

CHAPTER III

THE NOVEL

3.1. "The Good Earth" and the Pulitzer Prize

"The Good Earth" was Pearl Buck's best Chinese novel and one of her outstanding literary achievements. It was published on March 2, 1931. This novel became an immediate success, best seller, and won the Pulitzer Prize given to the best novel of the year by an American author. "The Good Earth" was translated and available in over thirty languages; it was also made into motion picture. All critics greeted "The Good Earth" with praise. It was the first sympathetic novel to reveal the interior of China to the West. Florence Ayscough, a critic, associated the book with her own experience.

"A beautiful, beautiful book. At last we read, in the pages of a novel, of the real people of China. They seem to spring from their roots, to develop and mature even as their own rice springs from a jade green seed bed and comes to its golden harvest...I have lived for many years in such a country and among such people as Mrs. Buck describes, and as I read her pages I smell once more the sweet scent of bean flowers opening in the spring, the acrid odor of nightsoil poured lavishly on the soil during the growing season, and I feel again the blazing sunshine of the harvest months; all as it was...in the Yangtze Valley." (Cevasco, 1967 : 445.)

"The Good Earth" was built up by the imagination out of the memories of a child who had lived and thought in the Chinese pattern without losing the detachment of her Western perspective. It has power to stir the imagination by going round the world in print and on the screen (Canby, 1938 : 8). With the appearing of "The Good Earth", Westerners dropped away the misunderstanding, all the nonsense, and sentimentality to the Chinese characters. Buck wanted the world to see that a Chinaman is not, in his own estimation, a yellow menace or a clown speaking gibberish in a ridiculous falsetto. Rather, he is a man who loves, fears, and hopes as we do, who needs to nourish his senses, his body, and his mind in the same ways that Westerners have imagined to be their exclusive privilege (Gray, 1969 : 32).

3.2. The Plot Outline of the Novel

The novel begins with the day of Wang Lung's, a young farmer, marriage. The earth is good when he is married to O-lan, an honest, faithful, though plain woman who shares his life and bears him sons. Wang enjoys peace and prosperity on his hard-worked land with the help of his wife. Then, when the crops fail, there comes dire poverty. Famine forces him to take his family south. He is wandering as a beggar with his wife and children in the city.

Disaster follows disaster, but Wang Lung never gives

up the land of his dreams. Eventually he returns to his good earth when the revolution breaks down. From the hard work that he does he reaps prosperity. He buys the home of a decadent aristocrat whom in his youth he has admired and feared. He also adopts the ways of the aristocrats. He builds a great manor, obtains servants and slaves, hoards silver, and brings concubines into his household. He becomes an important man of the village. His every dream is fulfilled.

Only his sons prove a tragic disappointment. He has given them life, care, an education, and he supplied them with wealth and wives, but not one of them has his father's love for the land. The quarrels are coming at last to the end of his days with the demoralizing fear that his children will uproot themselves from the soil and perish as he has seen the other great family perish and go down into oblivion. Over the dying body of their father, Wang Lung's sons make plans to sell his land and move as rich men to the city.

3.3. The Characters

The major character in the story is Wang Lung. He plays an important role because the story tells about his life; from the time when he is young, when he gets married, and when he dies. It also tells about how he rises from a poor peasant to a rich landowner. Other characters that become a part of the story are O-lan (Wang's wife) and Wang

Lung's father. These characters affect Wang Lung's life, his way of thinking, and his action.

3.3.1. Wang Lung

Wang Lung is presented as a young peasant who lives in a transitional era between the Old and the Modern China. He is the portrayal of the old ways who is doubtful to enter the modern China. He wears his hair in a braid which is the old style. When a barber asks him to have his hair cut in a new style he refuses because he has to ask his father's permission first. The old ways also influence his belief that respect is the valuable and real wealth, not money.

His basic principle about the land relates to the theme of the story. For him, lands, and not money, are the most precious property, something which cannot be taken away by anybody. Lands are the most permanent wealth. Because of this principle, he decides to secure his lands and not to sell them even when he needs food in the starving time. At the moment, he buys more lands instead of foods for his family. With these lands, he becomes a landlord who is respected in the neighbourhood.

Wang Lung has a great pride of himself. Although he is poor, he wants other people to respect him. Because he is afraid of losing his pride, he often helps his lazy uncle, although he feels burdened helping him. And because of his pride, he takes Lotus as his second wife. Wang Lung

has been corrupted by his pride of being a wealthy man. He feels disgusted with his wife who has helped him to rise from poverty, only because he feels that it is prestigious to have a beautiful wife when he is rich.

At the end of the story, Wang loses his pride. It seems he is controlled by his second wife who does not respect him as head of the family. Wang Lung has to fulfill Lotus' desire for good food and articles. He does not consider his silver as part of his wealth anymore. The fall of his pride is shown from his failing to secure his land. His two sons do not inherit his principle and his love for the lands. They even plan to sell the lands when Wang Lung is near to death.

3.3.2. O-lan

O-lan presents a good traditional Chinese wife. As the second important character she greatly influences Wang Lung's life. She has a strong character which has made Wang Lung a rich landowner. When the lands do not produce anything, she is the one who fights for the family's survival. As a good housekeeper, she also helps her husband to be thrifty. She works side by side in the field with her husband without complaining, even when she has just born a baby.

She realizes what Chinese women should do according to their philosophy. When her husband does something that hurts her she cannot do anything; she can only keep quiet. This

happens when Wang Lung takes Lotus, the second wife, home, and also when she finds out that her two pearls are given to Lotus. Although Wang Lung's success is partly due to her sacrifice, she feels that she has no right to claim her rights. She has no other choice for it is her fate to follow the Oriental custom that she is a subject to her husband.

3.3.3. The Old Father

Wang Lung's father is presented as an old Chinese who has the habit of sleeping against the wall even at noon. When other people are busy with their work in the field and when they have to fight for survival, he does not wake up to do the same. His character relates to the condition of China at that time. This country is built inside the Great Wall. This closed country remains silent when other countries are busy developing themselves. It is awoken only when there is a strange culture from outside coming in.

He is also bound by Oriental customs. He feels it is not necessary to think about how to earn money or to get some food since it is his son's duty. It is the custom that the young should take care of the old. Therefore, Wang Lung should respect his father. During the hard time, when the whole family is busy trying to survive, Wang Lung's father is busy sleeping. The condition of Wang Lung's family is the portrait of the old tradition with its undeveloped ways.

3.4. Subject Matter

"The Good Earth" describes the cycle of life. It is the life of a young peasant who fights for survival. How he depends on his lands to feed his family and to become a successful peasant in the village. Since the setting takes place in China, the life of these characters is completely influenced by the Chinese traditional society. The author also describes how the Chinese ideology such as Confucianism influences their ways of thinking. Like other great novels, "The Good Earth" shows the conflict between the old and the new. It is shown through the conflict between Wang and his sons about the lands. Wang, who is from the old generation, considers the lands valuable; on the contrary, his sons think that money is more important than lands.

3.5. Theme

The theme is that in the traditional Chinese society it is difficult for a poor man to become rich. It has a universal theme which happens not only on the land of China. It is common that people usually want to rise to the higher position in their life. The main character of this novel, Wang Lung, struggles for success, for happiness, and for a better life. His struggles have an abstract meaning, that is the struggles for survival or for pride. Wang Lung wants to become an important man in

the village and he wants to be respected.