The Good Wife?: Pearl S. Buck’s Feminist Critique

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Summary of The Good Earth

The Good Earth narrates a story that a Chinese farmer Wang Lung who lives in 1920s rises from a poor and humble man to become a rich landowner with a large family. When he is poor, he marries O-Lan who is a slave in the House of Hwang. O-Lan is quiet and hardworking. She even joins her husband to work on land under burning sunlight as soon as she gives birth to her child. However, Wang Lung thinks she is not beautiful enough; so he is always indifferent to her. And then, there comes a severe famine. Wang Lung’s families are forced to move to a southern city. They live poorly in this city. One day, soldiers are seizing men to join the army. The city is filled with fear. Wang Lung gets some silvers from a man in a rich house by accident. The next day, Wang Lung and his families return to their home and buy some lands by these silvers. One night, Wang Lung finds out that O-Lan steals jewels from a rich person’s house. He takes her jewelries and buys more lands. Since then, he is getting rich. The richer he becomes, the more he dislikes his ugly wife. He marries another woman who is a prostitute named Lotus. As he is getting older, his fickleness and ambition fade away. His only wish is to keep all his lands. He tells his sons that they must not sell his lands no matter what happens and his sons promise him they will never do that. However, when Wang Lung is dying, they exchange a knowing smile indicating they have no intention of keeping this promise.

Main Characters

**Pearl S. Buck**

- Pearl Buck (1892-1973) was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia.
- She grew up in China, where her parents were missionaries.
- She was educated at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College.
- After her graduation, she returned to China and lived there until 1934.
- Her first novel, East Wind, West Wind, appeared in 1930.

- She would give birth alone, squatting over the old tub she kept for the purpose, creeping about the room afterwards to remove the traces of what had been, hiding as an animal does the birth stains of its young.
- Male or female, it mattered nothing to him now--there was another coming which must be fed.
- She made a slight movement of her hand under the bed and he saw upon the floor the child’s body. “Dead?” he exclaimed.
- “Dead,” she whispered.

**Wang Lung**

- He is taken from the scene as he is getting older, his fickleness and ambition fade away. His only wish is to keep all his lands.
- She never say “no” to their husband like O-Lan never resists Wang Lung’s requests. Readers can easily see women’s low position in marriage.

**O-Lan**

- She is a woman who is a slave in the House of Hwang.
- She never say “no” to their husband like O-Lan never resists Wang Lung’s requests. Readers can easily see women’s low position in marriage.

- She will have a new family and have no right to rebel men’s thoughts. As for women, they never have any intention to refuse her husband’s plunder. Most Chinese women at that time are like O-Lan. They never say “no” to their husband like O-Lan never resists Wang Lung’s requests. Readers can easily see women’s low position in their marriage in 1920s China from this scene.

**Interpretation:** In this scene, Wang Lung is taking pearls from O-Lan, and he is going to give them to his new wife Lotus. Wang Lung has already taken all of O-Lan’s jewels by buying more lands except this two pearls. From here, we can see that Wang Lung never considers O-Lan as his beloved wife. He only regards her as a slave from whom he can constantly plunder, reflecting the fact that women are thought that they are supposed to serve husbands in 1920s China. Men view themselves as the head of their family and women have no right to rebel men’s thoughts. As for women, they never have any intention to refuse her husband’s plunder. Most Chinese women at that time are like O-Lan. They never say “no” to their husband like O-Lan never resists Wang Lung’s requests. Readers can easily see women’s low position in their marriage in 1920s China from this scene.

Birth Control Policies in China

- One-child policy was introduced to ensure that China, which has historically been prone to floods and famine, could feed all its people.
- Females killed—Criedit of the policy maintains it has led in some cases to the abandonment or killing of female infants because of the traditional preference for boys.
- “Leftover Men”—By the end of the decade, demographers say China will have 25 million “Leftover men.”
- Forced Abortions—Forced abortion or severe financial penalties.
- China unveils two-child policy in 2016 in a proactive response to the issue of an aging population.

Improvements of Women’s Status in China

- In the subsequent Republic of China, the support of Sun Yat-sen, Regulations on Prohibit Women to Bind Feet was formulated, to prohibit women’s foot-binding.
- In 1980, thanks to the signing the UN Convention, an attempt was made in China to legislate against all forms of discrimination of women at the legislative level.

Conclusion

The Good Earth gives a perfect perspective of women’s role during early 20th Century in China. In marriage, O-Lan represents a “good wife” from a peasant family, who is strong but silent, lives as a slave rather than a marital player and plays the role of bearing sons instead of a wife. Moreover, O-Lan endures the pain of strangling her own daughter, sharing husband with another woman, and living with the only important purpose of giving birth to sons. O-Lan speaks out for many Chinese females in early 20th Century of China, who are suffering from unfair treatments and inhumanity. It is hard to change women’s social status in China which is influenced by thousand-year-old traditional idea. Nowadays in China, even though women’s status in marriage and society is not ideal enough, it still has been improved greatly.

References


