

# Theme of Motherhood and Translated Woman: A Brief Study of the novels of Pearl S. Buck

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## Abstract

The Orient has always been banned to the Western aesthetic mind. The exotic east has enthralled many poets, essayists, writers, philosophers, and painters. It has cast a serpent woman's magic spell on their imagination. China has always been a magnet for tourists from all over the world. The rich cultural past of China inspired a long line of writers and artists, including Orientalists and Indologists.

Pearl S. Buck, an American novelist, has beautifully captured her experiences and opinions on China in her novels. Her missionary parents took her to China at a young age, so she has spent most of her life there. China has always been part of her life, thoughts, and expression. That she wrote her autobiography, two memoirs of her parents (*The Fighting Angel & The Exile*), and several more works. Her works focused on Chinese culture and life. In her writings, she digs at foreign Christians, churches, and Christianity.

Her writings brilliantly deal with religion, culture, philosophy, man-woman relationships, and the position of women in China. The current paper explores the theme of motherhood in Pearl S. Buck's writings.

**Key words:** *the Orient, aesthetic mind, status of women in China, theme of motherhood etc.,*

## Introduction

Although Pearl Buck was not a self-avowed feminist in the contemporary sense, she supported numerous women's fights on a personal level, primarily through her missionary work. Buck never intentionally joined any Movement or Association. She was raised in a family of Chinese children. When she enrolled at Randolph Manco Women's College, she had a sense of estrangement. In China, she led a luxurious life as a missionary.

Motherhood is considered as both liberating and enslaving. Buck views motherhood as an institution that may be efficiently transformed into a representational mechanism for the Orient. Buck views the representation of the Chinese mother as an illustration of China. This concept is expanded upon in her companion, which is a dialogue between O-lan and the earth-mother. Buck describes the mother as a strange entity whose mysteries remain inscrutable to the rest of the world. Additionally, the Orient is considered to as an exotic place shrouded in mystery. The complexities and nuances of Chinese motherhood become a pliable tool in Buck's hands for portraying a negative image of motherhood. However, the mother-figures escape the depressing atmosphere of parenthood and demonstrate a sense of optimism about their future existence. Mother is the link between her history and present, without which she would have no physical or metaphysical life.

Buck is modelled by Good Earth and The Mother's nameless mother. They are a microcosm of the larger oppressive system of parenting. They are the earth mothers; they are "intuitive," "emotional," and "earthy," and hence mysterious. Buck portrays the mother as a 'natural' woman in contrast to the synthetic western ladies. The Oriental woman is feminine, shy, and strong in the way that an animal is, but she is not quite human enough to be on an equal footing with the Occidental woman.

The primordial aspect of the Orient is underlined in The Good Earth through the characters of O-lan and the mother. The Orient's bestiality, voicelessness, and passivity resound throughout the text: O-lan is described in animal-like terms:

***“Her body was beautiful, sparse and big-boned yet round and soft”. (The Good Earth : 1931)***

O-lan is immediately placed in the company of creatures. One must bear in mind that she has been lifted from the status of a slave to that of a housewife, and then to that of the mother of the sons. O – lan's progression traces the oppression of women in the Chinese system through patriarchy. Indeed, her tyranny is a microcosm of the Orient's subjugation. The Good Earth and The Mother both confirm the prevailing conceptions about the Earth's muteness that have been immortalized in European literature. O-lan emerges as the archetypal repressed Oriental woman. She is depicted as being stuck in a system with no exit. The lady is enslaved by her family, by her motherhood. O – lan is never allowed to leave the system in order to defend her rights as a woman. She continues to be a part of the family system. Motherhood, in O-opinion, lan's is extremely strong because it confers on the woman a social rank inside the family. By extension, barrenness is a sin. O – lan frequently views her role as a mother as a shield against the other women Lotus. Her outburst at the other woman serves as a reminder to her that she is a mother and thus a self-sufficient woman. As a result, no one can truly challenge her power inside the confines of the family. There is an air of contempt for the barren woman.

The Mother's mother emphasizes the value of motherhood. She is a woman with no name. Everyone in the hamlet refers to her as the mother. By failing to give her a name, Buck denies her the individuality she deserves. Mother is daring. She looks forward to developing a relationship that is not constrained by any framework. Edward Said focuses only on imperial modes of representation. There are various other components to the phenomena referred to as representation.

Anderson contends that because the concept of nation is an imagined political community, nationalism is also an imagined political community. Buck patronizes these concepts in her book and exploits them to stir nationalistic sentiments. This romantic notion is quickly shattered in The Good Earth, as Wang Lung's sons sell the land without their father's consent.

Buck's female characters are not timid and submissive ladies who serve as passive opposites to their male counterparts, as shown in the novels. These women are battling an uphill battle to carve out a space for themselves and so develop their individual identities. At the same time, it is unjust to dismiss Buck on the basis that her treatment of the Oriental subject obliterates the strife in the lives of these moms. Contrary to the author, as falsehoods embedded in the text, the struggle manifests itself in the woman characters they portray. The contrast between her mother's description and her own Chinese women characters is stunningly obvious.

..... *She vowed always to choose good rather than evil, to follow the stern side of herself rather than the gay, and all her lifelong to war against the sensuousness that she knew too well to be in her blood..... ( The Spirit and The Flesh : 1936 : 230)*

Buck's satisfaction in being welcomed by the dominant group serves as a reminder of Kingston's lifetime effort to assimilate into the dominant ideologue. Unlike Buck, Kingston grew up in America determined to prove herself. In her own unique way, the Chinese American struggles to establish an articulating space for herself. And this conflict is reflected in her writings.

The world and substance that shaped a great personality such as Buck are distinct from the world that gave Kingston its name and life. It is not coincidental that Buck, an American, spent a significant portion of her life in China while Kingston, a Chinese, became an American after years of residence in the United States. They arrived at their destinations as a result of a historical process. The strife-torn life of an ethnic minority in a White World has numerous heartbreaking tales. Buck led a privileged life as a missionary in China. Kingston was forced to accept the wealthy lifestyle. In White culture, her childhood is ruled by the voiceless. The issue of articulation becomes inextricably linked to her identity. This identity issue creates a void in which she must reassert her sense of self-worth. She should earn all 'A' grades in order to establish her worth. To be accepted as an individual, she must demonstrate to the White majority that she is the greatest among them. Buck's struggle for survival is not quite as fierce. Hers is more gender-based than race-based in order to allow her to flourish under the moniker John Sedges for a time. Another term that harmed her career was her Chinese ancestry.

In each case, despite their disparate views of China, China bound them in an inexpressible relationship that transcended the barriers of location, time, and race. Kingston is provided with an opportunity to recount her past via her and her work. Her childhood recollections, mingled with Chinese fairy tales and myths, get muddled by the China town's grim reality. Probably as a result of her complex childhood experiences, Kingston describes it as an encounter with ghosts. Kingston and Buck's works depict the most nuanced aspects of their lives. Kingston's creative children are born out of the necessity to abandon the past materially and recall it symbolically. Kingston's ambiguity shows her diversity of identities.

Buck's work is profoundly influenced by her disabled daughter Carol. Buck appears to have never had a problem between her job and parenting, owing to the fact that career has always come first for her. She recognises parenthood as a miracle in her life. Carol, on the other hand, could never provide her with fulfilment as a mother. Buck asserts that Carol's infirmity served as an inspiration for her writing:

*“... success means much to me – most to me – because it is the beginning of the sum that still looms vast – for Carol’s life annuity...” ( qtd. In Several Worlds of Buck : 1994 : 89)*

Her concern for her daughter's well-being fuels her urge to write continually. Carol's disability has a strong influence and is evident in the majority of her works. A female child is frequently not treated as a human being. However, the 'poverty fool' is treated with a great deal of care and sympathy. Despite the fact that Wang Lung's family is experiencing drought and poverty, Wang Lung decides to sell the girl. In her subsequent story, The Mother, a blind girl dies following her marriage. The invalid child's constant appearance provides her with a sense

of fulfilment as she goes through the process of creation. Her novel 'Time is Noon' vividly depicts the anguish of mothering a mentally handicapped child. Except for a flimsy disguise, it is said to be the most autobiographical of all her novels. Though she wrote it early in her profession, she was unable to publish it until late in her career due to the personal nature of it. Joan Richards, the novel's female protagonist, is modelled after Buck. Buck frequently depicts her personal struggles through the eyes of her White female heroes. Joan's predicament parallels Buck's in a number of ways. Joan, pushed to desperation, marries a farmer and subsequently suffers as a result of their inability to communicate. Then-invalid child depicts her husband's hopeless relationship. Joan divorces him and establishes her own home. Joan, like Buck, adopts numerous orphans in order to recapture a sense of childhood.

In her novel *'The Proud Heart,'* she effectively depicts a woman's battle between family and career. Sussan Gaylord is a sculptor whose creativity is limited by her domestic responsibilities. However, with a tenacious resolve to prove herself, she escapes the family structure. She leaves the system's tight atmosphere by divorcing her second husband, Blake, a sculptor as well. He perceives Sussan as a formidable opponent in the field. Blake reminds her of her familial responsibilities in an attempt to stifle her gift out of frustration. Sussan chooses to divorce him in order to pursue her career.

Ruth is seen in full bloom of motherhood in the 'Portrait of Marriage'. Ruth, the country woman, relishes motherhood, in contrast to Sussan, the urban woman who pursues a profession. Ruth's life revolves around her family and children. Buck's unfulfilled parenthood fantasies are realised through Ruth. Ruth's motherhood is continually contrasted with the urban environment. The narrative amplifies the parallel between nature and woman. Ruth is married to a painter located in New York. Her dislike for the urban environment makes her emotional for the rural setting. Ruth personifies nature, which serves as the backdrop for William's artwork. The difference between nature and culture is exemplified by Ruth and Elise. By virtue of William's preference for Ruth, Buck romanticises the country. Elise is insufficiently feminine to be a mother. Due to the conflict, she is separated from her sons. She is unable to appreciate parenthood. Ruth is projected as the mother due to her femininity and affinity to nature.

Buck's novels are heavily influenced by the concept of mother and motherland. She develops a sense of patriotism for her nation. The anxiety to be accepted by Americans is evident when she enrolls at Randolph Macon Women's College and later in life when she becomes a writer. She identifies with the White Women characters, not the Chinese. Kingston, like Kingston, expresses a greater desire to be linked with America than with China. Her understanding of China is tainted by European perceptions of the Orient. Frank Chin criticises the Americanization of the Chinese and their perspective of their homeland. He laments the following:

*The American born exclusively English speaking Asian Americans were dominated by the Christian vision of China as a country without a history and a philosophy and without substance. ( The Big Aiiiiiiii ! : 1991 : xi)*

China argues that Asian Americans are seduced by the West's ostensibly egalitarian influence, which causes them to reject their own cultures. For them, the West represents the power of rescue from the "Ikeygoeey horror of a Chinese culture," in which Chinese violently tattoo phrases on the backs of women using the written term for "woman" and "slave."

China's perspective is echoed by Chinese American writer and psychologist Ben Tong, who accuses Kingston of "selling out... her own people" by writing to a largely White audience and "gift packaging old stereotypes about China and Chinese Americans." (1982:198; qtd in Asian American Literature). Tong argues that Kingston's picture of Chinese life is entirely Westernized. Stereotypical ideas of their own culture, exaggerated by the European perspective, cause Western educated Asians to deny their cultural identity as Chinese. As a result, there is a differentiation between hyphenated and non-hyphenated Chinese Americans. The hyphen denotes both the Chinese and American national identities, but the unhyphenated variant, 'Chinese,' serves only as an adjective and does not denote nationality. While the desire to be recognised as an American is understandable, it should not come at the expense of one's Asian ancestry, assert the editors of *Articulate silences*. (*Articulate Silences*: 1993:17)

## Conclusion

Pearl Buck and Kingston's writings are heavily autobiographical. This may provide fodder for another type of fascinating investigation. However, the more pertinent concerns that may be investigated are Asian Americans' quest for the American dream. As a universal fact, the dream is perpetuated. However, the myth makes no mention of race or gender issues. It is a fiction that every American yearns to believe. Kingston chronicles the influx of Chinese families to America in quest of the Gold Mountain. It carries the moon's promise. Hers is one of the numerous Chinese American families.

Buck's humanitarian ideology is not Marxist or Socialist in nature. She vehemently opposed the creation of a Communist state in China. However, she founded a variety of organisations aimed at bridging the divide between the peoples of America and Asia. Her philanthropic activity is well-known. As her humanitarian views conflicted with those of the Communists, she permanently departed China in 1934 and resumed her work in America. As she admits in her own journal 'My Several Worlds,' adjusting to her own country was not easy for her. It took her a long time to overcome her China image. Kingston and Buck have a similar fate in this sense. They must be exceptionally gifted in order to establish their worth among Americans. Kingston has been canonised by American universities despite her "birth defect," while Buck has remained a popular writer despite being an American.

Both Buck and Kingston yearn for China, but they are unable to make it their destiny, their living reality. At least for Buck, China was a past reality; for Kingston, it remained the land of her forefathers, the home of her nightmares. Due to the chasm that exists between these two universes, contact is impossible. Buck, who has lived through the contrasts between China and America, analyses the impasse in the two countries' relations in her book *"My Several Worlds"*:

*“I grew up in a double world, the small Presbyterian American world of my parents and the big loving merry not-too-clean Chinese world, and there was no communication between them... when I was in the Chinese world I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts, when I was in the American world, I shut the door between....”*

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