

Chapter-I

Introduction : The Need
for a New **Window**

Pearl Buck Criticism : A Review

Pearl S. Buck, the Nobel Prize Winner was a very popular novelist of America in 1930's. Even today her works continue to be read widely by the general public. "The borrowing of her writings from public libraries is frequent and exceptionally steady. Her popularity in countries throughout the world is conspicuously attested to by the fact that she is the most widely translated American author. In the whole history of American Literature, only Mark Twain comes close to her in this area of approval."¹ Despite this popularity, Pearl Buck seems to have been neglected by critics and commentators in America.

Paul A. Doyle, the first and the only critic to have written a full length study of Pearl S. Buck, says in his preface :

"Since her success in the 1930's, Pearl S. Buck has received little attention by literary critics and commentators. Practically all of the important articles on her writings were published in the 1930's. Only a handful of significant essays and review articles have appeared since then, and no full length critical study has been published.

The tendency today in circles of literary criticism is to ignore Pearl Buck's work almost completely, although now and then a brief, and usually somewhat begrudging, nod of appreciation is given in the direction of The Good Earth."2

Paul Doyle published his book 'Pearl S. Buck' in 1965, and its second edition was published in 1980 but during this period there has been no noticeable change in the critical situation. Theodore F. Harris in his biography of Pearl S. Buck tries to account for this situation :

"In discussions by critics and journalists of what they call the leading American writers, she frequently is not mentioned, perhaps because she is not thought of as American by many American critics."3

Pearl Buck herself realized this and said with a combination of realism and confidence :

"It is true that the American critics ignore me. They do not know what to do with me. I don't mind. I think they are not quite sure I should be included in the field of American literature and writers."4

However, critics like Doyle, Harris and Gargill unanimously accept Pearl Buck's clarity and comprehensiveness in range, the universality of her view and timelessness of her setting and tone. Hoping that a new era will come in which story telling will be critically appreciated Doyle pleads for a new critical approach to Pearl Buck :

"The artistic dogmas built from the critical theories of Henry James are not erroneous, but a balanced approach to the novel should acknowledge Jame's own recognition that in the house of fiction there are many windows. Such an attitude will raise Pearl Buck's critical reputation. Eventually her literary standing may possibly settle on a level with that of such writers as Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and John Marquand."⁵

A similar feeling is echoed by Pearl Buck's biographer, Theodore Harris when he says :

"I predict that the works of Pearl Buck as one of the nonimmediate results, will become newly popular and respected and will be studied and examined more exhaustively than ever before for the simple reason that no one has ever written so understandingly of the problems that afflict the world today and so compassionately of China and Chinese and their share in the affairs of the world as has Pearl Buck."⁶

It is very interesting to note that such a popular and Nobel Prize Winner American novelist has been ignored by American scholars and critics. Malcolm Cowley has made some incisive remarks in this context :

"Although it (The Good Earth) has received more prizes and official honors than any other novel in our history, still there are literary circles in which it continues to be jeered at or neglected. It didn't succeed in the fashion that critics regard as orthodox. They like to think that a really good novelist is discovered by those younger critics who act as scouts for the rest, and that afterwards his reputation spreads from this centre in widening rings until it reaches the general public. Hemingway, Faulkner, Wolfe, Steinbeck all succeeded by this formula, but Miss Buck turned it inside out : she was discovered by the public at large while the literary scouts were looking at the other way."⁷

Apart from other non-fictional works, Pearl Buck published in all forty one novels.⁸ Yet only The Good Earth is praised by the critics alongwith the two biographies of her parents - The Exile and Fighting Angel. The Nobel Committee citation, which accompanied the award, read :

"For rich and generous epic description of Chinese peasant life and master-pieces of biography."⁹ Henry S. Canby, who does not approve of Pearl Buck's novels, says that her

biographies of her parents are unquestionably the best studies ever done of the unique personal traits developed by the missionary fervor of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

In general, Pearl Buck criticism, in whatever small amount it has appeared, seems to have centred around her The Good Earth and the two biographies of her parents. All her writings after 1940, (and much of her writing is published after 1940) have been ignored by reputed critical circles in America. The general opinion about her later works is clearly seen in James Woodress' remark :

"Pearl Buck enjoys a very modest place in the esteem of scholars and critics of American literature. She is rocketed to international fame with her second novel The Good Earth (1931), but after that her literary output, which was prolific, was anti-climatic. Novels came from her typewriter annually as inevitably as the changing seasons."¹¹

Though Doyle mentions some of her admirable qualities such as the universality of her themes and her power of story-telling, he remains faithful to the western critical tradition and explains some of the reasons for her being ignored by the American critics. He says :

"After 1939 she (Pearl Buck) became more facile at constructing her plots, handling dialogue, and in the technical aspect of her craft; but no subsequent significant growth in the artistic features of novel writing occurred in Pearl Buck's work. No experimentation in technique took place, and she made no attempt to penetrate more deeply into character analysis, showed no willingness to seek subtleties of tone or mood, and indicated no interest in using myth or symbolism or other elements characteristic of the modern novel. On this account alone Miss Buck must be neglected by some of the more recent literary critics because her total disregard of such concerns as myth and archetype, stream of consciousness, and symbolism gives critics very little to analyse and explicate. Her novels do not furnish the layers of meaning and the complexity which modern literary criticism demands."¹²

This is not all; Doyle in his preface says that she was distracted from complete literary dedication by her humanitarian interests which, although extremely worthy, admirable, and important in themselves, took the valuable time and energy necessary for a single minded approach and devotion to art. He further says that she has indeed written too much and too hastily. Obviously

enough her prolific writing could not maintain consistently high level of competence. In addition to that Doyle complains that she did not polish or revise her novels. However, of all her faults and drawbacks he has mentioned, his reference to her "optimistic affirmative point of view" is very important. According to him, "Pearl Buck's loss of prestige in serious literary circles stems from her optimistic affirmative point of view."¹³ This point has been mentioned earlier by Elizabeth Janeway and Doyle agrees with her. She says :

"She (Pearl Buck) prefers to deal with human situations as close to universality as possible at a time when the private struggle of a human mind with its interior world is a favorite subject. She subordinates her characters to her theme and approximates them often to types. Above all in an intellectual world which has plunged itself into profound pessimism.....Miss Buck is an optimist."¹⁴

On the basis of this remark by Elizabeth Janeway Doyle says :

"Our 'Age of Anxiety' is best attuned to a Lord of the Flies mood, and with such bleak tendencies Miss Buck is deliberately out of step."¹⁵

Here we find the most crucial point regarding the criticism of Pearl Buck's writings. We must remember that she was taken to China by her missionary parents as an infant of three months in 1892; and she came to America, to settle for the rest of her life, in 1937. Thus she was brought up not in the American literary tradition characterized by modernism but in confucianism and Chinese sagas. Doyle has rightly acknowledged it; therefore he says that she was not brought up in the western environment "which was conductive toward an artistic view of the novel.... Her confucian tutor, Mr. Kung, did not regard novels highly."¹⁶ In China novel writing was not an approved activity of a respectable and learned man. Moreover, as Doyle has pointed out, her missionary parents' religious attitude that novel reading or writing was not a serious endeavor has contributed to lower her general feeling towards the importance of the novel as a work of art.

Thus Pearl Buck was far away from the American novelistic tradition which upheld formal experimentation and modernist techniques. Her first language was not English but Chinese and she was influenced in her formative years by the style of the old Chinese narrative sagas. Her subjects, characters and settings are mostly Oriental rather than Occidental except in her 'John Sedges' novels.

Therefore, when she wrote about Chinese subject-matter "the narrative formed itself mentally into the Chinese language and she then translated this material into English."¹⁷ Consequently, one has to note that her novelistic vision is not at all prompted by the 'pessimistic' or 'bleak tendencies' of the western nihilistic tradition. She is influenced by the oriental view of life that believes in more hepful aspects of the human situation. And yet, she has been judged by the modern western literary standards and by the 'critical idiom that was foreign to her.

Her humanistic affirmation of life as distinct from the 'pessimistic' or 'bleak' approach of the west is clearly seen in her American Argument where she speaks of her contemporary young American novelists. According to her, they write "books of futility and despair" and she declares of their works "that there is no vision eventhough this is the most exciting age in human history, when the people of the whole world for the first time move with a common impulse toward better life. Our young men and women look only at themselves and so see nothing."¹⁸ Another illustration of her positive view of life is seen in her observation of Osborn's Look Back in Anger. She says: "John Osborn's Look Back in Anger is deficient in point of view because it

suggests a regression to animalism. Such an attitude leads to defeat and death, but the material of art is life."¹⁹

There is thus a fundamental difference between Pearl Buck's view of life as novelist and the western view of life held by the writers of her time. Darwin and Marx, Freud and Jung, evils of industrial revolution and rising materialism of modern technology have all destroyed the image of man in the west, and have thus added an almost nihilistic dimension to the Christian notion of man being born sinful. But in the East, especially in China and India, Buddhism, Confucianism and ancient Hinduism together with their principles of tolerance, mutual understanding of human relationships and spirit of inclusiveness have kept the dignity or the image of man from sudden destruction. As will be seen in the second chapter, Pearl Buck's view of life prompted by such characteristics of the Oriental culture and humanistic concerns; and through her novels, she is constantly trying to bridge the gap between East and West with her inclusive vision of the human condition on this planet.

Thus the significant feature of Pearl Buck criticism has been this difference between her optimistic Oriental

vision of life and the pessimistic western view of her ✓
critics. While she is engaged in the social and cultural
unification of the people of the two hemispheres of the
globe, her critics are busy with the exploration of the
tragic world of a single human mind in the form of myth
and archetype in the subconscious mind, or stream of
consciousness or the inner drama in some other forms. What
Doyle has said about her is quite true and significant as
far as the western literary and critical idiom is concerned.
Yet what is needed at present is a more detailed examination
and interpretation of Pearl Buck's writings and her
popularity. In other words a critical examination of the
thematic concerns of Pearl Buck in the context of her
humanistic and Oriental tradition is necessary for a proper
understanding of her works. Unfortunately no serious
critical attempt has been made, either in the West or in
the East, to examine her works. The real theme of her works,
especially of her novels, is the cultural encounter between
the East and the West, between the old and the new in the
light of the social, political, religious and racial
differences between two or more peoples. The present study
proposes to take a step in this direction by seeking to
provide a comprehensive critical statement on the theme of
religious encounter in six selected novels belonging to the
later phase of her career. Since Pearl Buck explores this
theme in the context of her humanistic vision, the present

dissertation seeks to provide a double focus on the theme and the vision in terms of both religion and humanism.

- II -

Pearl Buck and Religion :

Pearl Buck has expressed her views on religion quite frequently in her non-fiction also. They reveal the specific contours of the theme of religious encounter in the novels under discussion. There are a few significant things to be considered in this regard. First of all she was brought up in an environment that was full of religious contraversy and to which she was very sensitive. Secondly she believed that religion was one of the main serious barriers to the mutual understanding and the unification of the peoples of East and West. And thirdly she tried to understand almost all the major faiths of the world (except Islam) to make herself qualified to speak and write about them. Therefore, she did a lot of profound research on Judaism when she wrote Peony, studied the Confucianism for so many years in China as it is seen in many of her novels - especially in Peony, visited Buddhist temples in Ladakh to understand Lama-mysticism for her Mandala, established a good contact with Hinduism as it is evident in her Come My Beloved and Mandala, and plunged into the mystic and spiritual depths as evidenced in her Pavilion of Women.

Pearl Buck's parents were missionaries and hence religious atmosphere was the characteristics of her early life in China. In her childhood she could see the christian

} Syntax

zeal manifested in her father's dedication to his missionary work as well as the other priests and missionaries who were intolerant, selfish, arrogant and ignorant. She was very sensitive to the encounter between her father and all other missionaries round him. She has portrayed this in her biography of her father, Fighting Angel. She writes of him : "He was one of the few scholars among missionariesHe studied with profound interest Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism finding in these religions many parallels with christianity."²⁰ Pearl Buck was also remarkably influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism. Her tutor Mr. Kung was a Confucian. Mrs. Bucknall's remarks are very significant in this context :

"Pearl Buck was forged by two great traditions - China and the evangelical christianity of her missionary parents. Her writings with their simple, eloquent, somewhat archaic style and their taste for a clear message based on real experience, have reminded people of the Bible. But she was too earthly for a missionary and too accepting of all religions. She refused her father's doctrines (for her mother was more loving and less dogmatic) as too harsh and narrow and she tempered her parents' ideal of christian love and service with Confucian tolerance and calm. This meant that whatever her subject, she sought to convey to the world the dual lessons absorbed in her childhood.

And in this task she had set herself, she was as untiring and as impossible to discourage as her father had been in his mission work."²¹

One of the important features of Pearl Buck as a novelist of religious concerns is that she could step out of her Christianity and could compare it impartially with other religions of the world. Very few American authors have shown this ability so far. She was indeed well qualified to undertake such a task. She belonged to both Asia and America and was well informed of the human situation in both the hemispheres of the world. Therefore, Harris says :

"The scope of Mrs. Buck's enlightenment is so broad that I am almost afraid to write about her, lest I expose my own ignorance. She is, no question about it, the best informed individual in the world today on what ails the world and what can be done about it."²²

T.S. Eliot also studied Hinduism and Buddhism. But while his endeavor was merely an intellectual and personal one, Pearl Buck's social one was tempered with love, affection and human understanding of the peoples.

A few statements Pearl Buck herself has made in this regard, will illustrate this point clearly. She says :

"I, too, love the quiet church before the service begins, but do not care so much for it when the serman comes on. It is very difficult sometimes to sit and listen to what is said. But I like the best the quiet of Buddhist temples where only the gods stand and the priests do not speak."²³

She further says :

"I am grateful that I had such education, mainly in christianity and confucianism. But the education has not left me either a christian or a confucian although perhaps I am partly both, and something else besides. I am not an atheist."²⁴

The missionary group in which she was reared was limited and narrow in view point and often contentious. As a child she often fled from this background to the Chinese peasants and temples that were much more sympathetic and kind to her. She has mentioned it in her Advice to Unborn Novelist and in the same place she has described how she had reflected before a statue of a goddess of mercy in a Buddhist temple on what she had been taught about a harsh and severe old Testament God. She writes :

"It was only the little Madonna Goddess whom I felt did not mind me because I was foreign, although to give the priest their due, they always said that it made no difference to their gods what color the skin was on the humans who came before them. But the tranquility and the serenity of that little goddess, serene in an evil world, will never leave me. Hers is the greatest, perhaps the only gift that China has given me."²⁵

Thus she was able to step out of her own christianity in order to have a meaningful dialogue with other religions of the world. This explains why she studied Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Lama-mysticism and finally spiritualism that lifts the human soul away from any of the orthodox beliefs of the institutional religion. We find all of this in her novels under discussion.

Apart from all these general considerations, we must understand the exact concept of religion as conceived and advocated by Pearl Buck. First of all, as is already seen her view of religion does not confine itself to any orthodox, ritualistic or institutional religion; and secondly she is against any kind of narrow or exclusive nature of any religion. This is clearly illustrated in her statement in a letter. She openly and fearlessly says :

"The West is very warlike, for reasons which I do not understand, and they make their religions militant. Religions here seem mutually exclusive. In China, for example, a person can belong to all religions at once, if he likes. I happen to believe in inclusion."²⁶

It is for this reason that she blames christianity and 'other western influences' for rejecting Confucianism. She believes that in China communism had better opportunity in the rejection of Confucianism by Christianity and 'other western influences'. In another letter she declares :

"I have not given up religion. But I am happier if I am not confined in any religious organization; certainly I am not an atheist. I find God in many places and persons.

Second, I have the atmost respect for the religion of any individual if it be sincere, whether within a church or not. Religion is to me an exceedingly personal matter and it would be foreign to my nature to deny to anyone the comfort of his faith."²⁷

Thus her concept of religion is tempered with the spirit of humanism and tolerance.

The most important and crucial statement Pearl Buck has made regarding her own concept of christianity and religion in general is in her very famous speech on foreign missions delivered at the Astor Hotel in New York, on 2nd November, 1932. The long speech can be studied in two parts : first containing a severe attack on the hypocrisy of the christian missions abroad and at home, and the second is about the true meaning of Jesus Christ. In the course of her argument she asks the gathering "where is Christ to be found here in America that we may show him to others ?"²⁸ She declares to the people in the great hall that she does not believe in original sin. She says :

"How do I know Christ is only in the Church ? He may be there or he may not be. It depends altogether on whether in that church those groups of people live in His way and have His spirit or not. If they do not live and behave as He did, He is not there. I will neither persuade people to join churches nor prevent them. It is a personal matter not a cause."²⁹

And yet she declares that she was not willing to have the figure of Christ, however, veiled, pass from the earth. And then she speaks her gospel of 'active goodness' which she herself has practiced through out her life in the

form of 'Welcome House', 'East-West Association', 'Opportunity Centre in Korea', 'China War Relief', 'Centre for G.I. and Retarded Children' 'Pearl Buck foundation' etc. In the second part of the speech she describes in detail what she means by Christ. She says :

"We all think when we speak that name of a quality of humanity which is tinged with divinity, for some of us actual and physical, for some of us with the divinity of the whole vast and unknown universe which we can not understand, and perhaps shall never understand. That quality of humanity is made up of simplicity and sincerity in all behaviour, of perfect sympathy with others even where there is not complete agreement and understanding, of hatred and intolerance of hypocrisy, yes, and above all of the bearing of the burdens of the weak, a love even for one's enemies. These ideals, the noblest of which we are capable even of thinking about are inseparably connected with the figure of Christ, veiled in a measure as He must ever be to us all."³⁰

Pearl Buck, thus, associates the image of the Christ with her concept of 'active goodness'. Therefore, at the end of her speech she says :

"By birth and ancestry I am American, by choice and belief I am a christian, but by the years of my life, by sympathy and feeling, I am Chinese. As a Chinese I say to you what many Chinese have said to me come to us no more in arrogance of spirit, come to us as brothers and fellowmen."³¹

Before making this somewhat emotional appeal for humanism she defines with clear vision her concept of a religious life which she tries to illustrate in her novels. She says :

"To me the most exciting life in the world is the life that struggles toward personal goodness, which is beauty. The most wonderful spectacle is to see some one making that struggle. The most triumphant moment in life is the moment when I realize whether for myself or for another, that a choice has been made, strength gained, a deeper content achieved by one step more along that hard and stirring adventure, the life of man or woman who is determined to find the best he knows and do it. This struggle is made manifest in the christian life."³²

This is her vision of a religion and life as a novelist and as an individual. It is significant to note that being an artist, she considers the struggle towards

personal goodness to^{be} beautiful. Something fundamental and central about religion has been said by George Brantt in his Catholicism. He says :

"The root of religion must be sought in a human need, its fruit in a personal response. It is only from the matrix of existential need that reason can move, as it is only in the waiting, thirsting spirit that revelation can find reply. The man who does not need God will not find God, and it is his vital need alone which can be transfigured into the response in which the essence of religion consists."³³

What Brantt has said is amply evidenced in Pearl Buck's view of religion and in her fictional attempt to understand the true meaning of what she herself calls 'a struggle towards personal goodness'.

- III -

If the house of fiction has many windows, then surely the novels of Pearl Buck need to be looked at through a new one. The present dissertation is a critical attempt in this direction. It seeks to examine the theme of religious encounter in six major novels of her later

phase - Satan Never Sleeps, Peony, Hidden Flower, Come My Beloved, Mandala and Pavilion of Women. The thematic exploration is made not in terms of the categories of modernism but in terms of the very categories which Pearl Buck's novels demand - the Oriental basis of her art, the humanistic tradition she inherited and envisioned and finally her affirmative vision of universal brotherhood emerging out of the contemporary religious conflicts. The necessity and relevance of some of these categories are seen to some extent in the critical writings of Doyle and Harris. However, no systematic exploration of a single theme in relation to them is available. The present dissertation makes a modest attempt to fill this gap.