

SON OF THE SOIL IN PEARL S.BUCK'S *THE GOOD EARTH*: A STUDY

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Abstract

Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck is a story of a simple farming family set in the early twentieth century in a rural area of China. Buck's life in rural China gave her a vast insight into the minds of Chinese farmers. The protagonist of the novel Wang lung is farmer by occupation and he depends totally on land for livelihood. Land becomes the vital force in his life as he was born, brought up and protected by his land. That is besides the economic advantages, the land becomes the central living force for him and he develops deep sentimental attachment to his land and the values associated with agrarian culture. Thus when he was forced to sell or leave the land he feels helpless, miserable and loses his sense of belonging and finally he dies on his land. In short he feels like a newly born babe separated from its mother when the umbilical cord is severed. The present paper aims at depicting not just a Chinese farmer but a "universal farmer" a person who knows that riches and security come from the good earth itself.

From the times immemorial, man seems to be passionate towards the earth on which he lives. He has been worshipping the mother earth as a goddess in various forms in almost all the societies. His love for the soil from which he generates all the materials for his livelihood is everything for him. Right from Old Stone Age till today, mother earth is the main source for man to experience and enjoy a permanent, peaceful and contented life. Man and his attachment to the land has been an interesting theme in many of the classics of the world literature. In languages like Chinese, German, French, English, the life sketches of the people and their feelings and ideas about mother earth which they want to possess have been brought out by the writers in various genres. Among these great writers, Pearl S. Buck is one very important and significant. Her love and compassion for the poor farmers of China has been dramatically portrayed in her novel *The Good Earth*.

Pearl S. Buck the prolific, American author, who was far ahead of her time, was awarded Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for her rich and genuine epic description of the Chinese peasant life and masterpieces of biography. Pearl S. Buck who was deeply touched by the simplicity and purity of the Chinese peasant life wrote the novel *The Good Earth* which was published in 1931. With this book pearl buck established herself in the literary world. The book was on the best seller list for 21 months and earned her a Pulitzer Prize as "the best novel published during the year by an American author" She became famous throughout the world for

her moving story of the joys and tragedies of the Chinese farmer Wang Lung and his family. It was soon translated into more than thirty foreign languages; it has appeared in Chinese alone in at least seven different translations. *The Good Earth* was made into a Broadway play and a motion picture.

Buck born in her grandparents' home in Hillsboro was taken to China by her Presbyterian missionary parents, Caroline and Absalom Sydenstricker, when she was only 3 months old. Pearl's parents preferred to live among the Chinese rather than in a missionary compound.

"Happy for me that I had such parents, for instead of the narrow and conventional life of the white man in Asia, I lived with the Chinese people and spoke their tongue as I spoke my own. We learned by example to judge people by character and intelligence rather than by race or sect." (My Several Worlds, 1954)

Ms. Buck, who grew up in China, offers a keen insight into the struggles of the rural farming class of the early 1900's, highlighting their dependence on the fickle earth for survival and their dreams of becoming great landowners. Buck gives us a clear picture of the typical Chinese peasants, their values and their beliefs. She admired their traditional farming methods, which she believed, required no improvement. Buck performed her unique role as a brilliant writer to change the American image of the Chinese people in general. *The Good Earth* is a typical example of her talent in which she not only portrayed the Chinese farmers with love, affection and humanity but also depicted the ups and downs in their lives. As an American, Buck is a stranger to the lifestyle of the farmers. Though she lived among them during their prosperity and hardships, yet she had to study in great depth their varied culture which was totally different from hers. During the time when the novel was being written the Chinese society shows signs of modernization at the same time remaining deeply connected to ancient traditions and customs.

Pearl Buck highlights the life of a poor farmer, Wang Lung, the protagonist around whom the plot revolves as a representative of the Chinese farmers. He is portrayed as a simple and poor farmer who possesses the same primitive soul as his forefathers. His fortune clings on a single string that is the earth. For him the earth is the ruling power of his fortune as it gives him the full value of his labour. He worships the land and he seems to be made of the same stuff as the yellow brown earth. He has an intimate relationship with earth. Just as a child has towards his mother, he never wants to separate himself from the mother earth. He spends a great deal of his time in the field. He worships the earth deity with great devotion, thus it can be seen in the opening chapter, Wang Lung burning incense for the earth gods.

To Wang Lung, his land is more than just his sustenance and his livelihood. He believes that the "land is one's flesh and blood," as is the cornerstone of his being. He puts all his efforts, love, and devotion into his farmland as he depends upon the earth and he is forever grateful for the successful life that stems from it. Wang Lung deeply loves his life as a simple farmer as he feels that he belongs to the land and he cannot live with any fullness until he feels the land under his feet.

Wang Lung is a poor young peasant who lives in an earthen brick house with his father, who has arranged for him to marry a slave girl named O-lan from the Great House of Hwang, where the village's wealthiest landowner resides. Though he was very excited to get married yet he never forgets to take a look at his lovely fields. Buck has beautifully described through her compelling words the beauty of Wang Lung's land and the ever remaining soul of the typical Chinese farmer in Wang Lung.

“The farmer in Wang Lung was diverted for an instant and he stooped to examine the budding heads. They were empty as yet and waiting for the rain. He smelled the air and looked anxiously at the sky. Rain was there, dark in the clouds, heavy upon the wind. He would buy a stick of incense and place it in the little temple to the Earth God. On a day like this he would do it”. (Buck,1966,p.7).

On the way back home through the gates of the Great House of Hwang, Wang lung and O-lan stop at the temple in their field to burn incense in front of the gods of Earth and that is the moment of their marriage. As a poor farmer, Wang Lung has an intimate relationship with the earth. It is his god and he trusts it more than anything else. He spends a great deal of time in the fields all alone with nature. His religion is based on worshipping the earth deity, for whom he burns incense before the wedding feast. Through these events it can be observed that Wang Lung is frugal, hardworking, and modest.

O-Lan, Wang Lung's wife brings good fortune to the family. He considers himself lucky to find such a “woman not commonly found”. Olan is considered as a true companion of Wang lung, as she too acknowledges and respects the earth. Wang-Lung's progress from hardship to riches, diligent peasant to a wealthy landowner, is the direct result of his tending the land in meticulous manner, spending countless hours. The good earth has provided strength, sustenance, and happiness for Wang-Lung and his family. "There was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over into the sun...".(Buck, 1966,p.22) Any capital attainment earned is never spent frivolously, but he always turned it into more land. Owning land is essential to enhance his position in the social hierarchy, so possessing it made him proud and also worthy of respect.

When Wang Lung learns that the house of Hwang's is growing poor, he does not believe it but being shocked to discover them selling their land, he says:

“Sell their land! Then indeed are they growing poor. Land is one's flesh and blood.”(Buck,1966, p.37).

He says so because he feels that land is directly connected with life and thus he cannot imagine parting with it and is surprised to hear that the Hwang's would sell their land. As Wang Lung had respect and love towards the land which he considers his soul, he never wanted to miss the opportunity to buy some if he could. When he first buys a piece of land from the Hwang family, he was immensely happy. Buck ascribes Wang Lung's success to his continuing devotion to the land, and the Hwangs' decline to their distance from it.

However, when a devastating drought affects Wang Lung's community, his uncle tries to make him sell his land, but Wang Lung cries out in protest that he will never sell the land. He says that land is man's birthplace as well as his burial place.

“I shall never sell the land! Bit by bit, I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth.”(Buck,1966, p.61).

To Wang Lung, keeping the fields alive is just as important as keeping his own family alive; the destruction of the land means the downfall of his own family. O-lan, a strong and practical woman equally respects and values the land, and stands by Wang's decision not to sell the land. At last, the water in the pond dried into a cake of clay and the water even in the well also sunk so low that O-lan said to him, "If the children must drink and the old man have his hot

water the plants must go dry."Wang Lung answered with anger that broke into a sob, "Well, and they must all starve if the plants starve."(Buck,1966,p.71).

This clearly shows his great attachment to his land. Land becomes the vital force in his life as he was born, brought up and was protected by the land. That is, besides the economic advantages, the land becomes the central living force for him and he develops deep sentimental attachment to his land and the values associated with agrarian culture.

In spite of the hardships they had to undergo due to the changes in the weather, yet they tried to hold on to the land and to their farms as long as possible. Separation from their lands or farms left a void in their psyche, which was impossible to fill with anything else. Wang-Lung's family starved for many days but refused to sell their land even when they were going to the southern city for livelihood, since they felt that when they return from the city they will have the land to plough.

In the southern city, though O-Lan and the children turn to begging, Wang Lung, a self-reliant farmer, never stoops down to the level of begging, instead, works hard as a rickshaw puller to run his family. They find themselves aliens among their more metropolitan countrymen who look different and speak in a fast accent. They no longer starve, due to the free charitable meals in the city of rice gruel, but still live in adverse poverty. While living in the southern city, Wang Lung always yearns for the land. Although life in the city is hard and agonizing, the thought of his land assures peace for him. When Wang Lung learns that his second son has stolen a piece of meat from a woman, he feels desperate as he feels that his sons are growing up as thieves only because of their stay in the city. He also thinks that if they were staying on their land, they would have never done any such bad deed. He tells himself that they must go back to the land because city life is corrupt and evil.

Wang lung is upset as he is afraid he may never return to his land again and cries out, "Shall I never see it again" (Buck, 1966, p. 98). This statement shows Wang Lung's emotional attachment to his land. But a person in the neighborhood hut says that he is not alone and that this feeling and draught that prevents him from returning to his land will not last ever:"when the rich are too rich there are ways, and when the poor are too poor there are ways". The man goes on to say: "when the rich are too rich there is a way, and if I am not mistaken, that will come soon". (Buck, 1966, p. 98)

Eventually when a riot occurs, and a mass of people break into the local wealthy family's palace, Wang Lung encounters an obese rich man who hasn't managed to flee. The rich man is frantic, believing Wang Lung will kill him, and offers gold in exchange for his life. Wang Lung, who is strongly against stealing and committing deceptive actions in general, reasons that the man is giving him the money, and that the money would return him to his land. Wang Lung takes the man's entire gold and escapes from the palace, taking his family north once more. With the money from the city, Wang Lung builds a new house, buys an ox, farm tools, seeds, and even hires servants to help him work on the land and lives comfortably. Wang Lung's father, like Wang Lung, also cherishes a deep faith in the land. And he understands his son more than anybody else.

The wealth of the family is tied to the harvests of Wang Lung's land—the good earth of the novel. Wang Lung eventually becomes a prosperous man, with his riches mirroring the downfall of the Hwang family, who lose their connection to the land. Using the jewels O-Lan looted from the house in the city, they buy the House of Hwang's remaining land. Upon the purchase of rice land from the House of Hwang he shouts, "To those at the great house it means nothing, this handful of land, but to me it means how much!" All this the rain provides to Wang

and his family. One of the reasons why Wang lung wanted to buy more and more land was that if he had kept his money in the form of silver, gold and grains etc., he could be robbed of them easily. This he had seen in the Great house in the southern city. But, if he kept his money in the form of land, there was nothing anyone could rob him of. By investing all his money in the form of land, he was also safeguarding his money in a most secure way in insecure surroundings such as those existed in the region around Wang lung's village.

Wang Lung by recollecting the idle young lords of the fallen House of Hwang sets his sons to work; guiding them and giving them work what their little hands could do; so that they learn to respect and value land, the one that gives food. By the end of the fifth year, Wang worked a little in the fields because he was busy in business, marketing produce and directing men. He was greatly hampered by his lack of education and decides to send his sons to the town school.

As Wang Lung becomes more prosperous and wealthy, the yearly flood washes all of his farm land, stopping him and his servants' farming activity. Wang Lung, finds himself restless and idle every day with no work to do, falls to the vices of the cities rich food and prostitutes. It is these same decadent practices that finally destroyed the Hwangs. His wealth creates for him many problems, but Buck does not seem to imply that wealth alone causes these problems. Rather, it is the idleness and moral decay that often comes with wealth which is at the root of Wang Lung's difficulties. Buck in this manner, states the importance of morality for a typical Chinese peasant group or for a whole race as an unavoidable thing.

As Wang Lung grows old, he rents out his farm land to the tenants. His eldest son persuades him to buy the old estate of the House of Hwang in town. He felt it both as a means of moving out from the place where his disgraceful uncle and his wife live, and also as a symbol of Wang Lung's elevated social position. Though Wang Lung initially dismisses the suggestion, he is now gratified that he can take the place of the Old Master of Hwang who once intimidated him so much. So, to live up to the standard in the society, Wang Lung moves from his rural mud house, to an enormous mansion far away from his fields. Wang Lung took up the role of a wealthy landowner due to societal pressure, but "still one thing remains to him and it is his love for his land" it is because of his roots that he always returns to the land every spring. But although Wang Lung is the head of a three generation extended family who live in luxury with numerous servants yet he cannot find peace.

The last scene of the book is noteworthy as it shows the over attached soul of the old Chinese peasant who is not at all changed according to modern trends and is still chained to his mother earth. Finally, Wang Lung returns to the earthen house of his land to die. Material prosperity has brought him superficial social satisfaction, but only his land can provide peace and security. But in his last days, when he overhears his two older sons planning to sell the land on which Wang Lung has worked over his entire life, he feels helpless, miserable and loses his sense of belonging like a newly born babe separated from its mother when the umbilical cord is severed. Wang Lung hysterically yells at his two sons.

"Now, evil, idle sons..sell the land"... "It is the end of a family--when they begin to sell the land," he said brokenly. "Out of the land we came and into it we must go--and if you will hold your land you can live--no one can rob you of land..."(Buck,1966,pp.307-8)

He is appalled, distressed and unable to control his tears at the mention of selling the land. He scolds his sons, telling them that it will be the end of the family if they begin to sell the

land. Wang lung strongly believes that anyone who lost touch with mother earth is sure to end up as a pauper.

... the old man let his scanty tears dry upon his cheeks and they made salty stains there. And he stooped and took up a handful of the soil and he held it and he muttered, "If you sell the land, it is the end."(Buck, 1966,p.308)

Consoling the old man with soothing words "Rest assured, our father, rest assured. The land is not to be sold" Wang lung's sons are determined of their plan to sell the land. And over the old man's head they looked at each other and smiled. And finally Wang Lung died holding the soil in his hand in the lap of the mother earth; similarly Sambaiah the protagonist of Vasireddy Sitadevi's novel *Matti Manishi* (Telugu) also dies gripping soil in his fist and with his face and body covered with mud. The holding of soil by both the characters conveys an important message about the essential union of the spirit of man and the earth. Buck depicts Wang Lung as a typical Chinese farmer with all values and flaws. In a similar way Vasireddy Sitadevi in her novel *Matti Manishi* (Telugu) mirrors through Sambaiah, the aspirations, struggles and experiences of a farmer who trusts his land and turns him into a living, throbbing deathless individual.

The artistic skill of the novelist lies in her presentation of the protagonist in a realistic manner without idealizing him as a sylvan saint. Buck's life in rural China gave her a vast insight into the minds of Chinese farmers. Buck's writing can also be viewed as depicting not just a Chinese farmer but a "universal farmer" a person who knows that riches and security come from the good earth itself. No matter what fortunes or misfortunes come their way, the land is always there. It is where they are born and it is where they will die.

References:

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