

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF PEARL S. BUCK'S FAITH IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract :

Pearl S. Buck was a learned scholar of English Literature and had studied major British, American, Chinese, French and Russian scholars. She described various socio-political and eco-cultural conflicts in her novels. After getting the Nobel Prize for *The Good Earth* she continued to write purposeful novels and didn't follow the theory of art for art's sake. All her novels are criticism of life and she never revolted against ethical values. As a literary artist, she supported fundamentals of positive psychology such as 'psychological well-being', 'social well-being', 'hope', 'optimism', 'pleasurable experience', 'process theories of happiness', 'eudemonia' etc. All these terms have been critically analyzed in this research paper to confirm that she was interested in 'life' in spite of all oddities and like Robert Frost, wanted to return to earth as there was no other better place for her. Like Virginia Woolf, she recorded the 'impressions' that came to the mind of her characters. Generally, she didn't repeat her characters in the next novels. She has got to be admired for her choice of lofty subjects and majestic expression.

Keywords : Old order, East Wind, West Wind, Maladaptive behaviour , Resistance, Sovereignty, Emotional well-being, Eudemonia, Genetic predisposition etc.

Introduction :

Pearl S. Buck got the Nobel Prize for the novel *The Good Earth* (1938) and the readers of the world came to know about the socio-political and economic conditions of Chinese farmers, labourers, poor women and victims of social forces. This novel links her with William Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley as she has painted many scenes of nature — scenes of spring, winter, summer and autumn. Quite a few backward people of the villages felt that life is the same every year in the village and yet the sharp eyes of Pearl S. Buck noticed changes here and agreed with Tennyson's theory — 'Old order changeth yielding place to new.' Then she confirms the differences that she noticed between Chinese and Western life and inspired the Chinese to learn new technological skills from U.S.A. for self-improvement. Her novel *East Wind : West Wind* confirms the fact that she was a first-rate crusader who wanted to see better world order in China too.

In *The Good Earth* she highlighted many conflicts such as — conflict between husband and wife, between Wang Lung and his fate, between man and society, between O-lan and Lotus, between Wang Lung and his uncle, between Wang Lung and his past, between O-lan and her past, between O-lan and Cuckoo, between Wang Lung and his sons, between the wives of Wang Lung's sons, between urban and rural people, between Haves and Have-Nots etc. Robert W. Lundin explained in the book *Principles of Psychopathology* that conflicts affect the life of people —

'Like frustration it is reasonable to assume that conflict also has an additive effect in that too much conflict, particularly in the early development periods, will reduce one's tolerance for it and hence lead to maladaptive behaviour. Since conflict is an inevitable part of our daily existences, we must either learn to resolve the conflicts whenever possible or, at least, develop a degree of tolerance for them.' (115)

Pearl S. Buck accepted that various conflicts are inevitable in the journey of life. Quite often wise people learn a lot of wisdom from them and change tremendously.

Like Romantic poets, the characters of *East Wind : West Wind*, *The Mother*, *The Good Earth*, *Dragon Seed* etc. are deeply attached with mother earth. They enjoy farming

as that is the only source of their living. Even during days of famine, Wang Lung recollects the pieces of land that he possesses. O-lan enjoys breast feeding the baby. When breast-milk over flows, it falls upon earth. She doesn't regret it as she feels that earth has a right upon her breast-milk. Just after marriage O-lan joins Wang Lung and performs all the duties of a farmer. Being wise she advised him not to buy the second piece of land as it was far away from their farm. Unfortunately Wang Lung is greedy for more land and forgets the hard realities of life. As a family man he needed some money for rainy days too. Here the novel is remarkable for psychological realism because he repents for parting with silver coins. In times of adversity he feels — Had he not spent the coins, he would have faced the calamity easily. Now each member of the family is a burden but he is not prepared to sell his daughter. The artist has depicted the difference between Wang Lung and his Uncle because the latter sold his seven daughters due to shortage of money.

People of the village face rough weather due to famine and the flood. Like R.W. Emerson, Pearl S. Buck knows that nature has several moods and human beings find themselves helpless here like the trees. Yet moods of nature change with time and there is spring in the village once again. When Wang Lung and O-lan possess stolen coins and jewels, they return to their village, buy ox, feel vigour and zest in life and hope for good crop. Their labour doesn't go waste and they cut the harvest with enthusiasm.

Here Pearl S. Buck has depicted the generation gap because the young Chinese rustics are not prepared to do manual work in the field. Wang The Eldest, Wang The Second and Wang The Tiger wish to get farming done by labourers on wages. But Wang Lung always enjoys farming and knows its utility. He hopes much from his three sons but in vain! The same picture has been depicted in *Dragon Seed*. But Mother enjoys the field work and hopes to lead a happy life in the lap of nature. Like Thomas Hardy, Pearl S. Buck described the sufferings of rustics. Quite often they have to face flood and the locusts that eat the crop.

Nucleus :

Pearl S. Buck explains the different between negative psychology and positive psychology with her narrative art. There are people who enjoy drinking wine and gambling. They often adopt foul means to achieve their ends. They feel no hesitation in telling lies and often love lies for just mental satisfaction. Such liars are afraid of friends and not God. There is no limit to their greed and they wish to possess a lot of land, gold, silver and other material gains. They wish to be respected in society for their status and powers. At times they lose their temper and become angry with their friends and family members. It is generally seen that such people are mad for sexual desires. Due to their lechery, anger, greed and sense of possessive-negative psychology, they suffered a lot.

C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez have explained the term positive psychology and added importance to broad mindedness, 'positive emotions', 'content of affect', 'emotional well-being', 'eudemonia' (i.e. 'happiness associated with living a life of virtue'), 'pleasurable experience', 'Genetic predisposition' (theories of happiness), healthy physical response to positive emotions, mood', 'goal satisfaction theories of happiness', 'pleasure principle', 'process theories of happiness', (specific action tendency', subjective well-being' etc. (147-148).

With *The Good Earth* Pearl S. Buck creates the interest of readers in farming — the first thing the child wants is food and not education. How can we survive without food? Wang Lung and his friends enjoy ploughing the land. Famine doesn't kill interest of Wang Lung and O-lan in village and they start ploughing the land with new vigour. Even after facing the results of flood they remain attached with farming. Earth is their mother, God and everything. Wang Lung hopes that his sons will feel attached with his land and work hard to produce crops. But he feels disappointed and dejected in old age when his three sons wish to get fields ploughed by labourers. In other words, the sons are not children of the soil and regard farming just a source of income. Wang The Eldest enjoys as a life of luxury and feels as if he is a great lord. His ego has been satirized by the artist. Hence there is a gap between father and the sons. Wang The Tiger wishes to conquer other Tigers so as to become the supreme Tiger. Unfortunately three sons of Wang Lung don't possess positive ideology and fade in comparison to Wang Lung.

But Wang Lung is a round character and not a perfect God. In the first chapter he is happy getting married with O-lan as he has his ‘woman’ now. He feels satisfied with her and soon they possess two sons. But Wang Lung buys another piece of land due to his possessive nature. Then he starts flirting with Lotus and Pear Blossom. He had no right to ignore O-lan in her old age. It means that there are qualities of positive psychology and negative quality in him.

In the town Wang Lung is not prepared to bow down before economic problems. He faces the economic hardship and prefers pulling rickshaw rather than earning money by foul means. He doesn’t like his sons when they steal various objects. He hates the meat that has been stolen by the son. Often he feels shame in pulling the rickshaw during day time and hence prefers this manual job at night. Since he has led a life of poverty and scarcity, he feels tempted to steal the silver coins of the rich man and that too when the man was on the verge of death. He doesn’t plan any theft or intrigue to kill the rich guys of the town. He is almost satisfied with what he saves after day’s hard work. But he fails to control his sexual desires here too.

There are times when Wang Lung possesses the sense of social well-being, emotional well-being, psychological well-being and subjective well-being. In spite of all hardships he never curses God, Nature and Fate for his miseries.

On the contrary his Uncle and Uncle’s wife never possess any feeling of joy, contentment and well-being. Due to their ego and selfishness, they depend upon the mercy of Wang Lung for their livelihood. They talk and talk of village affairs and never devote to farming. Secondly, Uncle gambles almost regularly and believes in the theory — ‘Ends justify the means.’ Even after famine both of them return to village and force Wang Lung to support them. Uncle’s wife is wicked and creates gap between Wang Lung and his wife O-lan because she supports the desires and needs of concubines.

Personally, Pearl S. Buck hates the system of keeping concubines as they leave a bad effect upon children. Secondly, a concubine snatches the rights of devoted wife like O-lan. Thirdly, many Chinese kept concubines and provided them extra material benefits as Wang Lung did. Fourthly, the concubines were looked after well after the death of the

master. In *Sons* pensions are provided to Lotus and Pear Blossom by Wang The Eldest and Wang The Second. Lotus doesn't feel satisfied with the pension but Pear Blossom does.

Pear Blossom can be admired for her psychological well-being as she was happy in the House of Hwang where she had to tolerate prostitution almost every night. When House of Hwang met its downfall, she shifted to the upper rooms of tea shop with Lotus. Finally she adjusted in the newly built rooms of Wang Lung. She felt obliged to Wang Lung as the latter protected her from the Tiger. She was a source of solace to old Wang Lung and slept in his arms though he failed to satisfy her sexually.

Pearl S. Buck has been admired by several critics merely because she asserted the importance of education for all sections of society. She failed to understand as to why the Chinese authorities ignored the education of rural people. In *Dragon Seed* Lung Tan doesn't know what education is. His son Lao Er does not know what a book is? He is ridiculed in the town when he fails to choose any particular book for his wife Jade. It is through Jade that Pearl S. Buck illustrates the terms intellectual culture/intellectual well-being, evolution etc. As Jade's brother studied in school, she had learnt the art of making her own sentences with words. For her, each word has its significance and importance. The author connects himself with readers with the help of certain words and he chooses his words carefully so that he may be properly understood. Jade tells Lao Er that food items give temporary joy — Whatever we eat, turns into waste. But our studies give us permanent joy. Words of books increase our ability and knowledge creates the difference between a man and an animal. Jade can be put with Josui and Tama as the latter enjoy studying books.

In each novel Pearl S. Buck elaborates at least one word and forces the readers to think about that deeply and minutely. In *The Good Earth* she makes us think of 'life' i.e. live. Living is most important and nobody should lose interest in leading life. Life has got to be lived in spite of all oddities and problems. In *Dragon Seed* she asserts the word 'Resist' (285) i.e. a man must resist against all problems and evils. People succeed only when they resist.

Towards the end of *Dragon Seed* Lao Er attaches importance to ‘youth’, ‘hope’ and ‘promise’. His father is worried of rain and Lao Er consoles him —

‘Only a promise.’ (378)

Lao Er is pretty sure that God’ll fulfil His Promise to humanity. Jade possesses feelings of subjective well-being and psychological well-being because she can read, write and think about people, society and the world.

C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez regard ‘wisdom and courage’ (209) as two universal virtues that Wang Lung, Chick, O-lan, Jade etc. possess in abundance. These two thinkers attach importance to ‘Agency thinking’, ‘Collective hope’, ‘future orientation’, ‘Hope’, ‘Learned optimism’, ‘Pathways thinking’, ‘Past orientation’, (i.e. ‘What one learns from past experience’), ‘self-efficiency’ (i.e. belief that one’s capabilities will bring him joy), ‘situational perspective’, ‘social cognitive theory’ (i.e. confidence in oneself and one’s abilities) etc. (206-207) Jade, Josui and Tama possess wonderful self-confidence.

Like Roger Martin, Pearl S. Buck believes that universities creates knowledge through research and then distribute the same among students through teaching. (211) Through Wang The Tiger and the Buddhist saints she described the ‘benefits of spirituality’. (261)

Here Pearl S. Buck’s positive approach to life can be asserted with the reference of her novel *Enemy*. Dr. Jado Hoki had learnt Medical Science and surgery from an American Medical College. Since he was a Japanese he wished to return to his native land to serve his own people. He fell in love with pretty Hana whom he met at the residence of American Professor Harley. But he proposed her for marriage after he was sure that she was a Japanese girl. Both of them led a happy married on the bank of a river and Dr. Hoki became famous for his surgical skills.

One day he saw a black cloud moving towards his home. But he was a wounded American who had been attacked by Japanese soldiers. Now Dr. Hoki was on the horns of dilemma — should he inform the police? Or should he operate the wounded soldier?

As a humanist he thought of his duty to mankind and operated the patient with the help of his wife. He was conscious all the time that he had disobeyed the law of the land. But question of human life was not ignored by him. All the members of nursing staff opposed his step and left him with the patient. Yet he maintained his self-confidence and provided all medical help to the wounded soldier.

Here the artist has shown the victory of duty against narrow nationalism. He followed the dictates of human goodness and advised the American soldier to catch a boat for latter's safe return. Pearl S. Buck had seen many wounded victims of two world wars and felt pity for them. Like Arthur Miller, she believed that the wounded soldiers are also someone's 'sons' and hence must be served with love.

With *East Wind : West Wind* Pearl S. Buck unlocked her creativity and learning. Like William Shakespeare, she painted difference shades of womanhood through Mother, Kwei-lan, Mary, O-lan, Uncle's Wife, Lotus, Pear Blossom, Josui, Tama, Peony, Hana, Jade, Wife of Wang The Eldest, Wife of Wang The Second, Mrs. Siao, etc. and supported their rights in the changing society. In *East Wind : West Wind* Kwei-lan aspires to learn the skill of reading and writing and feels inspired to know the secrets of cultured life. Pearl S. Buck felt sympathy for uneducated women and uncultured rural women of China as they failed to read and write even upto 1938. American Mary can read and write and knows the art of love-making. She adjusts with her Chinese lover, far away from America. Similarly Hana joined American medical college to learn Medicine and surgery.

Pearl S. Buck contrasted educated Josui, Tama and Mary with uneducated concubines as the latter depended upon their Lords for physical needs and comforts. As a matter of fact they had no status in society and were generally hated by the new generation of China. Through Kwei-lan the narrator refers to air, water, sky, fire, earth and other elements. China as painted in other novels had greatly changed due to higher education. Many Chinese universities were established after Richard Nixon granted financial aid to China (1972). Due to higher education the people of Pearl S. Buck evolve with time. Naturally the young Chinese people didn't accept the rigid ways of life and got westernized. Like Josui, the girls revolt against established orthodox system.

It is true that Pearl S. Buck got impressed with Marxian theories of four stages of human history, dictatorship of the Proletariat, fifth and final stage of human history, means of violence etc. Yet she was wise enough to notice that the labourers of even U.K. and U.S.A. were not ready to sacrifice their selfish motives and didn't unite with the labourers of other British and American factories. Marx had given economic theories and not human values and labourers still felt unguided. Only a few intellectuals felt impressed with Marxian theories. Like En-lan, they were arrested for their interest in Marxism.

Pearl S. Buck noticed that no proletarian revolution broke out in any country in 77 years (1840-1917) because there was no practical aspect of Marxism. Secondly, people were deeply attached with religion and Marx regarded religion opium. Thirdly, wise people like Wu didn't want to take any risk and hence shifted son I-wan to Japan. Yet Pearl S. Buck asserted the term 'sovereignty' in *The Patriot* and *The Living Reed*. With *Dragon Seed* she asserted that women ought to learn valid subjects to improve themselves intellectually. Only physical growth is not enough for them. Through Mayli Pearl S. Buck confirms that women are in a position to play a constructive role if education is given to them. Let them be taught for social reconstruction and economic regeneration. When she asserts the words such as resistance, hope, life, sovereignty, social reconstruction, peace, she comes closer to thinkers like G.B. Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Arthur Miller, Eugene O' Neill, V.S. Naipaul etc.

With *Dragon Seed* she asserted the need of second marriage of widows. It is sad that war mongers killed innocent Orchid to satisfy their lust for sex. After enjoying sex with her, the Japanese soldiers killed her. Towards the end of the novel Lao Ta wants to get married and accepts a war widow as his wife. All the members of the family feel delighted with this marriage. In U.S.A., Japan, China, India, France, Russia many women became widows due to two world wars. She admires womanhood in *Dragon Seed* and remarks —

'These women whom he and his men sometimes rescued and women who wanted him to stay and eat and rest in their houses and any woman with the womanhood yet alive in her could not let him pass her without making some sort of sign to him. The

virtuous women did not know they did this, but still they did, and women who had no virtue were shameless and knew what they did.’ (301)

In *The Good Earth* she satirized prostitution, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, child marriage, feudalism, population growth etc. because she aspired for intellectual revolution. Till 1950 the Chinese people were backward, superstitious, indolent and victims of feudalism. Unfortunately, schools and colleges had not been established by the Chinese authorities. Then the Buddhist priests were selfish and not interested in the welfare of the masses. Mostly people led a poor life and no security was provided to the sick and old people. The rural people failed to arrange food for the family in hard times and often sold their female children. Of course, it was a male-dominated society and each father aspired for the birth of a male child. Secondly, dowry was demanded. Beggars could be seen on the road side. Unfortunately female beggars were sold and purchased by the lords and women felt forced for a life of low status.

Generally the males enjoyed eating opium in the home and women had to work in the fields. As there was no economic planning, the poverty of the masses continued to grow. Gap between the rich and the poor has been elaborated in *The Good Earth*. Poor people used to put on ragged clothes but the rich people could afford costly silken clothes and even hired the poor slaves for the menial jobs. Like Charles Dickens, she had sympathy with for orphans, poor labourers, miserable women and other marginalized people of society.

As an economist she noticed that poverty was growing in China due to population explosion. She described the need of many economic reforms for economic regeneration. She hoped for the brave new world. It was disgusting that the farmers and labourers became unemployed in times of famine and flood. No social security had been provided to the people and eventually they failed to arrange food for their belly. As a satirist she exposed the cruel hoarders of essential commodities. They kept the stock of food grains and earned huge profits in times of drought and famine. Poor labourers and farmers felt forced to eat the flesh of dogs and ox as they got nothing to eat. Some of them were compelled to sell even wives so as to get food. But people like Wang Lung had the moral

courage to face oddities like Ernest Hemingway's Santiago — A man may be destroyed but not defeated.

Conclusion :

Thus, Pearl S. Buck was out and out a realist and describes various shades of realism in her novels. Secondly, she was not a blind imitator of Marxism and advocated democratic socialism. Thirdly, she supported the concept of fundamental rights for women. Fourthly, she asserted the need of secularism and didn't propagate Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism. Fifthly, she felt the need of bloodless revolution to support equality, liberty and fraternity. Sixthly, she supported impartial justice with *The Patriot* and *The Living Reed*. Then, she advised every reader with the novel *Enemy* to regard all as brother and sister. Of course she felt the urgent need of perfect economic planning to get rid of dowry, prostitution, opium eating, poverty, backwardness and other social evils. She was a practical idealist and not a mere scholar.

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