



## Patriarchal Tradition in China: With Special Reference To *The Good Earth*

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**ABSTRACT:-** Pearl S. Buck(1892-1973), the Nobel Prize winner is a very distinguished American novelist. She has extensively written on Chinese life and culture. *The Good Earth* is Pulitzer Prize winning novel which was published in 1931. In *The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck highlights the pathetic condition of women in patriarchal Chinese society during twentieth century especially through women characters O-Lan, Lotus, Pear blossom, Wang Lung's aunty and Cukoo etc. This paper aims at depicting the status of women under patriarchal Chinese society and social condition of China. This can be done by critical and analytical study of Buck's renowned novel *The Good Earth*.

**KEY WORD:-** Concubine, , foot binding, O-Lan, Patriarchal Chinese society, etc.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Pearl S. Buck was born in 1892 in Hillsboro, West Virginia and taken to China as an infant before the turn of the century. The daughter of Presbyterian missionary, she lived with her family in a town in the interior instead of the traditional missionary compound. Buck grew up speaking Chinese as well as English and received most of her education from her mother. She received an M.A. from Cornell and taught English literature in several Chinese universities. She was forced to leave the country in 1932 because of the revolution.

She was never quite sure where she actually belonged to, or whether she belonged to anywhere. Although she was born in America but she was brought up in China where she was an infant. Pearl S. Buck's parents were Presbyterian missionary in China. She was enjoyed two different worlds one is America where she was born and second is China where she was brought. She was simultaneously an outsider and insider in two different societies. She felt continuously disoriented and displaced. She knew that China was not her home, but she had never known any other. Her father was grimly indifferent to her emotional needs and her mother reminded her every day that they were in exiles. Her father deprived her of the pristine happiness of childhood. It builds much to shape her adult relationship with the world. Numerous experiences mold her to become an effective writer and make her the way of critical thinking.

Pearl S. Buck's award winning novel *The Good Earth* which was published in March, 1931 and she became famous throughout the world for the moving story of Chinese peasant life of twentieth century namely Wang Lung and his family. The first time the world saw the Chinese peasant as a protagonist character in the novel. The novel became best seller in the United States, and soon it was translated in many languages. She received Pulitzer Prize and William Dean Howell Medal for renowned fiction in 1935. She received prestigious Nobel Prize in 1938 for her masterpiece novel *The Good Earth*, and her two biographies of her parents, *The Exile* and *Fighting Angel* both were published in 1936.

The award winning novel *The Good Earth* is poignant tale of Chinese peasant life. The novel is set in a traditional Confucian society in pre-Communist China where faithfulness to the patriarchal system is the core value. "The story takes place in the Anhwei province and follows the life of Wang Lung who is a Chinese farmer. It begins with the day of his marriage to O-lan and ends with his days of old age."(Jan, 1).

Pearl S. Buck narrates the story, a full of human tenderness who knows the human spirit as intimately as she knows the eventful peasant-life of China. Patriarchy is the system where male dominants all sphere of life. Man is ruling over the family. Woman had very low status in the society in Chinese patriarchal society.

Woman had to suffer and face maltreatment under the patriarchal society. Woman had no voice to speak, only had to be silent and obey whatever was dictated.

The Novel, *The Good Earth* begins with the day of Wang Lung's marriage with a kitchen slave O-lan. She is a slave in the House of Hwang the leading family of the region. The very first time Wang Lung meets with her and sees her feet which was not bound he becomes very upset. In Chinese society the bound feet was considered as beauty and significant. Pearl S. Buck introduced the barbarous custom of foot binding in her novels. The evil custom of foot binding started in 10<sup>th</sup> century and continued into 1940's and was banned in 1911 officially. At the age of 3 to 4 of girl's feet was bound so tightly that it should be in 3 inch length from heel to toe. Such custom was to please her husband. The girl whose feet were not bound, it was very difficult for a girl to marry a man in the Chinese society. Wang Lung never likes O-Lan because of her unbound feet.

So, from the very birth, O-Lan has been the victim of slavery. Daughters were considered not more than commodity in patriarchal Chinese society. They were sold by poor farmer families to survive the family in natural calamities. Wealthy people bought the girls and kept them as a slave. In the same manner, O-Lan is bought and used as a Kitchen slave at Hwang House in the novel *The Good Earth*. On the very first day of her wedding, O-Lan prepares delicious dishes and serves to the guests invited by Wang Lung to participate in his Wedding ceremony. Wang Lung's relatives, his friends and Wang Lung himself appreciate her for such tasty cookery. Wang Lung feels pride for her. In reply to Wang Lung's praise, O-Lan replies: "I have been Kitchen slave since I went into the House of Hwang." (Buck, 22) In the same way, on New Year, O-Lan proves herself as a good Kitchen slave by preparing such a delicious cake which only the rich people eat at the feast. Wang Lung feels pride in his heart because there is no other woman in the village able to do so. As one can read the Great Lady's words when Wang Lung goes there to take O-lan, "Take her and use her well. She is a good slave, although somewhat slow and stupid; and does well what she is told; and also she has a good temper." (Buck, 18)

Women's role was very limited to domestic chores and working in the field under Chinese patriarchal society. Women's work is to transform into wealth for their husband and her family. They have to depend economically on husbands; they were destitute of property and inheritance rights. They were disposed of all right and had to obey the dictates of their parents. They were not allowed to remarry if their spouse died, being harness by system of polygamy and prostitution. It has been well established tradition that when the husband dies, this wife also commits suicide as an expression of perfect faithfulness and conviction that it is better for a wife to go heaven with her husband than to live alone on the earth. (Yang, 178)

Under such rigid customs, women's were shaped in patriarchal society which ignores violence against women. Women have very limited roles to perform such as a wife, concubine, prostitute and a slave locked in domestic limitations. As described in books such as 'Percepts for women' and 'Classics for Girls', "women were instructed to be obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, respectful, reticent and unselfish in character." (Croll, 14)

Pearl S. Buck has drawn many women characters from the novel *The Good Earth* in patriarchal point of view. Some women characters are not even named in the novel; it shows the status of women in the society. They have no identity in the society. There is his Uncle's wife, the name of the character is not mentioned in the story, but she makes O-Lan's life very bitter when Wang Lung becomes rich. She helps Wang Lung to bring a concubine Lotus from the Tea house. She is a very lazy woman that she does not care about the house such as domestic matters that she has to do her duty. She is depicted as a pessimistic woman that once she fails she thinks that she has an evil destiny. To beget girl child is considered as evil sign in the Chinese society. She always blames her daughter about the suffering of her family. As she remarks "Ah, it is something you do not know--to have an evil destiny! Where the fields of others bear good rice and wheat, ours bear weeds; where the houses of others stand for a hundred years, the earth itself shakes under ours so that the walls crack; where others bear men, I, although I conceive a son, will yet give birth to a girl--ah, evil destiny!" (Buck, 60) The depiction of her is obviously all negative. It is because the slave bears slave that as the signature of the bad luck in the future. She thinks that the girl makes bad the fields and the house. This is the internalized level of the culture of silence that always faced by women. The thing that she is different is she could speak about the unjust treat that women get in the society that all of them are blamed to her. She feels that no one in the world does see her effort to avoid from the evil destiny that she always thinks. But one thing that society notices from the condition that is she is the reason of the terrible condition in the family that in the bad condition. Some of the indoctrinating to her is depicting herself as someone who will be blamed if there is an only daughter and deleting the fact that she could change the condition if she wants.

Keeping concubines are custom of wealthy people of feudal China. Wang Lung's passion burns for Lotus flower of Tea house. He loves her because of her bound feet and fair skin. Such qualities are deemed to be beautiful in feudal China. Having concubine is the symbol of the wealthy and rich people. Wang Lung feels pride to buy Lotus Flower as a concubine. It states that "And it was a pride to Wang Lung in the village that men mentioned with envy the woman in his inner court....(Buck, 230). Wang Lung keeps Lotus Flower as a flower in his home. Although Lotus was a common concubine but Wang Lung was very much fascinated with

her so she takes it as an advantage. She lives like a mistress and other hand O- Lan the mother of his sons and lives like a concubine. It is because of her ugly feet and face, which never satisfies Wang Lung in all days of his life. Therefore Wang Lung always inclines on Lotus and her beauty. Beauty becomes strength for the Lotus concubine. Unbound feet becomes weakness for the O-Lan but she becomes boon for the Wang Lung in his life. It is O-Lan who works hard in the field and the house for the Wang Lung and family. If Lotus had been she could not have worked in the field as well as in the house. Nevertheless Wang Lung inclines towards Lotus Flower all the days of his life.

Pearl Blossom is one of the beautiful child-slave in the Wang Lung's great house. She is a child slave who is bought by Wang Lung in the last days of his life. She was sold by her parents because of immense famine and drought in the village.

She only throws herself down before Lotus and she knocks her head on the tiles and she moans forth, "Oh, my mistress, not I--not I—I am afraid of him for my life--" (Buck, 301)

The quotation above is clearly shown the life of Pear Blossom in the house of Wang Lung. She is still child of ten years who is afraid of any strange things which occur in the house of Wang Lung. She gets fear immediately when she sees Wang Lung's cousin that comes from the war as an army brings the knife everywhere. The fear of Pearl Blossom is something logical that is because she is still a child that is natural tendency for children to be afraid of something strange. Moreover, the stranger is asking of something that she could not do yet. She is still new in the house and she has no such types of experiences in her life. She does not know how to behave in master's house. She is learning still in the house. She is extremely innocent girl as Wang Lung's daughter tells about the manner that she feels about the men that can do anything upon women that can be her future. She cries anytime she wants if she feels there is something wrong that can harm her. "Then the young maid put her hands together piteously and cried as though she would die of weeping and fear and her little body was all trembling with her fear, and she looked from this face to that, beseeching with her weeping." (Buck, 158) She is afraid of him that she never sees him before. Wang Lung's cousin wants to show the power over her. She loses her control. The slave can't refuse the order of his master. But Pear Blossom is still innocent child she has no fear of refusing to obey any orders. Being a slave, she can't refuse what the lord told to do, but because she is still a child that she is still learning to be "a good woman" later in the future.

Cuckoo is another concubine and the last female character in the novel *The Good Earth*. She is a concubine in the great House of Hwang previously where O-Lan was a kitchen slave in the same house. Every works were divided in the great House of Hwang, she was working in the great house for the pleasure in the bed. And O-lan was working as a kitchen slave in the same house. The house of Hwang's family becomes poor due to gambling, opium and lust for sexual pleasure. Every day he needs a fresh girl to quench his lust. Then Cuckoo is sold to the Tea house. Tea house is such place where people go for pleasure and fulfill their sexual desires. The Lotus flower was also with the cuckoo in the Tea house where Wang Lung meets and with the help of her aunty she is bought by Wang Lung. He takes her to his house as a concubine. Since Lotus comes with Wang Lung and Cuckoo also comes with Lotus as a servant to the Wang Lung's home.

Pearl S. Buck's major novels based on China and show her keen observation of Chinese society during 19th and early 20th C. She is successful enough in bringing out rigid traditions in all her major works. In *The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck succeeds in bringing out the varied images of women such as 'Kitchen slave', 'sex object', 'submissive housewife', 'bold and hard working', 'selfish and pleasure seeking' etc. through her women characters like O-Lan, Wang Lung's aunt, Lotus Flower, Cuckoo. So, it elaborates the prevailing patriarchal social traditions and its impact on women and the Chinese society as a whole in the best manner.

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