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## Subjugation of women in Chinese society during Early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Reflected in Pearl S. Buck's selected novels

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### Abstract

Women have been found caged in rigid boundaries of traditions and social norms in almost all societies of the world. They, demanding for equal social, political and economic rights have been the mouthpiece of many English writers. Similarly China had a more than five-thousand-year history and Chinese culture has been passed down through generations. Some rigid traditions still can be found in the twenty-first century. One of them was the oppression and subjugation of women in a patriarchal Chinese society. Chinese women experienced a bitter history of oppression, degradation and abasement in semi colonial and semi feudal dynasty which lasted for several millennia. There had been a profound influence of Confucianism, an ethical and philosophical system developed from the teaching of Confucius and Taoism on the lives of women in China since last several decades.

Pearl S. Buck, a humanitarian, philanthropist and advocate of women's rights was one of the prominent American writers who also got most coveted Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. She explores the position of women in Chinese society during late 19<sup>th</sup> C. and early 20<sup>th</sup> C. and given voice to the oppression, subjugation, submissiveness, slavery and inferior position of women through her major novels. The present paper aims at bringing out the subjugation of women being harnessed in rigid social boundaries in Chinese society during early 20<sup>th</sup> C. through the application of research methods such as close reading of texts, critical study. For that purpose I have selected Pearl S. Buck's major novels - 'East wind and West wind', 'The Good Earth', 'The Mother', 'Pavilion of women'.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Foot binding, social construction theory, Taoism

### 1. Introduction

It would be justified to remark that a nation's civilization may be estimated by the rank which females hold in the society. If we judge the Chinese culture keeping in mind this point of view, she is surely away from occupying that place which she strongly deserves. (Chinese Repository, Vol-2, p.313). Subjugation, oppression, subordination of women in a male dominated Chinese society during early 20<sup>th</sup> C. has been a common phenomenon as could be perceptible in other societies as well. There had been a great influence of Confucianism and Taoism on the position of women in China.

Taoism laid down the essential wisdom through the concept of 'yin' and 'yang'. 'Yin' represents 'femininity' which is weak and passive whereas 'Yang' represents masculinity which is strong and active respectively. Accordingly, women were subservient to men in position and status during Han dynasty. In the same way, they were supposed to follow 'Three obedience and Four Virtues' as laid down by the followers of Confucian teaching during the Feudal China. In accordance with it, 'a woman must obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife and obey her sons in widowhood' and the four virtues consist morality, proper speech, modest manner and filial piety.

Deprived of social and educational rights, girls were rendered training only for the sole purpose of marriage from the very early age. They were kept caged in 'women's apartments'. At the age of 3 to 4 years, girls became the victim of the barbarous custom of Foot binding which was supposed to be started in the 10<sup>th</sup> c. and have been in fashion until early 20<sup>th</sup> C. When a girl reached approximately 3 years of age, her mother would wrap her feet with bandages. So all toes except the big one were tucked under the sole of the foot. The result of it was a bound foot reduced to three inches in length from heel to toe. The intense pain and suffering caused by foot binding process can be summarized as "For every pair of bound feet, a bucket full of tears."

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Woman's role was pertaining to domestic household chores and working in the field. They were dispossessed of property and inheritance rights. A woman was considered as 'bearer of children'. The primary function of marriage was to produce male offspring within one year. If she was not able to conceive, her husband would take another wife or concubine. The most terrible thing was that his wife has to perform the task of finding a concubine for her husband. Polygamy was common practice in wealthy families in China until early 20<sup>th</sup> C. The function of woman could be summed in one word – to obey. As quoted in 'Classics for girls', young wife's priorities are:

“As a wife to husband's parents  
You should be filial be and good...  
Be submissive to their orders, all their wants anticipate,  
Be submissive to your husband,  
Or his wishes e'er neglect,  
First of all this submission is his  
Parents to respect.”

Bringing up the girl child was considered as commodity or bad investment. Especially in peasants' families, girl child was smothered to death or drowned in baby ponds or immersed in boiling waters. During worst natural calamities, daughters were sold as a slave to the wealthy families to survive the family.

Pearl S. Buck, a humanitarian and advocate of women's rights who devoted her life in her efforts to promote cross cultural understanding between Asia and America. She also founded 'Welcome House', an adoption agency which has placed over 5000 mentally and physically disabled children in American homes. As Pearl S. Buck grew up in a bilingual environment, she had firsthand knowledge of patriarchal society and the suffering of women in Chinese societies. Her own observation and her experience of her father's misogyny approach towards her mother, Carie as he believed in St. Paul's doctrine 'Wives be subject to thy husbands' inspire Pearl to explore the position of women in Chinese society. So, she felt significance and inevitability of change and also felt that she should reveal the world about it. So, I have selected Pearl S. Buck's four major novels – 'East wind: west wind', 'The Good Earth', 'The Mother' and 'Pavilion of women' and tries to explore the subjugation of women in Chinese society during late 19<sup>th</sup> c. and early 20<sup>th</sup> C.

**2. Research Methodology:** To fulfill my objective, Qualitative research methods such as close reading, thematic analysis are employed. I have also used Feminist theory and Social Construction theory.

### 3. Subjugation of Women as Reflected in Pearl S. Buck's Selected Works

Pearl S. Buck wrote 'East wind: west wind' when west wind began to sweep in China challenging the rigid traditions of China. Through Kwei-lan and her mother, two major characters of this novel, Buck makes it clear that how the social structure and social construction of gender force women to adopt and follow rigid social norms. Kwei-lan's mother represents the traditional Chinese women who strictly observe the social codes of conduct. She enjoys the position of First Lady in the family. Let me quote the words of Simone De Beauvoir "It is the society or civilization as a whole which makes women to behave in a feminine ways." It is completely applicable in the case of Kwei-lan's mother.

The phase of Kwei-lan's traditional training imparted by her mother is significant which reflects the subjugation of women as the general tenure was prevalent in Chinese families. It starts when Kwei-lan was six years of age. Kwei-lan was allowed neither to visit men's compartment nor to play with her brother because it was considered unfitting for them to play together after a certain age. From that age, she was trained to prepare herself in mind and body both for the marriage especially in serving her husband and her mother in law. As Kwei-lan's mother said to her,

“Through these seventeen years of your life, I have had this hour of your marriage in mind. In everything I have taught you I have considered two persons, the mother of your husband and your husband..... I have taught you to submit yourself as a flower submits to sun and rain alike.” (East wind: west wind)

Kwei-lan also had to bear the pain of Foot binding to please her husband. She also accepts as she said, “Ah, I am the daughter of an old Chinese home, with old customs, old furniture, old well tried relationship, safe, sure! I know how to live there.”(East wind: west wind, p.65) In short, she was trained keeping in mind with “all her honoured traditions”. The nourishment and training imparted to Kwei-lan till this point in this novel shows the feudal notion that women exist only for the pleasure of men. It represents the general social structure and status of women in Chinese society during that time.

But to her surprise, Kwei-lan's traditional training of 17 years is challenged by the western wind with the arrival of her betrothed from abroad. Water poured on her dreams when she heard the servants whispering that her betrothed wished to break their engagement because she was uneducated and had bound feet. But she could not escape from the fact though surprising and painful it is when she meets her husband on her bridal night for the first time. As he said to Kwei-lan, “you have been forced into this marriage as much as I have.” It was a tragic blow when her husband said,

“I wish to follow the new ways. I wish to regard you in all things as my equal. I shall never force you to anything. You are not my possession.”

Her husband having western education raised a war against the traditional mindset. He doesn't want his wife to be treated as merely 'sex symbols' and 'bearer of his sons' as per ancient command. As she has been reared up for the sole objective of marriage, she felt that there is nothing left in her life. She is terrified, desperate, bewildered and hurt. Her dilemma is not new but archetypal of all who were facing a clash between the east and the west. It's challenging not only for Kwei-lan's family traditions and her value systems but also for entire Chinese long lasting established customs and values. Her mother said to her,

“Nevertheless my child, there is only one path in this world – only one path to follow in this world – only one path to follow at any costs. She must please her husband..... then there is nothing left but to bend yourself to his will.” (East wind: west wind, p.70, 71)

So she has decided to succumb herself into his hands. Here we see that her unique image as the embodiment of change emerges from her previously discussed image of traditional typical Chinese woman due to her determination, endurance,

and strong will power. As per her husband's suggestion, she suffered a pain of unbinding her feet. Through it, she felt her second birth as 'a complete new life poured in'. She also feels a new sense of freedom physically as well as psychologically. She begins to move easily around physically and also able to run. As a result of it, a mutual understanding between them takes place.

On the other hand, her mother's deep rooted traditional mindset does not allow her to accept the change. It also does not allow her son to go abroad for further study in Peking. She was also too much mourned when she comes to know about her son's marriage with an American woman, the daughter of his teacher because it would break the family's arrangement for him to marry Li's daughter. By doing so, he would violate the Confucian morality of filial obedience and the well-established old traditions that marriage should be based on parent's consent.

Buck's 'The Good Earth' (1931), the bestselling novel also brings out the evils and social norms of Chinese society which result into the subordination of women through the character of O-lan. The wealthy families in China consider keeping slaves as a sign of pride and status during the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. and early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Here, in this novel, we came to know from the Old Mistress of Hwang family that O-lan was sold by her parents during the famine for the survival of family to them when she was 10 years of age. O-lan was working as a Kitchen slave at Hwang House when Wang Lung, the poor peasant came there to take her as his wife. Women as slaves were exploited physically as well as merely treated as a puppet at the will of men. O-lan, a victim of slavery told Wang Lung about her bitter experience as a slave, shared him the doleful condition of slaves in rich man's house. She said,

"Aye, beaten or carried to a man's bed, as the whim was and not to one man's only but to any that might desire her that night and the young lords bickered and bartered with each other for this slave or that...." (The Good Earth, p. 96)

According to Berger and Luckmann, any frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced without much effort. This is institutionalized by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective. As we came across the mindset of Wang's father who said to him, "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 and will pretty women do these things." (The Good Earth, p.6) It was a common social phenomena prevalent to view women as 'Kitchen slave' and 'bearer of children' rather than life partner. Her life as a slave forces her to behave in a submissive manner in every matter. It was believed that the birth of a daughter brings evil in the family. At the birth of a fourth child when Wang Lung asked O-lan, "what now..." O-lan replied, it is over once more. It is only a slave this time- not worth mentioning." She smothered the child to death and declared that the child is born dead. On the moral ground, this act of O-lan cannot be justified but her own suffering as a slave forces her to do so.

After famine when Wang Lung wants to get back to his land from the south, O-lan suggests to sell his daughter. She said, "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." (The Good Earth, p.83) These words of O-lan are the result of the

social conditions prevalent in Chinese society where women especially those of slaves have no place.

Wang Lung could have been able to become a landlord by accumulating lands from the bankrupted Hwang family due to O-lan's looting from a wealthy man. Even though she got nothing except repression, neglect, disloyalty, disappointment and emotional injury. His masculine traits emerge when he said to O-lan, "He saw with an instant disappointment that her feet were not bound." (The Good Earth, p. 26) His act of bringing Lotus as a concubine at home is suggestive of polygamy. It was considered as a sign of wealth.

In 'The Good Earth', Buck 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.

In 'The Mother', Pearl S. Buck succeeds in drawing the universal image of mother; an abstract figure of maternity through the unnamed mother. The mother like the whole race of mothers, performs all the household chores along with helping her man in the field. Apart from it, she has to feed everyone. Even though she never felt these routines dull. As per Chinese custom, the mother has to give birth to a child every year. Like other poor Chinese women, she also bears all these pains uncomplainingly.

As Filial piety was considered as one of the virtues as per Confucian teaching, the mother also respects and fulfills her responsibilities to the utmost towards her husband and her mother in law. Bored with the everyday routines of a miserable life, her husband abandons mother and go to far off town to satisfy his own desires. So, the mother is left with full responsibility of whole family – her mother in law, three children and a blind girl.

As per the social conditions prevalent in the Chinese society, the woman who was abandoned by her husband for his own pleasure was the most ashamed, humiliated and degraded. She would have no dignity or respect left in the society. But no one blames men for such act because men have the right to take concubines to fulfill their physical needs. So, the mother had two options either to lie or being humiliated. So she has to choose the former one for her survival. So she goes to the town and forges letters from her husband saying that he has found a good job in a town and is able to send money back.

The betrayal of her husband, the loss of her daughter by mistreatment of her husband, the loss of her younger son who is executed as a communist are all the products of China at that time. The mother had a sexual encounter with the agent of landlord long after she is abandoned by her husband. But such an act would be condemned by the society. In the Chinese society, the man has all rights to visit Flower houses but the woman was not allowed to remarry or seek other men even if she widowed or abandoned. Women themselves consider such encounter with other men as the ultimate sin due to their deeply rooted traditional mindset.

'Pavilion of women' was written when the western wind has started to sweep in China enabling Chinese women conscious of their position in the society. Society has tried women in a chain of earthly responsibilities however capable, intelligent, spiritual oriented she was.

Here, Buck's creation of Madame Wu and her craving for social and spiritual freedom is the consequence of Pearl's full understanding of the plight of Chinese women. There are

some realistic instances in the beginning of the novel which delineates how Chinese women were oppressed during the early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Madam Wu's youngest sister "remained a virgin because the man with whom she had been about to marry had died." (Pavilion of women, p.13) It was a common practice for unhappy concubines "to hang themselves or swallow their rings or eat raw opium." (Pavilion of women, p.133)

As a matter of fact, Madam Wu who belongs from a rich household does not pass through such oppression but her oppression could be perceptible in her endeavor to gain spiritual freedom. She herself is intelligent, beautiful and shrewd enough to command the whole Wu family – supervising the servants, deciding over family feasts, allocating budgets to her son's families, oversees the family business etc. But on her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, she decides to retire from all such womanly duties and arranges a concubine for her husband to satiate his physical need. Madam Wu's pursuit of freedom from all these earthly responsibilities is different than other Chinese women. Other poor women's longing for freedom had perhaps been smothered by society before it took shape.

When Madame Wu was very young, her father in law forbids her to read his books because he believes that "men love women when they are not too knowing." (Pavilion of women, p.62) and that Madam Wu is "so beautiful that she does not need a brain also". (Pavilion of women, p.60) She faces oppression for the first time here. It denotes that women were considered no longer than 'sex objects' for men. Through Madame Wu, Buck drives home the nature of oppression man had exercised upon women:

"Had she not created even him? Perhaps for that he never forgave her, but hated her and fought her secretly, and dominated her and oppressed her and kept her locked in house and her feet bound and her waist tied, and forbade her wages and skills and learning, and widowed her when he was dead, and buries her sometimes to ashes, pretending that it was her faithfulness that did it. (Pavilion of women, p.249)

To sum up, women were instructed to be obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, reticent and unselfish in character as described in books such as 'Percepts for women' and 'Classics for girls' (Croll). These social constructs lead to the oppression, and subjugation of women in Chinese society.

### Conclusion

Pearl S. Buck tried to promote the cross cultural understanding between Asia and the United States. She, a feminist though she didn't claim herself as a feminist succeeds in portraying her women characters such as Kweilan, her mother, O-lan, the mother, Madame Wu as hardworking, good housewives, caring mother, unselfish, and having strong will power. They had the desire to love, to be happy, to be respected, and to maintain their self-respect but the social conditions and rigid traditions prevalent until the early 20<sup>th</sup> C. in China subjugate them. These women characters are portrayed in the light of what may be called humanitarianism and they strive hard for gaining an individual significance for their existence. The subjugation of women in Chinese society was not inborn but social constructs like cultural practices and customs forced them to behave in a feminine ways. This study may be useful to those who wish to pursue comparative cultural study of different

societies. It may also assist to the feminists for doing socio-cultural study.

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