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The Subjugation Of Women In Chinese Culture: A Study Of Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth

Ms. Jacqueline J. Felix¹, Dr. V. Rejulin Jerin Kumar²

¹Reg.no. 20213094012019, PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Postgraduate Studies and Research in English, Muslim Arts College, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India- 627012

²Assistant Professor/Supervisor, Centre for Postgraduate Studies and Research in English, Muslim Arts College, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India- 627012

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Abstract

Women in the Chinese society were powerless and were confined to their houses. They were severely oppressed and were also denied the opportunity to participate in public life. The patriarchal Chinese society viewed women as social burdens. Female infanticide was very common in China, as the birth of girl children was considered as a source of misery and disgrace for the families. It was also practiced as a way to protect family resources from getting wasted. The Good Earth, reflects the predicament of women in the Chinese society. The novel The Good Earth by Pearl S. Buck was published in the year 1931. It is the first book in her House of Earth trilogy, followed by the novels Sons and A House Divided. The Good Earth is Pearl S. Buck's most renowned novel. Being one of the most celebrated works of that time, it was translated into more than thirty languages and was also made into a movie in the year 1937. It was the bestselling novel in the United States for two successive years and has also won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 1932. The Good Earth addresses the family life in the early twentieth century traditional Chinese society, particularly the subjugation of women.

Keywords: Oppression, female infanticide, slavery, foot binding, concubinage.

INTRODUCTION

Women were not given a proper recognition in the Chinese society. They were deprived of every rights and social advantages. In the novel The Good Earth, Pearl S. Buck questions the injustices faced by women in the early twentieth century Chinese society. Pearl S. Buck was an American writer. Being raised in China, in a bilingual environment by her American parents, she was well versed in both English and Chinese. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1938 for her accurate

representation of peasant life in China. Buck was the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. She was a supporter for the rights of women and other minority groups.

The *Good Earth* is about a Chinese farmer named Wang Lung and his family in agrarian China. It begins on Wang Lung's wedding day, when he arrives at the House of Hwang to claim his bride O-lan, who is a slave in that house. O-lan is a simple and hardworking woman and Wang Lung is satisfied in his life with her. Together they work hard on their land and save money to buy land from the Hwang family. But due to famine and drought, the family flees to a large southern city after selling everything, except their land and house. The family lives in abject poverty there, despite their hard work. When a riot erupts between the poor and the rich, Wang Lung and O-lan end up looting a rich household. The whole family come back to their village after this.

Wang Lung uses the robbed money wisely and works hard on the land. He prospers and later buys a concubine named Lotus. Soon O-lan falls sick and eventually dies. Wang Lung feels a void in his life, as he realizes the true worth of O-lan. In his old age, he desires nothing but peace in his family. But he often gets disturbed by the constant disputes between his sons and their wives. His only comfort is a young servant girl named Pear Blossom, who looks after him. At the end of the novel, Wang Lung overhears his sons planning to sell the land. He is disheartened and he tries to dissuade them. The sons pretend to obey him for the time being, but are actually determined to sell the land after Wang Lung's death.

Traditional Chinese society is highly hierarchical. Being viewed as outsiders in the male dominated families, the only way through which a woman could gain attention and position was by giving birth to a male child. Through *The Good Earth*, Buck exposes Chinese women for sacrificing their life in the name of culture and tradition, regardless of the harsh treatment they face from the society. They are too ignorant to react, as they think that it is women's duty to remain silent, while enduring all the pain inflicted upon them. This novel clearly portrays the cruelties and injustices faced by Chinese women. The character O-lan is a representation of the whole oppressed Chinese women community.

The common practice of female infanticide proves the inequality between men and women. Daughters are considered as burdens. No one would celebrate the birth of a girl child as it is considered as an ill omen. They are always associated with bad luck and misfortunes. When O-lan gives birth to a child, she herself is sad as she knows that Wang Lung would be disappointed to hear this news. So, she reluctantly tells him the news and Wang Lung is highly displeased as expected. He thinks that the Gods must be angry with him as he gets a daughter. He regards this new born daughter as nothing but an extra mouth to be fed. No one rejoices in the birth of this girl child. Previously, when O-lan gives birth to a boy, Wang Lung gives a grand feast to the whole village to celebrate his happiness. Being highly superstitious like most Chinese people, Wang Lung and O-lan, at many instances pretend that their son is a sick female child. They do this in order to protect their son from the evil spirits, by tricking them. During the period of starvation, O-lan gives birth to her second daughter and she immediately kills the child. She does not think twice before committing this heinous crime. She would have never killed the child if it was a boy. Wang Lung's gender discrimination never changes till the end. In his old age, he constantly visits temple and prays to gods for grandsons, even after realizing that his three sons are of no use to him.

The discrimination towards female children persists throughout the novel. Poor families selling girl children is a regular occurrence in ancient China. When Wang Lung and his family go through a hard time during the famine, O-lan suggests selling their daughter in order for them to survive. She remembered herself being sold as a slave when she was a child. And even though she has experienced the hardships of being a female slave, she could not help, but suggests selling their daughter. The physical and sexual abuses faced by female slaves are evident from O-lan's words.

“I was beaten with a leather thong which had been halter for one of the mules, and it hung upon the kitchen wall” . . .

“Aye, beaten or carried to a man's bed, as the whim was, and not to one man's only but to any that might desire her that night, and the young lords bickered and bartered with each other for this slave or that and said, ‘then you tonight, I tomorrow,’ and when they were all alike wearied of a slave the men servants bickered and bartered for what the young lord left, and this before a slave was out of childhood- if she were pretty.” (Buck 133)

Female slaves faced double oppression in rich households, for being a woman and also a slave. Due to the strict patriarchal system in China, male slaves were always in high demand and were only owned by the elite families who could afford them. Female slaves were mistreated by their lords and even by the male slaves, despite their dedication and hard work. The common practice of selling girl children and the injustices faced by female slaves clearly indicate that women were treated as objects rather than human beings.

The character O-lan is a perfect example of an ideal Chinese wife. O-lan works hard, both in the house and on the land, for the wellbeing of her family. She is an obedient daughter-in-law, a loyal wife and a loving mother. There are instances in the novel, where O-lan works hard without rest, even when she is pregnant. But Wang Lung never appreciates any of her efforts. Even if he is thankful, he hides it because of the Chinese traditional belief that women are bound to do these tasks without any appreciation. “O-lan is a strong, competent person, essential to the household economy, who achieves many of her ambitions; she is betrayed (but not broken) as much by her husband's weak character as by social attitudes” (Hayford 6). Male superiority was the central canon of the traditional Chinese society. A wife is supposed to obey her husband, without any question due to the strict Chinese rules. From this, it is evident that the ancient Chinese society actually used women's expected code of conduct, as an excuse to oppress them.

Majority of Wang Lung's wealth is contributed by the jewels that O-lan stole from the rich house in the city. After becoming rich, he criticizes her for being an ugly woman with big feet. As Chinese women are expected to have small feet, they are forced to bind their feet from a very young age. Women are expected to go through this extremely painful procedure, just for the sake of beauty and also to impress men. “For next to a good face, a woman was immeasurably proud of her small feet, as modern women are proud of their small ankles, for these feet gave her an immediate distinction in any social gathering. Her bound feet were painful, unmercifully painful, during the time of growing youth, but if she had a well-shaped pair, it was her pride for life” (Lin 160). The horrible practice of foot-binding illustrates the brutality faced by women in ancient China. It shows how women are forced to obey meaningless traditions without even considering the consequences.

When O-lan is no more beautiful to Wang Lung, he marries a concubine named Lotus. To Wang Lung, Lotus is his source of pride. He takes great pleasure in watching her bound feet. She is not much of a use to him, as it is difficult for her to even walk with her bound feet. She always stays inside her court due to this. A concubine's only duty is to delight her master. She is not given any household duties or responsibilities other than this. All she has to do is to use her beauty, to gain the favour of her master. And Lotus succeeds in that, as Wang Lung is fully fascinated by her beauty and her small feet. She is kept inside her court as an object that shows how rich Wang Lung is. Wang Lung's possession of Lotus causes him to gain more respect and position among the villagers. Because keeping concubines shows that the master of the house is rich enough to feed another mouth, even if she is of no use to him, other than fulfilling his sexual desires. As their sole purpose was to reproduce and as they were unable to marry, concubines never earned a position in society. This proves the exclusion of women in the twentieth century Chinese Society.

The entire novel can essentially be viewed as Wang Lung's relation with three women. O-lan, his wife serves as his pillar of support, since their marriage. Lotus, his concubine is his source of pride and pleasure. Pear Blossom, his young servant girl provides comfort and support in his old age. All these women are indebted to serve Wang Lung, as none of them accomplish success on their own. Traditional Chinese society is extremely patriarchal. Chinese women were destined to be obedient since their birth. No matter how intelligent, beautiful and capable they are, they face discrimination despite their role in the society and family. Pearl S. Buck strongly questions oppression against women in the Chinese society. Through the character O-lan, she criticizes the passive role of women in the Chinese society regardless of their bitter life experiences.

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