

I. Subordination of Women in Buck's *The Good Earth*

This study analyzes Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* from the perspective of feminism. The novel is thematically and structurally dominated by the concept of patriarchy. The plot of the novel covers subjugated as well as resisting situation of O-lan. At the beginning, she internalizes the Wang's domination as values of life, however, later she raises the questions about the domination and searches the values of her individual life. In the initial stage, O-lan believes that women are for the pleasure and assistance of men. The role of women is complementary to men and they should fulfill their natural feminine functions. Identity of the women is only determined by the male identity. Women have limited role of wife, mother and mistress all of which are pleasing and beneficial to men. The brave, laborious and courteous woman like O-lan has to suffer because her identity has just been limited as traditional female role. She does not have any status in the society even though she earns many assets for Wang Lung. She is much disturbed by the cultural norms and values, too. Similarly, though Lotus and Cuckoo try to live the life of pleasure, they fail to keep up their identity because they are the concubine and slave of Wang Lung respectively and both are subordinated to a man. All these events note that the situation of O-lan is subjugated one.

O-lan is ignored. She is constantly in pain after the birth of the twins. She wishes to see her eldest son's marriage before her death. The eldest son is betrothed with the daughter of Liu, a grain merchant. After the ceremony, O-lan dies and thereafter Wang's old father also dies and are buried into the earth.

One day, Wang's eldest son suggests his father move to the vacant great house in town, a house where great family used to live. Wang agrees this idea. Wang's whole family moves to the house except his uncle and aunt. Wang's uncle's

son goes to join the war. The house of Whang has now become the house of Wang. Wang spends more time in his town house than in his lands. After the death of Ching, Wang begins renting some of his lands to tenants.

As Wang grows older, he becomes less attracted to Lotus and yearns for another slave girl named Pear Blossom. Wang Lung loves Pear Blossom, but his love for her gradually turns into the love of a father to his daughter. Pear Blossom patiently serves Wang who is now a very old man. Wang Lung leads a quiet and isolated life in his court, seldom visiting Lotus. Wang has several things changed to Lotus but his love for land is constant. Wang returns to his house on the land with Pear Blossom and his first daughter. One day, his two elder sons visit him and they go out. Wang follows silently and hears them making a plan to sell the land. Wang cries and says that selling of the land will be the end of the family. Although they promise him that they will never sell the land it seems clear that they are lying and will sell the land eventually.

Buck's writings highlight the situation of women through projecting socio economic and cultural structure of male dominated society. Such perception has been developed on her due to her father's deed. Her father has wrong attitude towards female and he dominated the women without any plausible reason. Buck shows the pathetic condition of women under the patriarchal culture of China between late 19th and early 20th centuries. The dominance of male characters runs all over the novel. O-lan, is subjugated by Wang and being shocked in her life rushes to submit to torture: after so many years of sufferings, it presents a unique opportunity to gain the respect and recognition of the in-laws who praise the beautiful tiny feet even beyond her dowry to suffer and obey. This study answers the questions; why does O-lan become victim? How does she face the problem and what concept is responsible for

that? And how is she subjugated in her life? Due to the cause of being female and poverty, O-lan faces many problems in her life. She is unable to grasp opportunity and life and lives a life as human best. She has to work as servant in rich man's house because of poverty at the age of childhood. In this context, she is subjugated in her life due to male dominated cultural practice. O-lan is portrayed as a submissive character and as a peasant's wife; a woman works both in the house and in the field alike. In her house her situation is not different like Lotus's when she assumes this role in Wang's house. Finally, she becomes an upper-class wife like the eldest son's wife in the Great House, with servants to wait on her and do the housework.

The Good Earth, a Noble prize-winning fiction, has elicited a number of criticisms since its publication. Many critics have attempted different possibilities of interpretations and different aspects of the study are focused in the novel. The major criticisms of Buck's *The Good Earth* focus on the realism of the novel and its depiction of peasant's life. There are studies that focus on the romance and oriental existential issues David Kap represents the first trend and argues:

At last, we read, in the pages of a novel, of real people of China ... the China of fantasy so often exploited is absent from its pages. Instead, we have the honest peasant, and his faithful wife; the pampered singing girl, and her unscrupulous attendance; the rich earth, and a farmer's mud house; we have flowers, too, and the many courts of great houses, but it is all real so real . . . Mrs. Buck's novel is so moving and so "actual" that I must note one or two points. (4)

The book contains depiction of oriental life style. It is the first novel about oriental life by an occidental writer. John White, exclaims:

Such a novel as *Atlies* calls at once for comparison with other novel of the soil on the one hand and novel concerning oriental life on the other. Any such comparison brings out the fact that despite Mrs. Buck's very good narrative style, despite her familiarity with her material, her work has a certain flatness of emotional tone ... Mrs. Buck is undoubtedly one of the best occidental writers to treat Chinese life ... (230)

Nora Stirling also makes similar type of response. She argues, "*The Good Earth* deserves to be discussed from the standpoint of an Oriental familiar with the standard that under lies Chinese life" (58). Wang Lung never discourages himself nor does O-lan becomes hopeless. So, there are some critics who have accepted *The Good Earth* as an existential novel. In this context, Box Parry. writes, "The World of *The Good Earth* may be often sad, tragic, defeating, ironic, frustrating but never a world without hope, never one which would completely deliberate the striving individual ..." (332). O-lan's regular work without complaints carry the family through hard times. As a wife, she is constantly expected to obey her husband without question. For example, when Wang Lung discovers that O-lan has a sack of jewels, he asks for them and she obeys without question, except for the bold request to keep two small pearls which she later surrenders to him when he demands them; he takes away her luxurious possessions, the two pearls, because he wants to give them to a girl, he met in a tea house.

Pearl Buck is a humanitarian writer because her writings raise the issue of justice and criticize discrimination. A critic Roberto Boson, focusing this aspect writes, "Customs and experience which link Chinese with all humanity forms the exotic background for this outstanding character in the novel. It is a beautiful and impressive tale which makes all richer because of the opportunity it gives readers to

study characters" (230). Buck strongly opposes discrimination and oppression that were practiced against women. She calls for equality between men and women as both are equal and worth respecting and dignified. She criticizes women's passive role and doing nothing in order to improve their situation in a society dominated by men. Another interpretation of the novel is on the influence of romance. Showing the possibility of romance, Kang Young Hill states:

[...] By placing the emphasis on romantic love all Confucian society is reduced to a laughable pandemonium. We have the picture of a man taking on ugly wife so she will be a virgin, finding his own son a rival in his concubine's chamber, placating uncle's son, who attempts to violate one of the daughters of the house before the father's eyes and finally introducing the youngest slave of his own household into his bed, under the jealous and hating eye of his youngest son. (185).

Some critics have commented characters by showing their nature. Edgar Snow, reveals how the character Wang Lung expresses his views. He argues, "... Wang Lung can be gauche and timid, stubborn and resolute, servile and pusillanimous, snobbish and hard-hearted, idle, and restless, delicate and industrious ... (242). There are certain differences between how the poor and the rich women were treated in the traditional Chinese society.

Rich Chinese women could have their own slaves to do work for them; however, they did not have the rights to study and become scholars. Only men at that time were considered to be able to receive education and achieve a higher status. Buck's *The Good Earth* is critically acclaimed for its depiction of Chinese life. As Kiang Kang Hu points out the situation of Chinese women and writes:

Her portrait of China may be quite faithful from her own point of view, but she certainly paints China with a half black and half white face and the official button is missing... She capitalizes such points, intensifies them and sometimes “dumps” too many and too much of their kind on one person, making that person almost impossible in real life. (370)

Hu criticizes the novel as being far less to Chinese life. Buck says of it, “Anyone who knows those portraits most realize how far from the truth of life they are; the said pose, the arranged fold, the solemn, stately countenance, the official button. I have dealt in lights and shades” (371). From this, it is clear that her experience and knowledge about China was broad and she was confident to write about it based in actuality. Most of the critics were impressed with Buck’s depiction of China. Critic Phyllis Bentley remarks:

Mrs. Buck aims to present Chinese customs as familiar, natural and correct, because so would her characters regard them (These customs) are copiously illustrated, but always presented, as it were, unself- consciously, as part of natural process of living; never by slightest word or turn of phrase does Mrs. Buck call attention to the difference of these customs from our own. (1)

The novel uses a chronological form which proceeds at a fairly regular pace. Buck’s stories are chronological narratives of a piece of life, seen from one point of view, straightforward, without devices; they have no complex plots, formed of many strands skillfully twisted, but belong to the single strand type with the family, however, rather than the individual as a unit.

Patriarchal social systems have ignored the power, capacity and ability of women and are marginalized and have created the female figure according to their

needs. Meyer Howard Abram in his book *Glossary of Literary Terms* mentions some issues indicating in feminism which is briefly mentioned below:

Western society is passively patriarchal, male centered and control and conducted so as to subordinate women to men all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. What is feminine and what is masculine are merely the cultural constructs generated by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization. (89)

Women have been treated as inferior for a long time as males have believed themselves as superior. Thus, to pinpoint the history of feminism is a complex task. If a broad concept of feminism includes women acting, speaking, and writing on women's issue and rights, then we can see that these concerns go back as far as recorded history.

Patriarchal culture has been practised from centuries since male has captured the dominant position over every aspect of the society and females have been deprived of their rights related to each and every field and sector. Patriarchal society created female position as secondary. Women were treated as inferior since males believed that they were superior. They always tried to handle and put female under their control to establish their snobbish superiority.

Male controlled power over all aspects of the society: politics, society, property, capital, culture, literature, myth, religion, language and so on and defines the things as their will. Patriarchy is male made norms to subordinate female for their comfort. "Patriarchy" according to Abrams, "that is male centered and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic" (89). The patriarchal society traits women to be objects. They were treated as animal

without any human consideration and supposed to be private property. They were bought and sold as commodity. Thomas Keith, says, "The concept of patriarchy" denotes this general system where social practices, institution (church, family, state), and cultural images organize the power that men exert over women's" (239). Women have been always defined with reference to man and not he with reference to her. He is the subject; he is the absolute-she is the other. Renowned philosopher Plato's view on women states, "There is no pursuit of the administrators of state that belongs to women because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all" (234)

In every sphere of life, males have displayed their satisfaction in feeling that they are lords and try to prove women that they are secondary creature created to serve men. Females were supposed to be good daughters, wives and mothers moving only under the protection of their father's roof to the protection of their husband and sons. They were expected to comply the male members of the family, faithful with their husband, home, children and other family members. Female child is always supposed to be a burden. A girl child is an unwelcome birth and can even bring shame to families unable to produce a boy. Killing of female child before or after birth is still in practice in patriarchal society.

In patriarchal culture, there is not only male dominance over female but females have been taught to perceive their own subordination in the name of socializing themselves. As a result, women also desire male child and have pride for being the mother of male child. They feel humiliation for being a woman. Female power, capability, their toil and contribution has always been minimized and have been oppressed and they have little opportunity for individuality. Female are restricted

to talk. They should not speak too much, if they do, they are noted as characterless. Their talking, walking, wearing, laughing and other activities are measured by patriarchal norms.

Philosophers, writers, politicians and priests, have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in the Heaven and advantageous on the earth. Literary works which is considered as a great literature also can not be aloof from the patriarchal ideology. In them, male characters are shown as brave, ideal, courageous, intellectual, and perfect whereas female characters are given marginal and subordinate roles, represented as complementary in opposition to masculine roles. Aristotle says, "The female is female of a certain lack of qualities" (344). In the patriarchal order the image of women like another conceptualization, has been male created. They are motivated to show female is intellectually inferior and biologically weak. In the writings of psychologist Sigmund Freud he defines, "Female body as lacking penis" (56). A woman body is received as being less than man. The result of this conclusion was that women were viewed as less capable than men and their physical difference, such as being able to have children and generally physically weaker than men. Men created oppressive and restrictive ideologies of femininity and the roles of women were expected to play in the society. In any circumstance, patriarchal society is not ready to acknowledge any other possibilities of women in the society than as a second sex.

The issue of female body has long been connected with female subordination and patriarchy. According to poet Adrienne Rich, "The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected; power is exerted through the use and control of women's bodies and sexuality" (239). Western society defines that women's gender and sexual identity were tied to her biological sex. The ideal or perfect female body

constructed by patriarchal society negatively affects women. Female body is presented in advertisement, media and private conversation in such a way that women seek to achieve that idealized body image which is unnecessary subjugation to women that leads women's position as mere objects of male consumption. It is seen in the society that the reason behind the attraction of female to make perfect body is to please the male. Allured by perfect body image which is fashioned by dominant cultural ideals, women participate in their own objectification. Ideal body becomes more desirable and to achieve that image women put themselves in greater risk. They practice over exercise, eating disorders, complication of extreme and unnecessary cosmetic surgeries and many more which can permanently damage their hearts, lungs, livers and many other organs. The concept of wasp waist in Western society, little bounded feet in China, thirty-two virtues in Hindu culture all are designed by male to control over female body and to subordinate their position. Not only that, male also wants to control over the issues like: pregnancy, abortion, giving birth to child which are related to reproduction. Male wants to rule the society by controlling female body. "Controlling women's bodies is a way of controlling women" (44). In the same way, Alice Egarly, notes:

Battles over reproductive rights are perhaps most obvious example of the social control of women's bodies. Women of all races and classes face daily the specter of governmental control and interference in their healthcare, including access to range of birth control methods, abortion, fertility treatments, hysterectomies and many more. (44)

Various rules and regulations are made related to reproduction for women. Patriarchal society taught women to give birth male child is the perfection and pride for women. They do not hesitate to abort if there is a girl in their womb. Taking female body in

relation to reproductive process has given negative connotation. Female were historically oppressed and made weak in conventional masculinity imagination. They were taken biologically designed to inferior status in all spheres that privilege rationality. Janet Price opines:

As the devalued process of reproduction make clear, the body has a propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf. Thus, women themselves are, in the conventional masculine imagination, not simply inferior beings whose civil and social subordination is both inevitable and justified but objects of fear and repulsion.

(3)

The powerful oppressive patriarchal ideas made early feminists reluctant to engage with the female body and found difficult to provide positive theorization of it. The second wave feminist brings positive aspects on feminism that is different from traditional concept of feminism. Margrite Shildrick with Janet Price further present, “The uniquely female capacity to give birth ‘naturally’ has been taken up as the center of women’s power, simultaneously to be jealously guarded against the incursions of biotechnology and celebrated in its own right” (4). Female body continues to be a subject of great interest in feminism because it carries the burden of current cultural, social, political and economic values. Feminism has from the very start been deeply concerned with the body either as something to be rejected in the pursuit of intellectual equality according to a masculine standard or as something to be reclaimed as the very essence of the female.

Buck projects O-lan as subjugated woman and her role is guided by socio-economic and cultural value of patriarchal society. The first chapter is about introduction of novel and issue of the study with related review. The second chapter is

textual analysis and it analyzes the novel from the perspective of feminism. The last chapter is conclusion and portrays O-lan as a subjugated woman.

II. Subjugation of Women as Depicted in Bucks' *The Good Earth*

Chinese women are destined to prejudice since their birth because the society is based on the concept of patriarchal domination. In this context, Janet Price notes, "Chinese society is based on the concept of Confucianism that used prejudice to design women in Chinese society"(52). Women were consistently mistreated and thanklessly used as tools to make the lives of their husbands better. Women, no matter how clever, beautiful, or helpful, are subservient in their roles as children, as wives, as mothers, as slaves, or as the general members of the society. In Chinese society women's behavior was governed by the obedience until the first part of 20th century; a woman must obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife and obey her sons in widowhood. Many Chinese women had limited freedom because of the emphasis on subservience, certain behavioral demands and cruel yet popular practices in the society. Buck projects the issue through characterization of O-lan who is active, helpful and dedicated one. Throughout the plot of the novel, the writer highlights the social status of women which is controversial and dominated by the male. Socio-economic status of the Chinese women is guided by patriarchy. Yifei Shen notes about the feminism in China by projecting various contemporary issues and relates that issue with Chinese socio-economic and cultural context. She says," Chinese women are based on 'Thrice obeying' " (2). The concept that women are expected to comply with their fathers or elder brothers in youth, their husbands in marriage, and their sons after their husband's deaths. The society was designed to female subordination.

The novel reflects a picture of patriarchy which is deeply rooted in Chinese society. As Wang Lung and his father begin this family strand, one by one, characters are introduced from Wang's view point. In spite of the smooth surface, the novel

shows a complicated feminism which is similar to the third world feminism. Like in China in the third world, the situation of women is controversial; she is projected in double faces. On the one hand, women are important members of the society and on the other hand, she only plays the role of subordinate character in the family. Chinese society is patriarchal, oppressive, and stultifying to women. A woman does not have her own existence as a human being in the society, which is exclusively masculine society with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conducts from masculine point of view. Women are behaved such as they are the things to be used by males. In the first chapter, when Wang goes to take his betrothed O-lan, the slave of the great house, the Old Mistress says to Wang, "Take her and use her well" (13).

O-lan, the protagonist of the novel, however, seems to be bold and brave but in the hands of her husband, who is tyrannical and unkind, becomes weak and powerless. A woman in practical life is judged by men's law as though she was not a woman but a man. In the same way O-lan is designed and molded by Wang Lung with his own consciousness and patriarchal norms and values. Therefore, O-lan's identity is confined within the walls of her own house. However, in some circumstances, O-lan seems to be versatile but under the constructed rules, norms and values. She seems to be handicapped and remains within the limited space and time.

Woman has to obey man. Whatever the task she has to do not for herself but for her husband and she is compelled to bear only sons not daughter. In the novel the Old Mistress orders O-lan, "Obey him and bear him sons" (14). So, women's identities are constructed and categorized in the society by the male and if the female tries to go beyond such constructions, they are paralyzed or physically punished. The clearest illustration of this occurs through the eldest son of Wang Lung to his

wife, “We must put the women together in the innermost court and we must watch their day and night and keep the gates barred and the back gates of peace ready to be loosed and opened” (326). Thus, they took the women and the children and they put them all into the inner-court. The eldest son and Wang Lung watched the gate day and night and the second son when he could, and they watched as carefully.

The patrilineal descent of property and surname that demonstrates women’s social and legal inferiority to men was an institutional form that persisted unchanged over centuries. In traditional China, women did not own land. Inheritance went from father to sons or other male relations. This was still in case in most of the parts of China at liberation. Once born, girls have no place to claim in the family. When the slave who conceives by the uncle’s son gives birth to a baby girl, Wang Lung is relieved because if she had given birth to a son, the baby would have had to be acknowledged. Because it is only a girl, the new born child is not important. When Wang becomes involved with Lotus, a concubine, he demands the two pearls from O-lan. O-lan hands over them to her husband without a word, which are only possessions that have any monetary value to her. These situations demonstrate that female had no rights over property in traditional China.

A male child was taken as a good fortune to the family whereas a girl child was considered as a burden and misfortune. The main function of a wife in Chinese society is to bear sons. When O-lan, announced she was with child to her husband, Wang Lung immediately begins to assume that the child will be a male child. Wang has not even a simple human sympathy upon his wife at the time of her pathetic condition, at the time of bearing a child. Instead of giving special care to her at that time he gets feeling of victory. He says to his father: “It is a man child” he called triumphantly. “You are grandfather and I am father” (17). Similarly, when the time

comes for eldest daughter in law to give birth, Wang Lung desperately wishes for a grandson. He bribes the Goddess of Mercy with a new robe and even threatens the Earth God to give him a male grandchild. The birth of a male child in a family is an occasion to be celebrated and appreciated. The birth of a girl, on the other hand, is a shameful and bitter affair. The existence of novel also lies in the perception of all the senses of the individual. Vision at once is the dominant sensory system for a human being which Wang Lung and O-lan use at their best. Their perception of nature and colour are of prime importance. Nature's cruelty and compassion are reflected in their eyes. It is the objective correlative of natural order. The sensory details symbols, the image of earth, ox, sun, stars, moon etc. and similes, animation, personification and foreshadowing of danger as well as emphatic style contribute to the artistic makeup of the novel.

The novel *The Good Earth* presents psychological, social and economic operations of patriarchy. During the time of crisis, women were often sacrificed to help out financial difficulties in the family such as: infanticide, concubinage and finally selling daughters. The psychological order of women's behavior is controlled, they are raised to be subordinate to men and they are content with few possessions. Women's basic role in the society are bearing children (preferably sons) and working inside the house. All of these psychological, economic and social characteristics of women are inferior to men; hence these works reveal a copious number of operations of a patriarchy. Foot-binding, the cult of chastity and virginity, and stricter rules against the remarriage of widows are cited as evidence of the growing oppression of women. Women's behaviors are easily controlled by a patriarchal society and so are the social norms, traditions and practices.

The novel is more than just one man's struggle to rise to economic success, focuses on the depiction of Chinese women in that era. The novel portrays these women with great realism by including traditional Chinese practices like foot-binding, wife purchasing, and keeping concubines. O-lan's character thoroughly traps into the struggles and accepted customs, values and practices ways that lower-class women must deal with. In addition, readers do sympathize with O-lan and her daughter's sacrifices made to maintain the household's wellbeing. Lotus Flower, on the other hand, stirs up feelings of resentment for the hurt, she inflicts on O-lan by intruding on their marriage. Furthermore, *The Good Earth* exemplifies a dynamic portrayal of women in traditional China through the novel's other female characters, too.

Buck explores the status of women in traditional Chinese culture, through the female characters, by focusing on the hardships and limitations faced by women, from abuse in childhood to servitude in adulthood. O-lan, appears in the very beginning of the novel. At the age of ten, her parents sell her off to the Great House of Hwang, where the wealthiest landowner of the village resides. At this time in China, poor families would often sell their daughters off for slavery or prostitution. The following lines of the novel indicate the situation as:

'Is it male or female?' She answered calmly: It is another male.' They said nothing more to each other, but he was pleased, and the incessant bending and stooping seemed less arduous, and working on until the moon rose above a bank of purple clouds, they finished the field and went home. (51)

Above lines highlight that how Chinese society is guided by the patriarchal value system of society. Since O-lan is not an attractive individual, the Great House uses her as a slave in their kitchen. When her owner, the Old Mistress, explains O-lan's appearance to Wang she claims, "You see she has the strong body and the square

cheeks of her kind. She will work well for you in the field and drawing water and all else that you wish. She is not beautiful, but that you do not need” (18). The Old Mistress reinstates what Wang’s father tells him before their marital relationship begins, “And what will we do with a pretty woman? We must have a woman who will tend the house and bear children as she works in the fields. A pretty woman will be forever thinking about clothes to go with her face!” (8). Wang Lung’s father helps Wang realize that a hard-working woman is more important than a beautiful one. Later when Wang first meets O-lan, he immediately notices her feet were not bound. It is shocking that women of many classes rush to submit themselves to such torture: after so many years of suffering, it presents a unique opportunity to gain the respect and recognition of the in-laws, who will praise the beautiful tiny feet even beyond her dowry, as an undeniable proof of her capacity to suffer and obey. However, O-lan’s parents could not afford this Chinese luxury to her due to poverty as mentioned by Old Mistress:

This woman came into our house when she was a child of ten and here she has lived until now, when she is twenty years old. I bought her in a year of famine when her parents came south because they had nothing to eat. They were from the north in Shantung and there they returned, and I know nothing further of them. (18)

After Wang Lung’s marriage to O-lan, she starts to understand her new role as a farmer’s wife. O-lan’s presence brings great changes to the family. She acts more as a servant to Wang Lung rather than a marital partner. O-lan not only takes over many of the household responsibilities, but she is also striving to find ways to please Wang Lung. When she prepares hot water for his father, she says, ‘I took no tea to the old

one-I did as you said” (27). Wang continues it as hard as he did before their marriage, but life is more luxurious with her presence. In this regard, he says:

Females and that one idle son of mine who is less than a male for his idleness, I, too, might have been rich now as you are. Then might I have willingly would I have shared my riches with you. Your daughters I would have wed to good men, your son would I have placed in a merchant's shop as apprentice and willingly paid the fee of guaranty; your house would I have delighted to repair, and you I would have fed with the best I had, you and your father and your children, for we are of one. (55)

After working all day in the fields, he comes home to a clean house and a meal prepared for him. The next day, O-lan goes to the city to pick up droppings from the animals and uses them to fertilize their fields, never once being asked to do any of these chores. Day by day, O-lan accompanies Wang out in the fields without a single complaint about the hard labor.

O-lan’s diligence is typical of Chinese peasant women; however, she exceeds that of peasant women in general. O-lan makes mockery of modern natural child birth. She simply has a child, and bears it alone-without a doctor, midwife, or her own husband’s help. It shows clearly that O-lan receives lack of affection throughout her life. Growing up as a slave, she is expected to work through the struggles of her own. By living in an environment without any affection from anyone, she adapts to a life without sympathy. She lives without sympathy because patriarchal values of the society realizes the matter as duty of women not the subject of mercy. So, by the time she gives birth to her first child, her independence is extraordinary. The lines of the novel indicate the situation as:

He had no idea of whether it was male or female, but it was tall and dressed in a straight black robe of some rough harsh material and there was the skin of a dead animal wrapped about its neck. As he passed, the person, whether male, or female, motioned to him sharply to lower the shafts, I and he did so, and when he stood erect again, dazed at what had befallen him, the person, in broken accents, directed that he was to go to the Street of Bridges.(91)

The novel also illustrates how a peasant woman finds happiness. After the birth of her first child, the key to O-lan's happiness is her pride. At the time of her first emergence of anger, she tells Wang, "When I return to that house it will be my son in my arms. I shall have a red coat on him and red-flowered trousers and on his head a hat with a small gilded Buddha sewn on the front and on his feet tiger-faced shoes" (33). The Old Mistress demands that she takes the first child back to the Great House for her to see. By presenting a baby boy instead of a girl, she is praised and treated with respect by the people of the Great house, hence, allowing her to feel a sense of pride. If she were to have back a girl, she would have been sent back to her parents' home, as a way of humiliation, or simply be discarded or sold. In addition, she is proud in her success being a wife to Wang as well as a mother who has produced many sons for the family. Such a pride is particularly touching because O-lan wants and expects so little from life.

At the onset of time, O-lan's loyalty as a wife surfaces. Instead of condemning Wang for his inability to provide for his family, she stands by his side with hope. Times are so harsh for the family that they need to beg to acquire food since Wang sternly stresses, he is not a beggar. O-lan says, "I and children can beg and the old man also" (100). She cries to the villagers, "A heart, good sir-a heart, good lady! Have a kind heart-a good deed for your life in Heaven! The small cash-the copper

coin you throw away-feed the starving child!” (100). She has now taken control of the family’s welfare, and even Wang Lung seeks her guidance. Afterwards, the couple joins a mob in the raiding of rich man’s gates, and O-lan shows Wang the jewels she retrieves. She hands over all the jewels to her husband to invest in land. She keeps just two small pearls for herself. Wang’s greed sets in; he begins to lavishly spend money on material goods. He also engages in sexual affairs with a concubine named Lotus Flower. Additionally, he buys her copious gifts. His greed overcomes him, and he demands the two pearls from O-lan. Even though they are the only possessions that have any monetary value to her, she hands them over to her husband without a word. She continues to accept the situation and stands by her husband’s side in spite of his selfish demands and his affair with the concubine.

Another perspective of the role of Chinese women is illustrated with Lotus Flower. As explained earlier, Lotus is Wang’s concubine. The lines of the novel show situation as:

A good and working man, a man with a wife and sons—which picture would he, pretending as a child pretends that he might do a certain thing, pretending then, which would he pretend to take? And he looked at every painted face closely and with intensity as though each were real. Before this they had all seemed equally beautiful, before this when there had been no question of choosing. But now there were clearly some more beautiful than others, and out of the score and more he chose three most beautiful, and out of the three he chose again and he chose one most beautiful, a small, slender thing, a body light as a bamboo and a little face as pointed as a kitten's face, and one hand clasping the stem of a lotus flower in bud, and the hand as delicate as the tendril of a fern uncurled. (146)

There was no such thing as divorce to keep concubine. In many ways, she is O-lan's opposite. She dresses silk and wears jewelleries along with an enticing scent. Her feet are bound so she is not expected to work. Her weight becomes a problem since she binges on sweet meats and sits around all day every day. Lotus's demeanor towards children differentiates from O-lan as well. She tells Wang "I will not stay in this house if that one (Wang's mentally handicapped daughter) comes near me, and I was not told that I should have accursed idiots to endure and if I had known it, I would not have come- filthy children of yours!" (211). Wang finds her remark intolerable nevertheless; she comes back two days later to please him and things are back too normal. Even as a concubine, Lotus holds more power than O-lan.

Wang Lung and O-lan's daughters introduce the last and most important time in Chinese women's lives. Unfortunately, O-lan strangles her first-born girl child due to their lack of money to provide for feeding mouth. Not much is spoken from Wang after this occurs because it is their third child and it's a girl- an evil omen. Their eldest daughter receives little attention and nurturing throughout her first years and as a result, she grows to be mentally handicapped.

O-lan's youngest daughter demonstrates the fate of an attractive girl in a well off Chinese family. At the age of ten, her mother binds her feet against the girl's will. She hates the fact that her feet are like this because the pain is excruciating and she can not sleep at night. However, when an argument about foot-binding arises with her father she tells him, "And my mother said I was not to weep aloud because you are too kind and too weak for pain and you might say to leave me as I am, and then my husband would not love me as you do not love her" (252).

As a peasant's wife, O-lan works both in the house and in the fields, the following lines exemplify it, "In the afternoon she took a hoe and a basket and with

these upon her shoulder she went to the main road leading into the city where mules, and donkeys and horses carried it home and piled the manure in the dooryard for fertilizer for the fields” (28).

Similarly, a woman could be a household slave, like cuckoo as well as O-lan herself in the great House before her marriage to Wang Lung. In the reply to Wang’s query whether she can prepare food, O-lan replies, “I have been kitchen slave since I went into the Great House of Hwang. There were meats at every meal” (22).

A woman could be a prostitute serving any man’s pleasure, in a tea house like Lotus Flower who performs this role under the guardianship of Cuckoo. Cuckoo indicating the prostitute says: “And I suppose you have not looked at anything else, have you, eh? No pretty little hands, no sweet smelling cheeks?”(175). Further, she says, “There they are, their pictures. Choose which one you wish to see and put the silver in my hand and I will place her before you”(176).

Similarly, a woman could be a concubine serving only her master’s pleasure, again like Lotus when she assumes this role in Wang’s house. Wang possesses two women together without divorce to first one:

So, these two women took their place in his house: Lotus for his joy and pleasure and to satisfy his delight in beauty and in smallness and in the joy of her pure sex, and O-lan for his woman of work and the mother who had born his sons and who kept his house and fed him and his father and his children.
(216)

A woman, who also could be an upper-class wife like the eldest son’s wife in the Great House, with servants to wait on her and do the housework. Rich or poor if she is a wife, her principal function is to bear sons- “Obey him and bear him sons and

more sons. Bring the first child to me to see” (18). The Old Mistress tells O-lan on her wedding. Therefore, women in *The Good Earth* have been portrayed as subservient.

Another aspect of Chinese life that seemed designed to make women suffer was the practice of foot-binding. The Chinese custom of foot-binding was meant to please men aesthetically and to enhance a man’s status by showing he was wealthy enough for his wife or concubine not to work. We may compare bound feet with the “wasp” waists that were fashionable for western women in the nineteenth century. Those waists, which a man could enrich with his two hands, were achieved only by tight corseting that forced the internal organs out of place and often caused injury. Tight corseting was not as crippling as foot-binding but it had the same purpose to please men. In this regard, the following lines indicate the situation as:

And am I never to be done with all this trouble in my house between male and female? Here am I passing into my age and my blood cools and I am freed at last from lusts and I would have a little peace, and must I endure the lusts and jealousies of my sons?’ And then after a little silence, he shouted again: ‘Well, and what would you have me do?’ (236)

It gives much insight into the ways in which women were treated in Chinese society around the time in which the story takes place. Foot-binding is a practice that is mentioned several times throughout the novel, “The woman’s hair was neat and smooth and her coat clean. He saw with an instant disappointment that her feet were not bound” (17). Small, bound feet are considered beautiful and desirable female characteristics. Thus, when Wang Lung discovers that O-lan’s feet are not bound, he is disappointed. O-lan’s unbound feet will continue to irritate and repulse Wang Lung: “Once or twice he looked back at her. She plodded steadily on her big feet as though she had walked there all her life, her wide face expressionless” (20). In the middle

part of the novel too, we can trace example of foot-binding practice. As Wang Lung becomes wealthier and idler, he begins to carefully examine O-lan. Realizing that she is ugly, Wang Lung is repulsed by her appearance. In a rush of anger, he mentions her unbound feet, and O-lan is immediately ashamed and apologetic. She promises to bind the feet of her daughter. Wang says to O-lan, "I have labored and have grown rich and I would have my wife look less like a hind. And those feet of yours..." (170). O-lan whispers in fear, "My mother did not bind them, since I was sold so young. But the girl's feet I will bind . . . the younger girl's feet I will bind" (171). It seems as though a woman who wishes to be loved by her husband need to have small bound feet. This is what O-lan seems to have instilled in the second daughter. His second daughter tells Wang Lung that she has been ordered by her mother not to say anything against her foot-binding because without bound feet, she will not be loved by her would- be- husband.

Female babies are considered worthless and burdensome. In order to ward off evil spirits from their first-born son, O-lan and Wang Lung pretend that their child is an undesirable female with an incurable disease. So, they want the baby die. The following extract clearly justifies the ideas mentioned above:

"What a pity our child is a female whom no one could want covered with smallpox as well! Let us pray it may die."

"Yes...yes..." said his wife as quickly as she could, understanding dimly what a thing they had done. (51)

A second girl child is born during the famine. Although it is not explicitly told, it is suggested that O-lan kills it immediately after birth: "It would be merciful if there were no breath", he muttered, and he heard the feeble cry how feeble a cry... "(82). It is mentioned that there was no second cry and over the house the stillness became

impenetrable. But for many days, there had been stillness everywhere, the stillness of inactivity and people, each in his own house waiting to die:

“Where is the child?” he asked.

She made a slight movement of her hand upon the bed and he saw upon the floor the child’s body.

“Dead!” he exclaimed.

“Dead” she whispered.

He stooped and examined the handful of its body . . . a wisp of bone and skin . . . a girl. (82)

The novel also gives insight into what was considered proper female behavior in Chinese society. Wang Lung is shocked to see his older girl cousin, a daughter of the uncle, talking freely to a village man. A free interaction between a grown man and woman is considered scandalous, inappropriate, and disgraceful. Wang Lung, meeting his oldest girl cousin thus one day, was so angered for the disgrace done to his family that he dared to go to his uncle’s wife and says:

Now who will marry a girl like my cousin, whom any man can look on? She has marriageable these three years and she runs about and today I saw an idle lout on the village street lay his hand on her arm and she answered him only with brazen laughter!” (59)

In response to this, his uncle’s wife answered with anger, “well, and who will pay for the dowry and for the wedding and for the middleman’s fee?” (60). It clears us how much a girl becomes burden for the family.

There is the belief that birth of a female child in a family is a misfortune reverberates throughout the book. When O-lan had her first daughter, she tells to Wang Lung that the child is not worth mentioning. Because it is only a girl, it does

not deserve any recognition. Wang Lung's uncle finds himself unfortunate because of his woman. He says to Wang Lung:

If I had been my destiny, to have married a wife as your father did, one who could work and at the same time produce sons, as your own does also, instead of a woman like mine, who grows nothing but flesh and gives birth to nothing but females...I too might have been rich now as you are. (62)

However, a piece of literary composition requires no explanation, it stands its own worth as it reveals the human conditions. The characters, not plot become the driving force, O-lan and Wang Lung struggle in the field with patience and courage where pain, suffering, meaninglessness and nothingness prevail. They show courage in the fight and stoicism in defeat. This signifies their authentic existence. Wang's aunt screams at once with anger:

ah, it is something you do not know—to have an evil destiny! Where the field of others bear good rice and wheat, ours bear weed; 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 conceive a son, will yet give birth to a girl—ah, evil destiny! (60)

The sense that female children are commodities to be constantly bought and sold persists throughout the novel. During the famine, men sell their daughters in exchange for money or farming tools with which they rebuild their lives. People sell their daughters in exchange for money. The angst of existence can lead to nihilism. But Wang Lung and O-lan escape from it and take shelter in optimism. The dread of death, the consciousness of nada, nothingness, absurdities, and the feeling of loneliness can be said to be the source of human anxiety. The protagonists, Wang Lung and O-lan are condemned to choose and suffer because of their difficult choice.

They go too far Southern province for their better survival and existence. They stay there patiently in that true place in vain that reveals the absurdity of human existence. O-lan tells her husband Wang Lung that she was also sold by her parents to the Great House of Hwang during a difficult time. Therefore, she is willing to sell their eldest daughter to get Wang Lung back to his land. We can examine it with the following expression of O-lan:

“There is nothing to sell except the girl”, she answered slowly. Wang Lung’s breath caught.

“Now I wouldn’t sell a child!” he said loudly. “I was sold”, she answered very slowly. “I was sold to a great house so that my parents could return to their home.”

“And would you sell the child, therefore?”

“If it were only I, she would be killed before she was sold... The slave of slaves was I! But a dead girl brings nothing. I would sell this girl for you--- to take you back to the land”. (118)

A man nearby his hut tells Wang Lung that like many others, he has had to sell his daughters to survive. According to him, others kill their daughters as soon as they are born instead of selling them as slave. The man says to Wang Lung:

[...] last winter we sold two girls and endured, and this winter, if this one my woman bears is a girl, we will sell again. One slave I have kept—the first.

The others it is better to sell than to kill, although there are those who prefer to kill them before they draw breath. (119)

When Wang Lung returns to the land, he discovers that all of his girl cousins were sold by his uncle during famine. Even the ugly one, who was poke-marked, was sold for a handful of pence to a soldier who was passing through to battle. Buck has

depicted the theme of individual; Wang Lung must struggle until he is dead to create meaning in a hostile and indifferent universe. Wang Lung appears to strong-willed action having extraordinary quality, strange man, comparable to Nietzschean Superman. The supermen are people of restless energy, who enjoy living dangerously, have contempt for meekness and humanity. Wang Lung stands as a rebel, protestor of mechanized and indifferent world like Nietzsche, who challenged the contemporary religious world by declaring that God is dead.

Buck's emphasis on the individual as a rebel against conventions, against nada, against absurdity and presenting the hero as distinct, a lonely man is her existential root in the novel. His loneliness represents Heidegger's doctrine of alienation and loneliness. Heidegger finds his life meaningless and gets no way to human happiness as Buck's protagonists, Wang Lung and O-lan do. They are surrounded by difficult situations far out from which they can not run away but confront it with a full conscience, patience and courage. Wang Lung, though accompanied by O-lan, finds himself lonely to achieve the goal of his choice

Woman is taken as a commodity for man. Wang attracted towards a concubine having perfect 'body' image that was created by male dominated society, which is to please man. "He chooses one most beautiful, a small, slender thing, a body light as a bamboo and a little face as pointed as kitten's face, and one hand clasping stem of lotus flower in bud, and the hand as delicate as the tendril of a fern uncurled" (126). Whatever man does is meaningless because life is itself meaningless. Man tries to give meaning to life engaging oneself in different activities. Wang Lung and O-lan involve themselves in the activity that they are compelled to do. They have to take risks going too far to south and fighting with social system and natural as well. They go for south in order to save their children, and old father and themselves from the

tragic famine and drought. It is always man who fights against the darkness, meaningless and motionless.

In the novel, Buck explores the condition under which human being is categorized as having masculine and feminine traits. She tries to deal with the social and cultural problem of such categorizations as 'masculine' and 'feminine' which bears significance in human being. She communicates her claim that being a human; a woman needs a sense of love, respect and equality rather than domination and subordination. The birth of a child whether it is a girl or a boy must have equal right to live on this earth. A girl child should not be taken as misfortune and burden. She should not be disturbed like Wang's second daughter by masculine norms and values. At last, the novel significantly addresses the problem of women's identity and an exploration of the suffering of women in a male dominated society.

III. Plight of the Chinese Women in Buck' *The Good Earth*

Though portrayed women as calm, passive, patient and obedient, Buck enlightens us about dilemmas faced by masses of Chinese women. She succeeds in elaborating the subjugation of women by varied images of women such as 'Kitchen slave', 'sex object', 'submissive housewife', 'bold and hardworking', 'selfish and pleasure seeking' etc. through her women characters like O-lan, Wang Lung's aunt, Lotus Flower, Cuckoo. She endeavors to portray and criticize such a society simultaneously. It also examines how cleverly Buck expresses her experience that the society she lived in and experienced which was founded on the assumption of male domination and female subordination because in China patriarchal notion has been taken as social norms.

The world of *The Good Earth* is a world where all the women suffer. The society where the protagonist of the novel O-lan exists, believes that women are for the pleasure and assistance of men; their role is complementary part of men and they should fulfill their natural feminine functions. It considers them different from men and warns not to compete with them but to depend on them for everything, especially for their identities. It has rewarded them for the limited role of wife, mother and mistress all of which are pleasing and beneficial to men. The brave, laborious and courteous woman like O-lan has to suffer because she is just a woman. She doesn't have any status in society even though she earns many assets for Wang Lung. She is much disturbed by the cultural norms and values, too. Similarly, though Lotus and Cuckoo try to live the life of pleasure, they fail to keep up their identity because they are the concubine and slave of Wang Lung respectively and both are subordinated to a man.

In this novel, the inferior status of women in traditional China is portrayed with the great emotional impact. The casual way, in which a fellow refugee talks of strangling a girl child at birth or selling her as a slave is itself a shock. Wang Lung and O-lan deal with both these alternatives.

All the women like youngest daughter, the uncle's wife including O-lan portrayed in the novel are as submissive. As a peasant's wife, a woman works both in the house and in the field as O-lan herself does. She could be a household slave like Cuckoo. She could be a prostitute serving any man's pleasure in a tea house, like a Lotus Flower or a concubine serving only her master's pleasure; again, like Lotus when she assumes this role in Wang's house. Finally, she could be an upper-class wife like the eldest son's wife in the Great House, with servants to wait on her and do the housework. Rich or poor if she is a wife, her principal function is to bear son.

The prominent aspect of this novel is how women are portrayed in the pre-revolutionary Chinese society. The role of the women in the then Chinese society is woven throughout this novel. Depending on their social status, each female character within the novel provides readers a different perspective of woman's role during that period. In addition to their roles, the author includes the trials and tribulations these women must face as well. As a whole, the importance of these female characters is based upon their contributions to fulfill the ego of male protagonists and as being providers of support to both family and order in society. Moreover, they are portrayed to be consistent with the Chinese culture of that period.

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