything needed to keep the family together, including chasing off the law with a frying pan and putting herself in harm's way to assure Rose of Sharon a protected delivery in a sheltered railroad car (492).

As the family travels farther away from the property-based patriarchal structure they knew in Oklahoma, Ma continually
demonstrates her strength and resourcefulness. For Ma the most critical stage of the family's journey comes as they are crossing the California border. Ma is worried they will be detained by the border police. When they are stopped, Ma, riding with Granma in the back of the truck, tells the officer Granma's health is failing and they are in a rush to find a doctor. The border patrol immediately lets them through, but when the family stops to examine Granma, Ma urges them to drive on. When they reach the fertile western plains, Al stops the truck so everyone can admire the view:

Ma raised her eyes and looked over the valley. "Granma's dead."

They looked at her, all of them, and Pa asked, "When?"

"Before they stopped us last night."

"So that's why you didn't want 'em [the inspectors] to look."

"I was afraid we wouldn't get acrost," she said. "I tol' Granma we couldn' he'p her when she was a-dyin'. We couldn' stop in the desert...

Tom said, "Jesus Christ! You layin' there with her all night long!"

"The fambly hadda get acrost," Ma said miserably. Tom moved close to put his hand on her shoulder.
“Don’t touch me,” she said. “I’ll hol’ up if you don’t touch me. That’d get me.” (251-252)

Ma rode all night with the dead body to ensure that the family would reach California. No personal sacrifice is too great for Ma to give in order to assure her family’s protection and preservation. In this moment Ma has gained leadership and authority in the family who regard her “with terror at her strength” (252).

Throughout the second half of the novel, Ma’s role as family leader continually evolves. This evolution is a gradual process, and, rather than aggressively pursuing leadership, Ma is forced by circumstance and the men’s reaction to their new situation to assume leadership. Ma explains the impact to the family—and the men—caused by the loss of the land:

They was a time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more....They ain’t nothin’ keeps us clear. Al—he’s a handerin’ an’ a-jibbitin’ to go off on his own. An’ Uncle John is jus’ a-draggin’ along. Pa’s lost his place. He ain’t the head no more. (434)

Ma does not wish to “rule” the family but is forced to make
decisions because she is the only one able to focus on the family’s best interest. When Tom kills Casy’s killer and is on the run, it is Ma that gets him out. She formulates, directs, and with the help of the family, executes his escape:

“Ma—I got to go,” said Tom....

“You can’t,” Ma said. “They wouldn’t be no way to hide out. You couldn’ trus’ nobody. But you can trus’ us. We can hide you, an’ we can see you get to eat while your face gets well.”

“But, Ma—”

She got to her feet, “You ain’t goin’. We’re a-takin’ you. Al, you back the truck against the door. Now, I got it figgered out. We’ll put one mattress on the bottom, an’ then Tom gets quick there, an’ we take another mattress an’ sort of fold it so it makes a cave, an’ he’s in the cave; and then we sort of wall it in. He can breathe out the end, ya see. Don’t argue. That’s what we’ll do.”

Pa complained, “Seems like the man ain’t got no say no more. She’s jus’ a heller. Come time we get settled down, I’m a-gonna smack her.”

“Come that time, you can,” said Ma. “Roust up, Al. It’s dark enough.” (442)
Regardless of danger, threats, and Tom’s objections, Ma remains committed to preserving the family.

Not only is the shift from patriarchy to matriarchy apparent in the family, Ma and Pa’s relationship serves as a microcosm of the transition. According to Briffault, any modern return to matriarchy would also include some aspects of patriarchy and, of course, force gender roles to be redefined in regard to the matriarchal values of solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence. Returning to the cooperative relationship between men and women that, according to Briffault characterized matriarchy, is difficult because, traditionally in patriarchy, the relationship between the two sexes is antagonistic because one sex controls the other. The matriarchal system depends on the gifts, contributions, and abilities of both sexes, so neither partner is viewed as less than the other or expendable. Thus, matriarchy is without many of the control issues apparent in patriarchy. The feminine principle depends on community and cooperation, not total control.

Despite Ma’s transition into family leader, she does not seek or use power over others. Rather, she leads simply because it is natural and other family members, as illustrated in a previous quotation, like Pa, are unable to recognize the ramifications of present situations and so do not develop plans to address
difficulties. For example, starving and jobless in California, the Joads live in a government camp for a time. Because of the sanitary and humane conditions at the camp, no one wants to leave, though they are starving and desperately need to leave and seek work. Pa avoids making the decision and so Ma is forced to. Although the family’s governance is naturally reverting to matriarchy as a result of the family’s dire situation, Ma has no desire to overshadow or emasculate Pa. She is committed to keeping every member of the family “whole” and a contributing family participant:

Pa sniffed. “Seems like times is changed,” he said sarcastically. “Time was when a man said what we’d do. Seems like women is tellin’ now. Seems like it’s purty near time to get out a stick.”

Ma put the clean dripping tin dish out on the box. She smiled down at her work. “You get your stick, Pa,” she said. “Times when they’s food an’ a place to set, then maybe you can use your stick an’ keep you skin whole. But you ain’t a-doin’ your job, either a-thinkin’ or a-workin’. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an’ women folks’d sniffle their nose an’ creep-mouse aroun’. But you jus’ get you a stick now an’ you ain’t lickin’ no woman; you’re a-fightin’, ’cause I got a stick all laid out too...”
Pa got up in disgust and moved away, and Uncle John followed him.

Ma’s hands were busy in the water, but she watched them go, and she said proudly to Tom, “He’s all right. He ain’t beat. He’s like as not to take a smack at me.”

Tom laughed. “You jus’ a-treadin’ him on?”

“Sure,” said Ma. “Take a man, he can get worried an’ worried, an’ it eats out his liver, an’ purty soon he’ll jus’ lay down and die with his heart et out. But if you can take an’ make ’im mad, why, he’ll be awright. Pa, he didn’ say nothin’, but he’s mad now. He’ll show me now. He’s awright.” (388-389)

Even though Ma has gained a position of authority, she recognizes the importance of every family member to the group. Ma needs Pa’s help in her quest to keep the family together and has no desire to hurt Pa or make him seem, in his or anyone else’s eyes, less of a man.

At the novel’s conclusion, the Joads are worse off than ever before. They are penniless, Rose of Sharon’s baby is dead, and all their possessions are lost to the flood. Ma leads the retreat before the rising water and takes the family to a barn where they are dry. When they enter the barn they discover an emaciated man and his son also seeking shelter there. Ma passes the matriarchal values of
solidarity, cooperation and interdependence—with its life sustaining force—to Rose of Sharon, who saves the strange man by breast feeding him:

The boy was at her side again explaining, “I didn’ know. He said he et, or wasn’ hungry. Las’ night I went an’ by a winda an’ stoled some bread. Made ’im chew ’er down. But he puked it all up, an’ then he was weaker. Got to have soup or milk. You folks got money to git milk?”

Ma said, “Hush. Don’ worry. We’ll figger somepin out.”

...Ma looked at Pa and Uncle John standing helplessly gazing at the sick man. She looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort[er]. Ma’s eyes passed Rose of Sharon’s eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl’s breath came short and gasping.

She said, “Yes.”

Ma smiled, “I knowed you would. I knowed!”....

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort[er] around 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 fingers 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. (501-502)

The starving man is saved by Rose of Sharon's milk, which symbolizes—in a shockingly literal way—the power that is hers as a women, by natural decree. Rose of Sharon embodies the maternal power and matriarchal values that give and sustain human life.

Solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence do not only affect the Joad family; they reach outside the family including all who, because of their similar situation, share the fundamental needs of shelter and sustenance. This communal spirit constantly grows, encompassing the people the Joads meet along the way. The communal mentality made evident through Rose of Sharon's life-saving action is offered in contrast to the independent, competitive patriarchal structure evident in Oklahoma and California where the desire to maximize profit creates human wreckage. Through the novel's development the reader comes to realize that the matriarchal values of solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence
are the most beneficial not only to the family but to society as a whole.

Matriarchy and patriarchy are, most basically, distinguished by two opposing sets of values. Patriarchal values include individualism, isolation, and competition while matriarchy affirms cooperation and community solidarity. The contrast between the values associated with matriarchy and patriarchy are captured in *The Grapes of Wrath*’s third chapter in the famous passage that describes a turtle’s struggle to cross the highway:

...at last the center of balance was reached, the front tipped down, the front legs scratched at the pavement, and it [the turtle] was up...Now the going was easy, and all the legs worked, and the shell boosted along, waggling from side to side. A sedan driven by a forty-year-old woman approached. She saw the turtle and swung to the right, off the highway, the wheels lifted for a moment and then settled. The car skidded back onto the road, and went on, but more slowly. The turtle had jerked into its shell, but now it hurried on, for the highway was burning hot.

And now a light truck approached, and as it came near, the driver saw the turtle and swerved to hit it. His front wheel struck the edge of the shell, flipped the turtle like a
tiddly-wink, spun it like a coin, and rolled it off the highway. The truck went back to its course along the right side. (15-16)

This passage emphasizes the radical contrasts between patriarchy and matriarchy. The woman driver views all life as valuable and strives to preserve it when faced with a choice to either maintain or destroy life. The male driver lacks the woman's connection to all life. He regards himself as an individual, disconnected from other animals. For him, the turtle is a target to aim at, to dominate, to kill.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, women are thus associated with these more generalized matriarchal values. Ma explains the differences between matriarchy and patriarchy, in response to Pa's frustration over their changing roles:

[Pa] “Funny! Woman takin' over the fambly. Woman sayin' we'll do this here, an' we’ll go there. An' I don' even care.”

“Woman can change better'n a man,” Ma said soothingly. “Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head. Don' you mind. Maybe—well, maybe nex year we can get a place.”

“We got nothin', now,” Pa said. “Comin' a long time—no work, no crops. What we gonna do then? How we gonna git
stuff to eat? An’ I tell you Rosasharn ain’t so far from due. Git so I hate to think. Go diggin’ back to a ol’ time to keep from thinkin’. Seems like our life’s over an’ done.”

“No, it ain’t,” Ma smiled. “It ain’t, Pa. An’ that’s one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk—gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain’t gonna die out. People is goin’ on—changin’ a little, maybe, but goin’ right on.” (467)

Pa, representing the patriarchal system, is unable to adapt to this new situation of need. As a product of capitalist patriarchy, Pa is virtually incapable of seeing himself as a part of all humanity. He has seen himself in relation to his neighbors in terms of wealth and land, but has not yet acknowledged the deeper human link among all people. The new reality that faces Pa is almost too much to bear, so he escapes into his memories of the past. Rugged individualism and independence isolate Pa, who has basically given up hope. His faith in his ability to provide for the family has been “jerked” too many times. It is, however, interesting to note that in this passage Pa uses Ma’s term “fambly”; perhaps it signals that he is coming to
recognize what Ma already knows, that their survival—physical, mental, and emotional—depends on maintaining family solidarity.

Ma’s view of the family’s upheaval and displacement is less fatalistic than Pa’s. For Ma, women are more adaptable in difficult situations because they feel connected to humanity and the earth through their ability to create and sustain life. Women do not experience the same kind of jarring and isolation because they recognize they are part of a bigger picture that encompasses the past, present, and future. The connection between women and their children grants women a sense of continuity; they are born, have children, and die, but the process is natural and flowing.

The human connection and continuity Ma identifies with matriarchy extends to all humanity, not just the immediate family. Ma explains:

“When you’re young Rosasharn, ever’thing that happens is a thing all by itself. It’s a lonely thing. I know, I ’member, Rosasharn.” Her mouth loved the name of her daughter.

“You’re gonna have a baby, Rosasharn, and that’s somepin to you lonely and away. That’s gonna hurt you, an’ the hurt’ll be lonely hurt, an’ this here tent is alone the worl’, Rosasharn.” She whipped the air for a moment to drive a buzzing blow fly on, and the big shining fly circled the tent
twice and zoomed out into the blinding sunlight. And Ma went on, "They's a time of change, an' when that comes, dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin', an' bearin' an' dyin' is two pieces of the same thing. An' then things ain't lonely any more. An' then a hurt don't hurt so bad, 'cause it ain't a lonely hurt no more, Rosasharn. I wisht I could tell you so you'd know, but I can't." (230)

In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck, like Briffault, suggests that the connection Ma describes between humanity and nature is far superior to the isolation, independence, and individualism endorsed by patriarchal society. And, furthermore, such positive matriarchal values can be claimed and acted on by men as well as women. Both Tom and Jim Casy demonstrate their matriarchal values.

As the family drives to California, Tom and his younger brother, Al, take turns driving the Hudson Super 6. Al takes pleasure in hitting animals when the opportunity presents itself, while Tom, like the woman when confronted by the turtle, purposely avoids killing them. Tom is Ma's favorite because he shares her mission to keep the family together. Tom stays with the family as long as circumstances allow, while Noah and Connie abandon the family, and Al, indicating the ascension of matriarchy at the novels close, joins his fiancee's clan.
After Jim Casy is killed trying to nurture and protect the poor migrant workers, whom he regards as part of his human family, Tom leaves the family. Yet, he is not abandoning them. He accepts the human race and true to the matriarchal values embodied in his mother seeks to protect all the Okies and poor people by uniting them to stand together in the face of the capitalist “money machines.” In the end, Tom sees all people as related and regards them as part of his family.

At the novel’s conclusion, Ma, Rose of Sharon, Tom, and Jim Casy have all embraced a definition of community very different from the community they left in Oklahoma, which revealed the disastrous effect private property has on families and the larger community. That community was at its very root competitive, as neighbors worked against one another to further their own interests. As Tom travels home from prison, he explains the relationship between neighbors to preacher Jim Casy:

Albert Rance took his family, kids an’ dogs an’ all, into Oklahoma City one Christmus. Thay was gonna visit with Albert’s cousin. Well folks aroun’ here thought Albert moved away without sayin’ nothing’—figgered maybe he got debts or some woman’s squarin’ off at him. When Albert come back a week later there wasn’t a thing lef’ in his
house—stove was gone, beds was gone, winda frames was gone, an' eight feet of plankin' was gone off the south side of the house so you could look right through her. He come drivin' home just as Muley Graves was going away with the doors an' the well pump. Took Albert two weeks drivin' aroun' the neighbors' 'fore he got his stuff back. (45)

Such competition, encouraged by capitalist patriarchy, isolates families and communities, which play an inferior role to the land. Land divides the people into small family groups, and even the small family groups are undermined and eventually destroyed in a system that places primary value on private property. As sons and daughters reach adulthood, sons strive to buy their own land and compete against their families. Daughters marry men with land so the family is divided yet again. Alliance and community are established by the land, not by blood links and are, thus, tenuous and potentially damaging.

Steinbeck portrays capitalism as the nameless, faceless bank—the monster that removes people from the land and from whom the displaced farmers can exact no revenge. Once the Joads arrive in California, Steinbeck reveals that a minority of private property owners control the majority of the wealth. In an effort to protect their individual interests, the owners band together in the Farmers'
Association to employ the cheapest labor and accumulate the largest profits possible; meanwhile, they remain blind to the human suffering they cause. The Association sets the prices and wages; all landowners are bound by the Association’s decisions; the Farmers’ Association of California and the bank monster of Oklahoma are the same thing—devices by which people are isolated and exploited in the quest for wealth and power that private property secures for only a few. Unfortunately, as long as private property exists, so will the exploitation of the landless.

IV. CONCLUSION

My first interest in exploring *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck’s message grows out of my intention to teach English to secondary students. While millions of high school students read the novel every year, I suspect they come away with a message vastly different from the message I came away with and the message I believe Steinbeck wished to impart to his readers. The first words that many student read regarding *The Grapes of Wrath* appear on the novel’s cover. My Bantam edition quotes *Time Magazine* on its cover, describing Steinbeck’s “masterpiece” as the...epic chronicle of man’s struggle against injustice and inhumanity...The story of the Joads and their journey to
California, "the golden land," is not so much the story of one family and one time, but the story of the courage and passion of all men throughout history. "Great...impassioned and exciting. It is Steinbeck’s best novel, his toughest and tenderest, his roughest written and his most mellifluous, his most melodramatic, his angriest and most idyllic."

Now, after my own study of the novel, what strikes me most about this description is what it leaves out. First, it generalizes the "struggle" that the Joads endure. The cover description smothers Steinbeck’s critique of capitalist patriarchy within the specific context of early twentieth century American industrialization because it very pointedly states that the novel describes men’s struggle "throughout history." "Man’s struggle against injustice and inhumanity" is emphasized and equated with power and private property. Furthermore, nothing is mentioned of Ma’s struggle to maintain the family and the emphasis Steinbeck places on matriarchal values is invisible. This description also ignores the novel’s critical development of a new community based on a matriarchal social order. Instead, "the golden land" is pointed out as the most significant and important aspect of the novel—totally ignoring the communal spirit evident at the novel’s conclusion. This general summary, which guides the high school reader and teacher,
silences Steinbeck's message for cooperation among all people, his call for the development of a renewed communal spirit.

My second interest, as a contemporary female reader and heir to more than two decades of feminist debate in political and literary arenas, is Steinbeck's endorsement of matriarchy as the preferred social structure. I have been taught to be somewhat wary of such celebration of women's maternal power. Historically, women's maternal aspect has been emphasized over any or their other qualities or capacities. At the same time, maternal values have been viewed as lodged exclusively in the female. Though acknowledged as praiseworthy characteristics by a patriarchal society, matriarchal values—and by implication, women—have been viewed as inferior to the patriarchal values of independence, isolation, and competitiveness. Barrie Thorne, in “Feminist Rethinking of the Family: An Overview,” explains the feminine situation:

...motherhood has been glorified as women's chief vocation and central definition...contemporary feminists have challenged the definition of women by their reproductive status and argued, as Juliet Mitchell has written, that when motherhood is used as a mystique, “it becomes an instrument to oppression.” The contemporary women's
movement has worked to give women a choice not to mother....Feminists have emphasized the right of all women...to have activities beyond motherhood...hence, efforts to bring women into an equal position in the labor force and to diminish their ideological encapsulation by the family. (11)

Thus, men have considered the maternal role as the one and only appropriate role for women, and have required women to define themselves accordingly. Conversely, men have been discouraged and even attacked for displaying nurturing or "maternal" behaviors, as is reflected in the pejorative term "effeminate." Patriarchal society has endorsed and encouraged maternal values in women, perhaps as a way, historically, to control female sexuality, to make sure the heirs to the property are definitely the patriarchs' biological offspring. At the same time, patriarchal society has remained suspicious of "maternal" values as a system for all society.

In Thorne's description of the family, it is obvious that in patriarchal society women have become associated with a number of specific values and functions, while men are a variable for an entirely different group of values and activities. In contrast to this separation of the sexes, Steinbeck advocates the equalization of the relationship between the sexes and recognizes that values described
as matriarchal reside in both men and women. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, women are not relegated solely to the maternal realm and men are not required to deny maternal values. Steinbeck portrays neither sex as superior to the other; for Steinbeck, cooperation between the sexes is crucial to the survival of humanity. In this system, individuals are able to live their convictions and values regardless of their gender. Steinbeck illustrates this point in the characters of Tom and Ma. Their relationship, and the relationships they strive to create with their family members and fellow human beings, is based on equality and appreciation, not on animosity or control. Tom, as well as Ma, exhibits matriarchal values.

These maternal behaviors and values are not confined to the nuclear family. Rose of Sharon, in what might appear an act of "immorality" if seen only through the idea that women's sexuality and maternal powers are to be contained within the individual family. Instead it becomes an act of great morality in the novel, because Rose of Sharon saves the life of another.

Affirming "maternal" behaviors would for Steinbeck reverse our contemporary pursuit of individualism and bring about a more humane community. When people recognize and acknowledge their ties to one another, as Steinbeck urges, the competitiveness and isolation of capitalist patriarchy is replaced by interdependence and
solidarity. Steinbeck explains his vision of community best when he wrote in his journal that

The Joads and those like them must abandon their felt notions of individualism and move toward an “I to We” relationship with other migrants if they are to survive the economic and spiritual challenge of their displacement.

(Britch, 98)

As Tom leaves his family, he echoes this rejection of individualism and embraces community:

‘Two are better that one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif’ up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up.’...

Tom laughed uneasily, “Well maybe like Casy says, a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one—an’ then—”

“Then what, Tom?”

“Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know
supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise
an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. See?"

(464)
The matriarchal social structure Steinbeck advocates, then, in The
Grapes of Wrath is based on equality and a community concerned
with humanity rather than organized around individual "self-
interest," private property, and power over others.
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