

# Epitome Of Endurance: O-Lan in Pearl Buck's The Good Earth

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## Abstract

Pearl S. Buck's fiction is unique in its representation of Asia and above all her portrayals of Asian women. Buck's second novel *The Good Earth* is her magnum opus. It is an enthralling family saga which also provides a genuine picture of agricultural life in China. It deals with the chief protagonist Wang Lung's toils against hardships in nature and the support he gets from his wife O-lan in dealing with these troubles and his rise to the position of a property owner. The novel delineates his moral degradation after he gains a good economic status and the subsequent heartbreak that Wang Lung causes to O-lan, the woman who offered him unstinted support during his trying times. This paper is an attempt to delineate the courage and endurance of O-lan, an ordinary Chinese woman in facing the trials and tribulations of life. O-lan attracts us more with her genuineness than with her beauty. She displays courage, endurance and exhibits tough physical prowess.

**Keywords:** Chinese woman, Courage, Endurance, Famine, Self- reliance, Inner Strength

Pearl S Buck, the Nobel prize winner, a popular novelist of America in 1930's began publishing stories and essays in magazines such as *The Nation*, *The Chinese Recorder*, *Asia* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. She published more than seventy books: novels, collection of stories, biography and autobiography, poetry, drama, children's literature, and translations from the Chinese. Buck wrote stories based on her own experiences in China as a missionary daughter. Though born in West Virginia she was taken to China at three months old and was there for forty years hence she was well versed in both Chinese and English language.

Pearl's fiction is unique in its representation of Asia and above all her portrayals of Asian women. American writer Maxine Hong Kingston appreciated Buck for making Asian voices heard for the first time in Western Literature. By representing Chinese characters with "such empathy and compassion", Kingston said Buck "was translating my parents to me and she was giving me our ancestry and our habitation. (Qtd in Conn xiii)

Her first novel *East Wind West Wind* was published by John Day company in 1930. In 1931 John Day published Buck's second novel *The Good Earth* and it became the best-selling novel of 1931 and 1932, won the Pulitzer Prize and Howells Medal in 1935.

*The Good Earth* is her magnum opus, an enthralling family saga which also provides a genuine picture of agricultural life in China. It deals with the chief protagonist Wang Lung's toils against hardships in nature and the support he gets from his wife O-lan in dealing with these troubles and his rise to the position of a property owner. The novel delineates his moral degradation after he gains a good economic

status and the subsequent heartbreak that Wang Lung causes to O-lan, the woman who offered him unstinted support during his trying times.

The novel commences when Wang Lung manages to save enough money to purchase a slave (O-lan) to marry from the illustrious House of Hwang. In the first part of the novel, he lives happily with his male off-springs but due to drought, their fortunes decline and they face a serious famine and the entire wealth of Wang Lung's family is destroyed. During this trying period O-lan gives birth to a baby girl whom O-lan smothers to death and eventually the family migrates to the South in pursuit of better prospects. In the city, Wang Lung works as a rikshaw puller. Meanwhile during a violent rebellion O-lan discovers a cache of jewels subsequent to which the family's prospects improves and they return to their home. From this juncture Wang Lung prospers to such an extent that he buys the House of Hwang and resides there with his children and grandchildren. Prosperity alters Wang Lung's personality consequently Wang Lung buys a girl named Lotus but is devastated when he finds that his eldest son is having a fling with Lotus. O-lan is now not keeping well and she dies and Wang Lung too dies in distress when he learns about his sons attitude towards the land which he was so devoted to.

O-lan attracts us more with her genuineness than with her beauty. She displays courage, endurance and exhibits tough physical prowess. Buck describes the first encounter between Wang Lung and his impressions about her:

She had a square, honest face, a short, broad nose with large black nostrils, and her mouth was wide as a gash in her face. Her eyes were small and of a dull black in color, and were filled with some sadness that was not clearly expressed. It was a face that seemed habitually silent and unspeaking, as though it could not speak if it would. She bore patiently Wang Lung's look, without embarrassment or response, simply waiting until he had seen her. He saw that it was true there was not beauty of any kind in her face – a brown common and patient face. (TGE 18,19)

There is no beauty, no coquetry, no glamour, no charm, no sentimentality yet she steals our hearts with her sturdiness, tolerance, loyalty, industrious and passive resistance against unjust treatments. She cooks, cleans takes care of her children and Wang Lung's father. Apart from that she works with her husband in the field. Immediately after giving birth to a baby, she returns to her work in the field. While she was working beside Wang Lung in the field cutting and binding the sheaves together, she suddenly takes permission:

"I will go into the house Do not come into the house until I call. Only bring me a newly peeled reed, and slit it, that I may cut the child's life from mine." (TGE 35,36)

Disregarding her labour- pain she prepares food for the family. All alone she suffers the pangs of delivery and Wang Lung listening at the door can hear her animal pants. Finally, when he asked whether it was a man she replied in the affirmative. After delivery she cuts the cord and cleans the mess. The unique feature of this phenomenon reveals several traits of O-lan - there might be a sense of anguish against the world in which she is living. Though she is helpless and alone she exhibits her self-reliance and fierce independence and she is absolutely sure that nothing will go wrong.

During the famine O-lan kills the ox when she realises that Wang Lung being emotionally attached to the ox as he has worked with it when it was a calf is unable to kill the ox. She is always calm and quiet but when the villagers driven by hunger try to rob them, she firmly convinces the villagers and manages to prevent them from taking away the furniture. When it comes to finding edible things, she exhibits her resourcefulness and tries every way to find food yet she always eats last. She is quite practical which is evident when she teaches her children how to beg for food and when her second son has stolen a piece of

pork Wang Lung is furious and throws the meat away and shouts that “Beggars we may be but thieves we are not” O-lan calmly picks it up washes it and thrusts it back into the boiling pot and she avers “meat is meat” (111TGE) .

O-lan dresses her first born child grandly and makes special cakes and visits the Great House of Hwang as she wanted to show off to the people of House of Hwang who had illtreated her. She realises that they are now facing bad times and Wang Lung who has become prosperous decides to buy the land of Hwang. O-lan says, “Last year this time, I was a slave in that house”. She realised that “she would be a wife to a man who owned a piece of the land that for generations that made the House of Hwang great.”. (TGE 53)

Soon afterwards a period of famine ensued and O-lan gives birth to the fourth child but the baby is dead and while attempting to bury it Wang Lung noticed bruise marks around its neck. This act is so outrageous and cruel. A mother normally stakes her own life to protect her child from any harm and when a mother decides to kill her child it is due some extreme reason. Maybe she felt that feeding another mouth in this time of famine will be a burden on the family. This act of O-lan is a sacrifice she did for the sake of her family. O-lan must have mustered a lot of courage to do such a heinous act. The pain of losing one’s child is different and deliberately killing it due to some problems is entirely different. O-lan has sacrificed her child as she knew a new mouth and that too of a girl child will only be a burden on Wang Lung.

She displays the trait of a typical traditional Chinese woman in her total devotion towards her husband and family. Once Wang Lung saw a pouch of jewels in the custody of O-lan, “there was such a mass of jewels as one had never dreamed could be together, jewels red as the inner flesh of water melons, golden as wheat, green as young leaves in spring, clear as water tricking out of the earth (TGE144). O-lan explains that she got it from a rich man’s house. Wang Lung takes these jewels from O-lan except for the two pearls she wishes to keep for herself.

O-lan arranges the marriage between Lotus and Wang Lung to avert the danger of spending all their silver at the tea house yet she objects to the presence of Lotus’ serving woman Cuckoo in her house as Cuckoo was harsh and scathing to her in the House of Hwang. Her nonaggressive hostility against Lotus and Cuckoo shields her family and she is victorious over her opponents.

At the time of flood ,Wang Lung had no work and this leads him to a tea house where he gets attracted by a beautiful lass called Lotus and now, he compares the looks of Lotus and O-lan. He watches O-lan doing her daily chore, “And it seemed to Wang Lung that he looked at O- Lan for the first time in his life and he saw for the first time that she was a woman whom no man could call other than she was, a dull and common creature, who plodded in silence without thought of how she appeared to others” (TGE 167). He finds fault with O-lan for her ugly look and untied broad feet which is not in keeping with Chinese culture and pathetically O-lan replies: “My mother did not bind them, since I was sold so young, But the girl’s feet I will bind -the younger girl’s feet I will bind” (TGE 169).

Wang Lung is head over heels in love with Lotus, he says “Yet never could he grasp her wholly and this is what kept him fevered and thirsty” (TGE 181) and Wang Lung’s uncle’s wife realises this and is determined to help him win her hand. Wang Lung’s uncle’s wife decides to fix the gifts and price that Wang Lung should gift the girl hence he came to O-lan and asks her for the two pearls that she owns. She protests that it is a gift that she had reserved for her youngest daughter’s bride money during her wedding but Wang Lung shouted at her “Why should that one wear pearls with her skin as black as earth? Pearls are for fair women! He demands the pearl from her “Then slowly she thrusts her wet wrinkled hand into her bosom and she drew forth the small package and she gave it to him”. And “O-lan returned to the

beating of his clothes and when tears dropped slowly and heavily from her eyes, she did not put up her hand to wipe them away; only she beat the more steadily with her wooden stick upon the clothes spread over the stone” (TGE186).

The pearls were the only piece of jewellery she owned and due to Wang Lung’s relationship with Lotus she had to give it up. She lost more than her pearls, she lost the affection and love of her husband and was stripped of her respect and position which a legally wedded wife is entitled to. All this belonged to this prostitute now.

Lotus finally enters Wang Lung house with her serving woman Cuckoo. Wang Lung now revels on Lotus’ beauty day and night “She swayed upon her little feet and to Wang Lung there was nothing so wonderful for beauty in the world as her pointed little feet and her curling helpless hands. And he ate and drank of his love and he feasted alone and he was satisfied.” (TGE199). He is head over heels in love with Lotus and he was so upset to find his sons entanglement with Lotus that he sends him away to South for further education.

Wang Lung forgot how O-lan served as his pillar of support during hard times; she gave birth to his children and took care of them. She says over and over moaning “I have borne you sons –I have borne you sons.” She also took care of his old father. O-lan never criticized Wang Lung’s muddy body and garlic and onion odour. She worked alongside him in the fields and did household chores yet there was no recognition for her hard work, patience, endurance and selflessness. (TGE 194).

O-lan has the wherewithal to get through all the hardships in life and survive thus exhibiting that her value is not skin deep like the beauty of many female fictional figures but it lies deep in her ability to survive all sorts of hardship and adversity.

Kang Liao opines:

In contrast with Lotus whose only skill is to please or enchant men O-lan possesses valuable qualities of a human being disregarding sex. Those qualities are too often neglected in life as well as in art because sexual serotypes have blinded most of us. (69)

When O-lan becomes ill Wang Lung takes care of her. Wang Lung perceives that O-lan is perpetually in pain and the doctor visits the house and informs him that O-lan is very sick and will die soon. In order to treat O-lan, Wang Lung is even willing to sell his land but O -Lan says “–No, and I would not -let you. For I must die -sometime anyway. But the land is there after me.” (256). With the advent of New Year, O-lan gets better and trains her daughter -in- law to prepare food. O-lan expresses her desire to see her eldest son’s marriage before her demise and the son comes from the city and the ceremony is held and at the end of the day O-lan passes away. Immediately after Olan’s death Wang Lung’s father dies. On seeing the grave of O-lan Wang Lung avers, “There in that land of mine is buried the first good half of my life and more. It is as though half of me were buried there, and now it is a different life in my house”(TGE269). It is only after her death that Wang Lung realises her real worth and her influence over him and his family. O-lan is courageous, pragmatic, strong and competent and has accepted her tragedies in life with an inner strength without any feelings of bitterness.

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