

Embracing the West in Pearl S. Buck's East Wind: West Wind

Dr.R. Aseda Fatima, Head & Assistant Professor, Nirmala College For Women, Coimbatore.

American literature

Culture and traditions

Upper class society

Abstract:

American literature started its journey in a search for ideal light directed by hope and expectation. It has always been a platform to involve the human situation in its established works. Pearl S. Buck is a successful novelist who belongs to two worlds- an American missionary world and a Chinese world. As a novelist, she was encouraged by her parents and society to write about intercultural and social understanding of different people. East Wind: West Wind is a story which depicts the life of the characters bound by the culture and traditions of upper class society. The novel compares the development and structure of two worlds- China and the West. The novel is based on the relationship with Hsu Chih-Mo, Kwei-Lan's husband in which she finds difficult to accommodate between tradition and modernity. Through the voice of Kwei-Lan, Pearl S. Buck attempts to portray the position of women in Chinese society.

American literature started its journey in a search for ideal light directed by hope and expectation. This search has been persistently a part of entire history of the literature growing out of the impact of European civilization upon the developing American frontier. American literature has always been a platform to involve the human situation in its established works. The weight of American literary tradition has held confidently to a vision of a man based on the conception of justice and the value and the unlimited potential of the individual whose dignity is not betrayed. This belief in the creative power of the human spirit and resources to endure and to prevail whatever the obstacles or the fables of the individual is the central and fundamental in the literature of America.

Pearl S. Buck was born in 1892, in West Virginia and she was taken to China by her missionary parents. As a precocious child, she asked many questions and read everything that came within her reach. Pearl S. Buck learned any other languages even before English. She played with Chinese children and grew up with Chinese culture and tradition. Later she said that as a child, she simultaneously belonged to two worlds- an American missionary world and a Chinese world. This explains her wish as a novelist to encourage intercultural and understanding among different people.

Pearl S. Buck wrote two short stories under the frame work of 'A Chinese Woman Speaks' and published as a novel *East Wind: West Wind*. Pearl S. Buck has pondered over her country China and the age old traditions as an ancient one and people living there gave way to the modern ways. *East*

Wind: West Wind is a story which depicts the life of the characters bound by the culture and traditions of upper class society. The novel compares the development and structure of two worlds- China and the West. Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind: West Wind* is a novel with the collection of old Chinese folk tales that has been narrated through the character Kwei-Lan and the Western influence was narrated through Kwei-Lan's husband and her brother's wife Mary.

Kwei-Lan who was born in China describes her confusing encounter with the modern world when she is married to a person who studied medicine in abroad. The novel is based on the relationship with Hsu Chih-Mo, Kwei-Lan's husband in which she finds difficult to accommodate between tradition and modernity. Buck explains the risk and possibilities of human connection across racial and cultural context. In this novel, Buck explains the same frustrations and dismay that she experienced during her lifetime within the context of marriage. Kwei-Lan being born in a traditional family in a Chinese society, she has faced gender and family issues. Hsu Chih-Mo notes that "Our old customs have held women tightly" (102) so that women believe that it is a sin to go against the rules and traditions put forth by the ancestors.

Through the voice of Kwei-Lan, Pearl S. Buck attempts to portray the position of women in Chinese society. Since family is considered to be the centre of ethical values, Buck also gives importance to the society and family in her works. The novel *East Wind: West Wind* concerns about the young couple Kwei-Lan who according to the old Chinese custom was betrothed to her future husband even before she was born. Kwei-Lan and her family believes in old traditions whereas her husband who got educated in the west for twelve years believes in equality and modern trends and domestic practices of the west.

Kwei-Lan was unhappy in her marriage life as her husband does not find her fair and beautiful because he has travelled across many countries and

had learnt to love new things and new culture. On their bridal night, Kwei-Lan is shocked when she hears that she will be treated as a companion and not as a slave or a piece of property. It was very new to her because she was advised by her mother to bow her head and place the hands before her husband when she sees him. He explains Kwei-Lan to follow the new modes and principles of western life and also gives her time to adjust and accommodate to new situation. As a wife, she is astonished for the ancient traditions in China, where wife is always subordinate to her family especially to her husband. But the reality is different for Kwei-Lan. Her life is confused with strange events. She is further confused when her husband refuses her to perform the standard duties that a wife is supposed to do.

Although, it was a tradition to live with groom's parents after marriage is a customary practice in China, Kwei-Lan's husband does not want her to live there, since her mother is so autocratic and he will not have his wife as a servant to serve him and his parents and he insists that they will live in a western style house. His parents forced him to stay with them. His father says:

My son, remain in my house. What is mine is yours. Here is plenty of food and space. You need never waste your body in physical labour. Spend your days in dignified leisure and in study that suits your pleasure. Allow that one, the daughter-in-law of your honoured mother, to produce sons. Three generations of men under one roof is a slight pleasing to Heaven.

But my husband is quick and impatient. Without stopping to bow to his father he cried,

"But I wish to work, my father! I am trained in a scientific profession—the noblest in the western world. As for sons, they are not my first desire. I wish to produce the fruit of my brain for my country's good. A mere dog may fill the earth with the fruit of his body!" (43).

her feet and bounder because he had traveled across many countries and Kwei-Lan finds western ways strange and when she meets his friends, she appears uncomfortable to mingle with them. Kwei-Lan can only think and dream of how to seize her husband's heart. She has pleased him everything that her mother had taught her regarding her husband's pleasure. Kwei-Lan is shocked to hear when her husband asked her to unbind her feet as he persistently insisted her to do against the age old customary practice of china. As a physician, he realized that it is an unhealthy practice to bind the feet as it leads to broken bones and deformed limbs. Kwei-Lan learns that her husband is vehemently against this practice. Kwei-Lan was all alone as she had no friends, she could only grieve within herself and wonder how to please her husband.

Theodore F.Haris, focusing the importance if the *East Wind: West Wind* says,

Only one who, like the author, has lived author, has lived all her life in China, yet being American still holds to Western concepts of romantic love, marriage and the scope of filial duty only a lover of China, but no convert to her code of family and clan supremacy over the individual, could have written. This is Mrs. Buck's first novel, a striking piece of work; indeed it does not suffer in comparison with the best of Lafcadio Heaven. (6).

- Buck,Pearl.S. East Wind: West Wind A Novel, 1938. Print.
- Harris,Theodore.F In Consultation with Pearl S. Buck, A Biography,1969. Print
- Shams,Ishteyaque New Perspectives on American Literature,2004.Print

Being a follower of Chinese tradition, Kwei-Lan thinks that their thoughts never met. She decides to unbind her feet in order to gain her husband's love. When Kwei-Lan asks her how to unbind her feet, her husband gave directions from his medical knowledge. When he understands that she is willing to try to follow western culture, he ceases to be aloof and begins to teach her some basic science and educates her western modern ideas. For the sake of her husband, she begins to live in a foreign country, eat their food and drinking their water to which her body is not accustomed since birth. No wonder her husband became enchanted of it so that they loved each other and would go along with it to live in peace and happiness.

Thus it makes sense that the novel identifies the problems of female character Kwei-Lan is confined to Chinese tradition in early years, finds difficult when she is asked to embrace the western culture and lifestyle associated with new modern ways. This is clear in a way when she feels uncomfortable with new western friends and also shocked to hear to unbind her feet. *East Wind: West Wind* is a novel that helps the readers to think about the way social upheaval lead to proliferation of women in China during the first half of twentieth century.