

Chapter-III

Conclusion : "The Twain
Shall Meet"

The six selected novels, discussed in Chapter-II, sufficiently unfold Pearl Buck's novelistic vision in terms of religion and humanism. The enquiry into the nature of the religious encounter in the selected novels starts from atheism and ends with spiritualism offering in between a broad thematic spectrum which includes Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and mysticism. The order of the six novels discussed here is a matter of critical convenience and not of chronology. Thus it is not a matter of the author's vision gradually developing itself during a span of time; rather it is a matter of a novelistic vision which is already shaped, and which finds its expression in the verbal space of six different novels.

To speak in terms of character typology, the novels selected here portray three types of characters : first exotic characters like the Old Rabby in Peony; second, humanistic characters like Kung Chen in Peony, Dr. Steiner in The Hidden Flower; and third, melodramatic characters like Madame Kang in Pavilion of Women. The conflict portrayed in these novels is mainly between religious orthodoxy and humanism. The characters engaged in this struggle are of two types : those who really believe in their religious convictions and those who turn to religion out of

their personal frustrations. The Old Rabby, Father O'Banion and Father Fitzgibbon, Father Francis Paul and Brother Andre belong to the first category, and Ho-san, Dr. Sakai and David MacArd belong to the second. Pearl Buck portrays these characters in terms of religion and humanism against the background of Oriental setting. All the six novels discussed here have Asian setting and they project, to a remarkable extent, an Oriental view of life. Half of the action of her The Hidden Flower takes place in Japan, that of Come My Beloved and Mandala in India and the action of her Satan Never Sleeps, Peony and Pavilion of Women takes place in China. America (and Italy in Pavilion of Women) is always in the background and Asia is always in the foreground.

The pattern of religious encounter projected in the novels is significant. In each of the six novels(except in Satan Never Sleeps) we have, on one hand, an orthodox and exclusive religion of the West, either Judaism or Christianity, and on the other hand an inclusive tolerant faith like Buddhism, Hinduism or Confucianism. The conflict is mainly between the exclusive spirit of the West and the inclusive faith of the East. All the novels, with the only exception of Satan Never Sleeps, confirm this pattern and in Satan Never Sleeps the conflict is not between two religions

but between Christianity and atheism of the political ideology of communism - originally discovered in the West. In this context, the central characters that project Pearl Buck's novelistic vision in terms of religion and humanism are Father O'Banion (and not Father Fitzgibbon) in Satan Never Sleeps, Kung Chen in Peony, Dr. Steiner in The Hidden Flower, Jehar and Ted in Command the Morning Miss Brooke in Mandala and Brother Andre and Jasmin in Pavilion of Women. All of them uphold the oriental spirit of freedom, tolerance and humanism that stands in contrast to the Western spirit of exclusiveness and the Western ego of superiority. Old Rabby, Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. MacArd represent the western spirit, while Kung Chen, Peony, Jehar, Darya Sapru and Jasmin represent the Oriental one. Characters like Dr. Steiner and Brother Andre, though belong to the West, represent Oriental view of life. It is in this context we have to consider Pearl Buck's remark :

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.¹

The reason behind this Oriental grounding of Pearl Buck's novelistic vision is obviously in her childhood learning in China. In her My Several Words she says :

I had learned from childhood to recognize the peoples of the earth as members of one family, known or unknown, and had realized the practical meaning of this Chinese view of the globe, first instilled into me by Mr. Kung (her Confucian tutor), as history unrolled before me, enfolding me as it went.²

Moreover, we find that though she lived in America, for a few years, for her higher education, she was unable to become a part of the American scene. Therefore, she says :

I had no home during college and thus I had never become a part of the American scene.³

Pearl Buck's novelistic vision in terms of religion and humanism is, thus, shaped by the Chinese view of life, and is influenced by the Indian view of life. While speaking about the Jews, she points out that the Jews are absorbed in China and they are allowed to maintain their religion in India and never persecuted as in the West.

The great humanism of China leveled religious differences, too, but in India all religions have been encouraged to live distinct and yet in friendship.⁴

Thus her view of religion and humanism is largely influenced by her orientation towards the Oriental thought. This is further evidenced by a comparison between the concept of humanism in the West and that in the East. This comparison reveals that the Chinese or Confucian humanism is far older than the western one. Lord Buddha and Confucius lived in the sixth century B.C. while the humanism of the West was started in the 14th Century A.D. The second and significant difference is that the western concept of humanism is essentially rebellious in nature as it is a reaction against the oppression by the Church or the throne, but the Confucian concept is the result of wisdom gathered by a long experience and study of life in China. Thirdly, western humanism yields to individualism while that of Confucian is restrained by social norms, dignity, decorum and elegance. In some rough way we may say that Western humanism is romantic in nature while that of Confucian is classic in essence. We find these general observations made concrete in the Encyclopaedia Britanica. The western humanism is

The attitude of mind which attaches primary importance to man and to his faculties, affairs, temporal aspirations and well-being...often regarded as the characteristic attitude of the Renaissance in Western Europe. The Greek and Roman classical writers regularly distinguished the human or humane on the one hand from the bestial and on the other from the divine, but in making the latter contrast they usually stressed some pathetic aspect of the human such as mortality or fallibility. Medieval Christianity, however, suggested that man's life on earth was significant only in so far as it affected his soul's expectation of God's mercy - after death, and it was against the belittling of his natural condition that the humanists of the Renaissance asserted the intrinsic value of man's life before death and the greatness of his potentialities. As the ecclesiastical influence waned, the protest of humanism was turned against secular orthodoxies that subordinated man to the abstract concepts of political or biological theory.⁵

We find something more readily defined and clearly articulated in Confucian humanism as against this somewhat general concept of Western humanism.

Confucius taught "the three universal virtues" of wisdom, humanity and courage which include filial piety, brotherly respect, righteousness, propriety, good faith, liberality, diligence generosity, sincerity, humility, self-respect, loyalty, eagerness to learn, carefulness in thinking, friendliness in appearance, earnestness in handling affairs, and all possible virtues. He called the man of perfect virtue the "superior man" or "gentleman". Confucius radically changed the meaning of the term gentleman to refer not to birth but to character.

According to confucius, individual goodness (Italics mine) is incomplete unless it serves society. The Confucian doctrine of the Golden mean signifies not merely moderation but the balanced development of the individual and society. A gentleman, "wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, he also helps others to be prominent." This is humanity (jen), confucius' most discussed subject, which involves both conscientiousness (the individual) and altruism (society). This is the positive side of the Confucian Golden Rule. The negative side was stated by confucius as "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you."⁶

We find the most striking illustration of this Confucious gospel of humanism in the form of Kung Chen in Pearl Buck's Peony; and the other central characters in the novels try to project this same Confucian humanism - Dr. Steiner, Father O'Banion, Jehar and Ted, Brother Andre, Jasmine, all strive towards this end. Therefore, it is this Confucian concept of humanism that leads Pearl Buck to her belief in "the struggle towards personal goodness." It is very significant to note that the humanism of the central characters of the novels is more Confucian than Western. The whole discussion of these novels in the second chapter essentially reveals this.

As Pearl Buck's humanism is largely shaped by Confucianism, her attitude towards religion is also remarkably influenced by it. As already pointed out in the second part of the first chapter, she steps out of Christianity. She does not believe in the "doctrine of original sin" and she just does not bother about the sermon by a priest. She is not sure of Christ being in a Church and she finds peace in the presence of the Buddhist goddess "where priests do not speak". As she herself declares she

is not atheist, she is partly both a Christian and a Confucian and something else besides. She "finds God in many places and persons". In this context, what Confucius says about religion becomes at once significant :

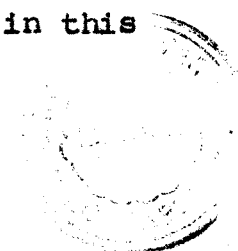
Confucius glorified Heaven as 'great' and 'august'. He said that at 50 he knew the will of Heaven and that he obeyed the mandate of Heaven. But Heaven to him was a moral reality, the source of the moral law, and not an anthropomorphic god who makes decisions for man and interferes with his actions. Heaven reigns but does not rule.⁷

We find this Confucian concept of god and religion illustrated in the character of Brother Andre in Pearl Buck's Pavilion of Women. This Brother Andre is called 'heretic' by all the Christian people around him. Significantly enough we find Pearl Buck being called 'heretic' in America for her speech on Foreign Missions at the Astor Hotel in New York on 2nd November, 1932.⁸ This clearly shows us that her concept of religion is more of Confucius than of Christianity. This will be very clear if we compare T.S. Eliot's view of religion with that of Pearl Buck. In his Murder In the Cathedral we find as Coghill observes :

Eliot has put his thought in another way
at the end of Becket's Sermon :

A martyrdom is always made by
the design of God, for His love of men,
to warn them and to lead them, to bring
them back to His ways. It is never the
design of man; for the true martyr is
he who has become the instrument of
God....⁹

Thus, seen in this context, Eliot's view is essentially
Christian while that of Pearl Buck is necessarily more
Confucian. In China, Buddhism, which influenced Pearl
Buck's mind in her formative years also strengthened the
Confucian doctrine of personal goodness. As Abraham
Kaplan points out, "...in Buddhism religion turns altogether
from the worship of God to the service of man."¹⁰ Buddhism
is largely in tune with Confucianism; for "Buddhism starts
with naturalistic and humanistic premises and stays with
them to its conclusion."¹¹ Thus the unified Oriental view
of life - a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and the
inclusive and tolerant spirit of Hinduism in India - have
contributed a lot to shape the novelistic vision of Pearl
Buck in terms of religion and humanism. It is in this
context we must consider her feeling :



One never recovers from Asia ! It makes no difference where in Asia I go - Korea, Japan, India, it does not matter - suddenly I am at home again. I love the people and they know it, they, intern, accept me as theirs.¹²

Once this Oriental basis of Pearl Buck's imagination and vision is confirmed, most of the charges the American critics and commentators have made against her seem to lose ground. A very striking illustration of this conviction is the charge about her 'optimistic affirmative point of view' (referred to in the first part of the First Chapter). Neither Confucius, nor Buddha, nor Hinduism projects any nihilistic or pessimistic tone about human life, Oriental philosophies and religions always uphold the positive and the affirmative in human life. Thus many American critics try to evaluate Pearl Buck's Oriental view of life by the standards of Western Sartre or Camu or of the Lord of the flies and Great Gatsby.

Another equally important charge against Pearl Buck is about her lack of the 'artistic sense' and the experimentation in the artistic form. As Doyle has already pointed out, Pearl Buck is not at all 'modern' in this respect. Yet

again the reason is her Oriental vision of art and life. The Chinese never held novel writing as an important or serious activity and Doyle has already pointed it out. It is interesting and significant to note that Confucius regarded poetry and music to be the means of his moral life.

Confucius cultivates the polite arts, such as music and poetry. The experience of beauty is an ingredient of the good life, not so much for what it is in itself, but because of the effect it produces. The conventions of art reflect, in their measured harmonies, all that is best in conformity to tradition. Elegance, grace and polish are virtues in both art and life. The revolutionary artist, however, the creative genius who breaks through academic mold to reveal new possibilities in his materials - or in the life of man - such an artist has no place in these perspectives. Like Plato, Confucius prizes art only when it is in the service of the ideals already established for it, either by the state or by tradition.¹³

Seen in this context, the discussion of six selected novels in Chapter-II clearly reveals that Pearl Buck writes in the light of Chinese view of art that subordinates form

to the content. The western spirit of rebel in the form of modernity stands in contrast with the Chinese belief in the tradition. Kaplan rightly points out : "For the Chinese, it is age and not modernity which is a hallmark of merit."¹⁴ We find Pearl Buck sacrificing modernity for the sake of this 'merit of the age.' Thus the criteria for the just evaluation of her works should not be modernity of the western art, but the Oriental merit of the age. The study of her six selected novels reveals that she has understood the Oriental 'merit of the age' and has conveyed it to the West with remarkable ease and straight forwardness. It is in this sense that Harris says that Pearl Buck is looking toward another renaissance and her mission in life has been "to establish real communication between peoples, to make them realise that all people are alike in their simple and basic and deep desire for new freedom and out of which will evolve a new renaissance."¹⁵

It is significant to note that Pearl Buck's efforts for another renaissance in human history are most timely because they are made when the world is shaken by the two world wars and is still under the shadow of the third.

The analysis of her novels reveal that her humanism is not a dead end for her as it is for some avant-garde twentieth

century writers of absurdism. For her humanism is the only moral alternative to the evils and odds of the modern civilization. What Leslie Fiedler says in his study of class culture and mass society is highly relevant in this context. Making a strong plea for evolving canons of criticism which will bridge the gap between serious and popular, high and low literature, Fiedler observes :

There is a sense in which myth as myth survives in literature, as it does in philosophical or pedagogical discourse. Low literature, indeed, whether in pre-print, print or post-print form aspires to the condition of pure myth.¹⁶

Pearl Buck certainly belongs to the popular or low tradition that Fiedler is speaking of here. At the centre of her fictional work, however, there is a pure myth - the myth of the Universal Man. It is this myth which constitutes Pearl Buck's affirmative vision as a novelist.