

## **MULTIFARIOUS IMAGES OF WOMEN FOUND IN PEARL S. BUCK'S 'EAST WIND: WEST WIND'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Literature both reflects and helps to create reality. It is through their preservation in works of art that we know what the stereotypes and archetypes have been and; in turn, know the images influence our view of reality and even our behaviour. It has been justly remarked that a nation's civilization may be estimated by the rank which females hold in the society. The portrayal of varied images of women in a patriarchal society has been the mouthpiece of the literature of many nations. Multifarious images of women exclusively as 'submissive housewives', 'caring mothers', 'sex symbols', 'modest maidens', 'a means of pleasure', 'beautiful bitches', 'faithful wives', 'kitchen slaves', 'bearer of children' and so on in a male-centric societies have been portrayed by prominent writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone De Beauvoir, Jane Austen, Henry James, Mary Anne Ferguson, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Pearl S. Buck etc. Pearl S. Buck, one of the renowned American writers can be rightly called as Philanthropist, Crusader of women's rights, a champion of women's liberation. Her experience of both American culture as well as Chinese culture enable her to explore the condition of women in Chinese male dominated societies through the major women characters in her major novels such as East Wind: West wind, The Good Earth, Pavilion of women, The Mother, Peony etc. during the first half of 20th C. She is a pioneer to promote the mutual understanding among different cultures and she is an idealist believing the cultural harmony between the East and the west.

The present paper aims to bring out the multifarious images of women in Buck's novel East wind: west wind and thereby presenting the conflict between tradition and modernity, old and new, and east and the west. Kwei-lan, the chief protagonist has been presented as the 'traditional woman' reared by her mother following the Confucian codes of conduct in the beginning and later on her image as 'the embodiment of change' is emerged. Her mother's image as the 'caring mother' and 'orthodox Chinese woman' representing the whole race of Chinese women is portrayed.

**KEYWORDS:** Confucianism, Feudalism, Foot Binding

### **INTRODUCTION**

Right from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, the subordination of women and the resultant emergence of varied images of women have been portrayed in their literary works and thereby given voice to the oppression, subjugation, slavery, submissiveness and inferior status of women in societies. And such images of women often serve as an indicator or metaphor of any society. For several years, the image and role of female body was determined by social class and custom in dynastic China as could be perceptible in the societies of several countries.

In case of Pearl S. Buck, she lived for many years in China. Moreover she was brought up in two cultures which

had nothing in common except the subordination of women. There was a dominancy of Confucian codes of conduct on the lives of women in China which was considered as the chief codifier of women. In feudal china, women's behaviour was governed by the "three obedience and four virtues" (Confucianism, 2007). In accordance to this, a woman must obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, and obey her sons in womanhood. The four virtues include morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. These rules clearly denote that women were severely restricted in feudal china. Previous to the revolution, the situation of women was oppressive. Women were expected to have blind obedience to the man of the household. Locked in the domestic sphere, women were isolated from the social and economic politics of China. In his essay 'Autumn Harvest Uprising' in human, Mao Zedong wrote that

"A man in China is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority (Political authority, clan authority, and religious authority)... as for women, in addition to being dominated by men. (the authority of the husband)".

These Confucian codes of conduct for women and Buck's personal antagonism towards her father who believes that 'wives be subject to thy husbands' were the driving force for Pearl S. Buck to depict varied images of women in her novels.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. in China, there had been a great impact of western influences on Chinese families. So the East for the first time with a thousand years hierarchy of established rigid customs and traditions was challenged by western civilization's foreign impositions. It is against this milieu that The problem of clash or conflict between eastern and western civilization, between old and the young, between modern and traditional china have been unfolded by portraying the images of women particularly of Kwei-lan and her mother.

Pearl S. Buck who lived in china had firsthand knowledge of patriarchal society and the suffering of women in Chinese societies. As per her own observation and sympathy, she felt significance and inevitability of change and also felt that she should reveal the world about it (*My several worlds -164-166*). Buck was successful in doing so by presenting varied images of women in one single family through her first novel '*East wind: west wind*' as in case of Kwei-lan and her mother providing the readers with an intimate, microscopic view into women's conditions in china at that time.

### **Multifarious Images of women in '*East wind: West wind*'**

The novel is narrated in the first person point of view. Kwei-lan, the protagonist tells about how she had been reared up in a rigid environment and rendered training for marriage. She also reveals that how this had been challenged by the wind of western civilization.

Buck was successful in depicting the varied images of women in china by portraying the characters of Kwei-lan and her mother. She presents Kwei-lan as the embodiment of change and her mother as the symbol of China's past. Kwei-lan is portrayed as a typical woman in her time and also successful enough. Kwei-lan's process of changing is a painful one but also represents conflicts of the process the whole nation was undergoing. It was forced and agonizing in the beginning.

Kwei-lan's mother had a long lasting influence of Confucian teaching. Dominated by such rigid environment, she resists change and as a result she failed to survive the arising conflicts that come with societal changes. In the beginning of the novel, Pearl S. Buck took grand efforts to describe Kwei-lan's life before marriage. First of all we see her family background in the starting pages. Kwei-lan's father- one of the aristocratic one has four wives. Kwei-lan's mother is the First lady in position or native ability. No one else in women's apartments was equal to her. Even at this age though her

face is fleshless, it preserves the clear oval of the paintings of the ancient women. She commands the whole house and also is praised for her beauty by other ladies. The fourth lady remarked that

“The first lady’s eyes are sad jewels, black pearls, dying from over much knowledge of sorrow.”

The rest of her father’s wives are kept themselves busy in winning the husband’s favour which they ultimately lose their husband’s favour when their beauty fades.

The pre marriage life of Kwei-lan is significant as it reflects the image of women of that time realistically. This phase of Kwei-lan’s life is important because it sets the stage for her traditional training given by her mother as the general tenure was prevalent in Chinese families. In this context, Kwei-lan’s mother represents the whole race of Chinese women of her age who believes in rigid social codes and conduct as the traditions persist since last thousand years. She believes that the major goal of woman’s life is to satisfy and please her husband. Without fulfilling this goal, the woman would have no happiness and status in the family. Therefore she spares her level best efforts in rearing her daughter- Kwei-lan by imparting traditional education with an aim to fulfill her role towards her husband after she is wed.

This phase of her training starts when Kwei-lan was six years of age. She was separated from her brother who was nine years of age. He is sent to the court of men where his father lived. Kwei-lan was allowed neither to visit men’s compartment nor to play with her brother because it was considered improper for them to play together after a certain age. From that age, Kwei-lan’s only aim is to prepare herself in mind and body both for the marriage especially in serving her husband and her mother in law. Her mother informs her that she is about to marry the man to whom she was betrothed before she was born. She has been reared for this end. 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.”

Her mother gives training to her of how to decorate herself to draw his attention, cook to entice his appetite, speak with her eyes and expressions but without words and also has been taught to play the ancient harp while singing verses from poets for her husband’s pleasure. In dealing with her mother in law she has been taught how to prepare tea and present tea to an elder, stand in an elder’s presence, how to listen in silence while an elder speaks whether in praise or blame. Kwei-lan’s mother took pain taking efforts to rear her daughter keeping in mind “all her honored traditions” (page no. 4) and “well versed in all the duties of a gentle woman” (page no. 10). Her mother has also bound her feet smaller than any other. Kwei-lan was well equipped with the manners and etiquettes of aristocratic life by her mother. In short, her mother took all efforts to train her daughter, Kwei-lan in traditional manner so that her mother in law would not find anything lacking in her. And Kwei-lan accepts it 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.”(65)

Here, Kwei-lan and her mother represent the feudalist belief and strict observance of rigid social codes which had been prevalent in china since long time. The nourishment and training imparted to Kwei-lan up 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 Kwei-lan's traditional training given by her rigid mother is challenged by the western wind with the arrival of her betrothed from abroad. She was stunned and 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. She was not ready to believe due to her deep rooted conviction and her conventional training that learning has never accompanied beauty in women and only farmers or servants have big unbound 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." She was amazed and didn't see any force as it was according to our custom. It was a tragic blow against her 17 years traditional training when her husband said to her on wedding night,

"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."

There was a conflict in her mind and number of questions raised against her traditional learning. Her learning permits her to ask such questions to herself:

"What else could I do if I didn't marry? And how could I marry except as my parents arranged it? Whom could I marry if not the man to whom I had been betrothed all my life?"

During the wedding night, her husband leaves her alone in the bridal chamber, the marriage unconsummated. Her hard learned traditional training and ways are being challenged and her seventeen years value system is turned upside down by the very person she is so prepared. 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. In such a state she wishes to go back to her mother. But her learning as per the proverb "A daughter married is the water poured out" doesn't allow her for so because she knows that her mother would be waiting to send her back to her duty.

Here starts Kwei-lan's new challenging path and phase of life. Her husband having western education raised a war against the traditional mindset. For that he dared to move himself and Kwei-lan out of the courts of his parents' family against their wishes as he would not have his wife a servant in the home by his autocratic rigid mother. He doesn't want his wife to be treated as merely 'sex symbols' and 'bearer of his sons' as per ancient command. He doesn't want to spend his days in dignified leisure. He wishes to utilize his foreign education in medicine for the welfare of his country. Had he been reared in the old ways, he could never have resisted his father but accept the ancient long preserved customs.

Until this point, Kwei-lan's image as a typical Chinese woman is reflected. For her, the environment in which she dwells is totally unexpected and opposite to her value system. Her predicament is not new but representative of all who were facing a conflict 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. Kwei-lan's shaken life is suggestive of challenges that shake some of China's well preserved ancient feudal odes at the time which were backward because of the sweeping west wind. But for Kwei-lan as in case of any Chinese woman who has been brought up in such an environment resists such change at first. Keeping in mind the importance of winning her husband's favour as Kwei-lan saw in her family, she continues her efforts in vain. She tries to attract the attention of her husband by washing her face in steaming, scented water and smooth it with oils and perfumes in the early morning but her husband pays least attention to her and makes it clear that woman's real beauty lies in her being natural. As per her mother's advice, she tries to catch his attention towards her by playing a harp but her husband says that she should better learn to play piano.

But the traditional training by her mother and all her efforts to please her husband are proved fruitless as they are traditional in nature. Now Kwei-lan has only two options to survive in this whirlwind – either to resist change or to become accustomed to change as the Chinese society as a whole has. For her the first option would keep her outside her husband's favour and her 17 years training given by her mother with the sole purpose of marriage would be in vain. Therefore she has no more except to opt second option. But this path of change is not so easy for her because her learning and training in rigid Confucian codes for the ultimate purpose of pleasing her husband doesn't allow her to accept it internally. She finds herself in a dilemma as Hamlet felt in Shakespeare's tragedy 'Hamlet "to be or not to be that is the question". When she meets her mother, she shares her conflict with her. Her mother after discussion 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.” (70, 71)

Kwei-lan realizes that times have changed and her husband has changed as well. So she has decided to succumb herself into his hands. We can say that her determination to change doesn't come from within but external circumstances force her to adopt the new path. As Doan remarks,

“Kwei-lan may well represent the soul of ancient china: though she becomes a convert to modern life, the conversion is forced upon her by marriage rather than by a genuine conviction.”

Whatever the reason it may be, she reveals her character traits: determination, endurance, strong will power and as a result her distinctive personality emerges. Here we see that her distinctive image as the embodiment of change emerges from her previously discussed image of traditional typical Chinese woman.

Here starts her new phase of readjustment, an initiation into her husband's world. This journey begins by following her husband's desire to unbind her feet. Her husband wishes her to unbind feet as foot binding is unhealthy for her whole body. When Kwei-lan's husband said,

“I wish you to unbind them because they are not beautiful. Besides foot binding is no longer in fashion.”

Kwei-lan is shocked to hear that as it was completely opposite to what she was taught and reared in a long lasting Chinese fashion. Foot binding was prevalent during that time in Chinese society. So the girls have to pass through this painful process of Foot binding only with the goal to please their husbands. In case of Kwei-lan also tears came into her eyes at his words. She suffered a lot due to foot binding only thinking that her husband would praise her feet when she got married. It represents the social scenario and images of women in rigid Chinese society during that time. But he was making useless all the sacrifices and even demanding a new one! So, for kwei-lan, the unbinding process was as painful as the binding had been. The loosening of the feet is followed by an intolerable pain.

Foot binding represents the oppression and confinement of Chinese women following the Confucius moral codes. While the unbinding process symbolizes challenge against this well established social customs prevalent since last thousands of years, moving towards a new way of life. In case of Kwei-lan she has sacrificed and suffered a lot to fit into the mold, but now her sacrifice becomes worthless and 'a new sacrifice'(84) has to be made. This process of unbinding illustrates distinct view points of both Kwei-lan and her husband. For her husband having western education, the unbinding is a resolution to break away from traditional Confucian moral codes. As he said, “It is not only for us but for others too – a protest against an old and wicked thing.” But for Kwei-lan, it's not easy to adopt new ways of life; breaking away from

long years customs of china. So she makes it clear to him: “No! I do it for you – to be a modern woman for you.” (85). So her motivating factor behind her unbinding foot is her long cherished conviction that the happiness of a woman lies in her ability to please her husband as her mother taught. The pain she suffered in this process is not merely physical but psychological as well as spiritual.

Whatever it may be, but her image as the embodiment of change arises. Through unbinding her feet, 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. She starts to feel happy and not lonely. Not only sense of freedom and happiness but also all the rewards of change work as a motivating force for Kwei-lan and thereby it leads to her conviction that she made a right choice.

As compared to Kwei-lan, her mother could not accept the change against the sweeping west wind. Kwei-lan’s mother is depicted as the embodiment of traditional Chinese women. Pearl S. Buck is successful in presenting her image as ‘a caring mother’ ‘a good housewife’ and a typical traditional woman in an aristocratic family. Her mother is portrayed as a typical traditional First lady in every way. “She understands many things and moved with a habitual quite dignity which kept the concubines and their children all fearful in her presence.”(14) She is successful in maintaining her power as the First lady due to her management of household, though she has lost the favour of her husband long ago. Though she is strict in the observance of Confucius codes, she proves herself as a good and caring mother. Her sadness is the result of ‘a hundred generation of women who loved their lords and lost their favour.’(162). It reflects the social custom and family structure in Chinese society and the position of women in it. Another instance of her long experienced belief can be seen when she said, “Do not use poetic expressions in regard to it (love). It is only desire – the man’s desire for the woman, the woman’s desire for a son. When that desire is satisfied, there is nothing left”. (166). It makes clear of Buck’s condemnation of the mistreatment of women that women were treated as sex symbols. Kwei-lan’s mother’s deep rooted Confucian moral codes and traditional beliefs do not allow her son to go abroad for further study in Peking She advised her son that the foreign learning is unnecessary for him. By doing so, he will imperil his life which is not fully his until he has given her son to carry on the ancestral name if he would have married first. It makes it clear that Kwei-lan’s mother is the strict observer of Chinese social codes in which she had been brought up and lived. She was also too much grieved 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.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> C. the west wind was so strong that it affects many Chinese families. Here Pearl S. Buck is successful in presenting review of resolving the clash between the two winds : one should neither resist the change completely nor abandon the tradition completely by bringing forth accurate images of women in China like Kwei-lan, her mother and the three Concubines in *East wind: west wind* at a time when the western wind started to sweep. The two cultures can help each other, complement each other. As a result of the bond developed between the couple during the process of change, Kwei-lan gives birth to a boy. She also enables to fulfill her traditional duty to her husband. Kwei-lan starts to learn new things. During this process, her view point in judging and evaluating persons and things is expanded. As we see that she dislikes her American sister in law as her mother but later on Kwei-lan is able to see her good qualities and

starts to admire her. Kwei-lan realizes through her American sister in law that western women have the same feelings as her. Kwei-lan's process of change is not an easy but its success depends on her husband's cooperation and motivation. If Kwei-lan hadn't been supported by her husband by providing her opportunities to learn and experience new ways of life, she would have been discarded by time.

Against it, Kwei-lan's mother resists this change. For her resistance towards west wind, she cannot be considered responsible. According to social construction theory, femininity is a social construct. It is the cultural forces and civilization as a whole that encouraged women to behave in such a manner. Women are basically geared towards behaving in specific ways deemed appropriate by society. Kwei-lan's mother experienced and realized and thus concludes that there is nothing like love and her only hope in life is to see grand children to carry on the family name. Kwei-lan's brother's marriage to an American would be a direct blow to his mother's teaching as well as to her expectations as every Chinese woman had from her son during that time. If she approves her son's marriage with a foreigner, it would directly mean giving up her well established and confirmed traditional beliefs and ideology which had been prevalent since last thousands of years. So instead of compromising with the sweeping East wind, she opts death. She hasn't accepted her son and his wife as the heir of this ancestral family.

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