

Analysis of Pearl S. Buck's East Wind: West Wind: Cultural Conflict as a Potent Force

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Abstract:

Cultural conflict is a clash arising from the interaction of people with different cultural values. China's traditional and cultural values have a huge influence on the psychology and identity of its people. The conflict between the cultures of East and West in China can be seen in Pearl S. Buck's first novel, *East Wind: West Wind*, which focuses on China's difficult transition from tradition to modernity. The novel portrays the dilemma faced by the changing society of China, as the younger generation becomes more aware of the Western world and its culture. It concentrates on the changing attitudes of the young people towards family life and the emerging role of women in China. The novel also exposes the philosophy behind many ancient Chinese traditions that have kept women oppressed in the society for generations. It is an account of the changes the ancient culture had to endure due to Western influences, from the perspective of a young Chinese woman named Kwei-lan. It shows how she struggles in managing her marriage, when her modern husband's attitude of embracing Western culture and also his ideas of equality clash with her strongly held Eastern traditions. Being an American, with deep knowledge about the Chinese culture and traditions, this novel, *East Wind: West Wind*, is evidence of Buck's ability to mediate between Western and Eastern culture.

Cultural conflict is a clash arising from the interaction of people with different cultural values. China's traditional and cultural values have a huge influence on the psychology and identity of its people. Pearl S. Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1938 for her true portrayal of the peasant life in China, making her the first American female Nobel

Laureate. *East Wind: West Wind* is a coming of age novel about a young Chinese woman named Kwei-lan who is torn between the Eastern and the Western cultures. The entire novel is in the form of a narration by Kwei-lan to a foreign woman whom she addresses as her sister. Kwei-lan belongs to an aristocratic family. She is brought up in a traditional environment. She shares a special bond with her mother who teaches her to be traditional in every aspect. Her marriage has been fixed even before her birth. She knows nothing about the man, who is going to marry her, except that he is a medical doctor who studied in abroad. Everything falls apart after the marriage. Her world crumbles as she finds it difficult to adjust herself with her husband's new ways of living. Kwei-lan's husband expects her to follow Western culture which is completely new to her. He never even shows any interest in her until she decides to unbind her feet. Later, Kwei-lan realises that most of her ideas about the West are wrong. Kwei-lan and her husband are, finally, blessed with a son.

The second half of the novel is about Kwei-lan's brother who has been studying in the United States of America. He informs his parents about his marriage to an American woman, Mary, despite being betrothed to a Chinese woman. His parents are infuriated to find their only son going against the age old tradition. Kwei-lan's brother and his wife, Mary, come to China with hope of convincing his parents in accepting them. But, in spite of all their attempts his parents refuse to accept her as their daughter-in-law. Soon, Mary conceives and her stubborn mother-in-law is unable to bear all the sorrows and dies. Finally, the family informs Kwei-lan's brother that he will be disinherited, if he doesn't send Mary back to America. Kwei-lan's brother refuses and prefers Mary to his family and inheritance. They begin to live in an apartment near Kwei-lan's home. At the end of the novel, their baby is born, closely tying together his parents as well as their two cultures.

The novel, *East Wind: West Wind* highlights some of the conflicts that occurred in China during the early 20th century. It depicts issues such as East versus West, tradition versus modernity and also shows how Chinese women are treated within their own culture. It showcases "the contest between tradition and modernity and the risks and possibilities of human connection across racial and cultural lines" (Conn 83). Being brought up according to the traditions of China by her mother, who considered Chinese culture as superior to others, Kwei-lan does not object

and never wants to be different from her ancestors. Tradition is wholly established in a society and it is believed over generations. It constructs the habits, attitude, thinking and behaviour of people. Wolfreys' *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* says: "Tradition is a socially and culturally established, inherited or customary pattern of thought, action or behaviour. Tradition also refers to a characteristic of manner, method or style of organization or conduct" (98). As for Kwei-lan's mother, her daughter is perfect. But now, Kwei-lan wants to be a modern woman for the sake of her husband who prefers Western ways to the Chinese ways of life:

What we mean by modern is that each process led to the emergence of certain distinctive features on social characteristics, and it is these features which taken together, provide us with our definition of 'modernity'. In this sense, the term 'modern' does not mean simply that the phenomenon is of recent origin. (Hall and Gieben 6)

In the patriarchal society of China, women are powerless against their husbands and fathers. They are confined to their homes and depend upon the income of males of the family. They are not allowed to participate in public life and can neither inherit property nor carry family name. Basically, the Chinese society considers women as a social burden. Kwei-lan is willing to be a submissive wife as expected of an ideal Chinese woman. Or she does not know otherwise. When her modern husband longs to see her as his equal and also as a friend, Kwei-lan is shocked, due to her ignorance.

Unlike other noble men, Kwei-lan's husband is not ready to lead an idle life. He wants to work and earn, even if his father is against this. Kwei-lan's husband is a rational thinker and that is what attracts him towards the Western culture. According to him, there is no point in blindly following the old tradition that does not give any advantages to the people. He is a person who strongly believes in equality as far as class, gender and familial roles are concerned. Kwei-lan is stunned to see her husband disobeying the commands of his parents. She believes that all those years in the West have made him unfilial.

Kwei-lan feels like an alien in their new modern house. The greatest blow occurs when her husband asks her to unbind her feet. Foot binding is an evil that has been practiced in China from the ancient times. It is considered as a part of aristocratic female attire. So women are forced to undergo this excruciating pain as proper dressing is a symbol of Chinese identity and culture,

marking their superiority over the foreigners. Actually, foot binding is an indirect way of ensuring the oppression of women. Due to the pain, they are even denied the basic freedom to move freely. As for Kwei-lan, she is proud of her tiny feet. In her childhood, whenever she wept, her mother told her to endure the pain as her husband would praise her feet in the future for their beauty. So Kwei-lan couldn't hold back her tears when she heard what her husband asked her to do.

But later Kwei-lan decides to obey her husband so as to please him. The unbinding process is as painful as binding. Her husband comforts her. For him, it is a protest against an age old wicked tradition. When she is able to walk properly, Kwei-lan experiences a new kind of freedom. Experiencing this special freedom makes her realize the inconvenience that their country's tradition has caused them. She realizes that there is nothing wrong in breaking a tradition that restricts the basic rights of people. Instead of blindly following the tradition, she begins to see the possibilities of the new one.

Chinese people consider foreigners as inferior to them. They are addressed as barbarians. As they are not exposed to the modern world, they believe that they are the only civilized people on earth. Kwei-lan also has this sense of superiority. She thinks that the Westerners came to their country to learn their civilization. But what her husband teaches her is actually the opposite: "This was very astonishing to me. I did not know that there were ancient people except ours, that is, civilized people. But it seems that the foreigners also have a history and a culture. They are therefore not wholly barbarian" (87).

Kwei-lan is happy to be a little modern and more open to the Western culture in which she could be herself. When she becomes pregnant, her husband discards all the superstitions she has regarding the childbirth. He takes her to the Western home of his old American teacher, so that she can learn to raise her children properly. He does not want her to copy them entirely, but it would help to enlarge her ideas. Becoming modern, does not mean to lose a person's values. He lets Kwei-lan follow traditions she is accustomed to, if they are reasonable. Even if Kwei-lan is pleased to see the foreign babies, she is shocked to see their white clothes. In China, white is the colour of mourning and death. She is also surprised to see the foreign woman nursing her own children. In China, noble women never do that as their children are nursed by slaves. Her

husband tells her to nurse her own child for the well being of the baby. When Kwei-lan visits Mrs. Liu, another foreign woman married to a Chinese man, she is happy to see her children clothed in traditional Chinese clothes. When Kwei-lan shares her experience in the foreigner's house, Mrs. Liu tells her, "See, my white is all inside- linings which can be taken out and washed. Learn the good that you can of the foreign people and reject the unsuitable" (109).

When Kwei-lan gives birth to a son, her husband tells her that the baby belongs to them both and they have equal rights over the baby. She is glad that she has married a modern man. But, she is somewhat reluctant in accepting her brother's wish to marry an American woman. Kwei-lan's husband tells her that the foreigner might not be willing to accept a subordinate position as it is not customary in their country for men to have secondary wives. She wonders, how the foreigner expected to be her brother's only wife as it is the law of China, which allows men to have several wives. Every woman including her mother has been following this rule for all these years.

But, Kwei-lan herself couldn't imagine her husband marrying another woman as she loves him so much. She thinks that she is bound to help her brother and Mary at any cost, if they loved each other as she herself loved her husband. Here, it can be seen Kwei-lan slowly changing her perspectives regarding tradition and culture. Unlike her husband, she does not fully adopt the Western culture. She tries to adjust her life according to the ways of her modern husband. Kwei-lan feels that she is in conflict between tradition and modernity. When her brother and the foreigner arrive, Kwei-lan let them live in their home until everything will be solved. By doing this, Kwei-lan is openly going against her mother and thereby the tradition itself. "Tradition is not wholly static, because it has to be reinvented by each new generation as it takes over its cultural inheritance from those preceding it" (Gidden 37). When she sees the foreigner, for a moment, she thinks she would never fit in their traditional family. She is a free spirited, proud woman who is very frank in showing her affection towards her lover, unlike conservative Chinese women. At first, Kwei-lan thinks about her behaviour as indecorous. But strangely, when she thinks about it again, she is convinced that there is nothing wrong with her ways.

But everything Kwei-lan's brother do to convince his parents fails. The difference between the older and the younger generation of the same culture can be seen implicitly. Whereas, the

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younger generation is more open to new ways, the older generation clings to tradition and follows it blindly. This can be best understood from Mrs. Liu's words: "These are ruthless days for the old. There is no compromise possible between old and young. They are as clearly divided as though a new knife severed a branch from a tree" (205). Kwei-lan's parents are not ready to accept her, even when she conceives, saying that an impure child of mixed race wouldn't be considered as the heir of the family. Finally, Kwei-lan's brother renounces his inheritance saying: "I and my wife, we will go forth. In this day we shall be free as the young of other countries are free. We will start a new race- free- free from these ancient and wicked bondages over our souls" (264). Kwei-lan exclaims at the extent to which her brother has gone for his love. He leaves the ancestral home forever with the foreigner. They move to a small two storied house in which they live an ordinary life. These two people have left a world for the sake of other. Kwei-lan is humbled to see such love and she thinks their child would be very precious:

As for their child, I am moved in two ways. He will have his own world to make. Being of neither East nor West purely, he will be rejected of each, for none will understand him. But I think, if he has the strength of both his parents, he will understand both worlds, and so overcome. (271)

The novel, *East Wind: West Wind*, depicts a young Chinese woman's conflict with tradition and modernity. She takes the difficult decision of supporting her brother's marriage with a foreign woman. Through the character of Mary, Pearl S. Buck might have actually tried to showcase her own struggle as a foreigner in adjusting with the Chinese culture while living in China. She portrays most of the evils that exist in China during that point of time. And through many instances in the novel, Pearl S. Buck tries to prove that the Western culture is more rational than the East.

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