

Analysis of the Image of O-lan in *The Good Earth*

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ABSTRACT. *The Good Earth is Pearl S Buck's masterpiece about Chinese rural life. In 1938, for The Good Earth and other seven works, Pearl S Buck won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The secretary of the Swedish Academy, Per Hallstrom, on the award ceremony said that one of the significances of the novel was to reflect the issue on the status of Chinese women. As a woman writer, women's living condition and social status must be one of the themes in Pearl S Buck's novels. This thesis attempts through analyzing the content of the novel, presents the characteristics of the heroine, O-lan in The Good Earth to find Pearl S Buck's views on women reflected in her works and her female characters.*

KEYWORDS: *humble and submissive wife, Selfless Devoted Housewife, tough and Tenacious Woman, Wise Decision-Maker, Silent Resister*

1. The traditional O-lan

The character O-lan, created by Pearl S Buck, a typical representative of the working class women in the bottom of the society. Her miserable life is a epitome of the fates of many women under patriarchal system in the feudal society. She is with the morals and characters that are required in Chinese traditional culture.

1.1 The Humble and submissive wife

O-lan was born poor who was sold to the House of Hwang as a servant since she was a child. She worked hard every day, from early morning until late at night. Yet despite this hard work every day, she would be beaten every day. Not only that, she was bullied and looked down upon by the other girl servants, because of her ugly appearance and humble status. She suffered physical abuse and humiliation of personality, living an inhuman life. In such a living environment, she developed an introverted personality. She looks dull and quiet. *"But she does well what she is told to do and she has a good temper."* O-lan silently accepted the arrangements for the owner, married to the poor peasant Wang Long.

Although the identity of O-lan from the servant became the wife of Wang Long, she still keeps her humble and obedient character. She always bowed her head when she spoke in a low sound. And she always worried about her behavior can not let her husband satisfied. When Wang Long and O-lan first met, he bought some peaches for her. She just *"nibbling one cautiously"*, *"but when she saw him looking at her she covered it again with her hand and kept her jaws motionless."*

On the second day of the wedding, O-lan put some tealeaves in the water for Wang Lung with her won decision. While when *"He looked up at her quickly she was at once afraid."*

When O-lan was pregnant for the second time, it is just in time for the busy season. Wang Long blamed O-lan for her pregnancy is not in the right time. While O-lan has no complaints and refute to that. And just after she gives birth to a child, she get out of bed and to help her husband in the field for harvest.

O-lan is like a loyal and taciturn maid, silently makes her husband and family services, obeys to her husband, and never requests something for herself.

The only once her asking for requirement is about two pearls. During their living in the southern city, O-lan accidentally got some jewelry. Wang Long discovered and asked for these jewelry. O-lan is almost timid and pathetic begging Wang Long to leave the two smallest pearls to her. This is almost the only one time, O-lan made request to her husband, But at the final, in order to please Lotus, Wang Lung took away O-lan's small pearls heartlessly. Poor O-lan tears down silently and obeyed her husband's decision. Although there is a plot that O-lan rammed the clothes which is a symbol of rebelling in her inner thoughts, however, under the background of feudal social system; bounded by the feudal ethical code that the male is statue and female is humble, which last thousand of years, O-lan as a rural woman belongs to the lowest level in the society, her consciousness of resistance is limited. In her mind, the obedience and rebellion contest. It is evident that the Obedience to her husband is upper hand. And this fact can be proved from another plot.

After fortune, Wang Lung began to dislike Alan's face and her big feet, so she take a concubine, a prostitute Lotus. Although O-lan is angry, resentful, and hurt, they can only obey her husband's decision. In order to make her daughter meet the abnormal aesthetic of her husband that represents the aesthetic deformities feudal society, and repeat no longer the fate of her disgust by her husband, O-lan binds the little girl's feet.

"Because my mother binds a cloth about my feet more tightly every day and I cannot sleep at night."

"Now I have not heard you weep," he said wondering.

"No," she said simply, "and my mother said I was not to weep aloud because you are too kind and weak for pain and you might say to leave me as I am, and then my husband would not love me even as you do not love her."

1.2 The Selfless Devoted Housewife

While O-lan shows people her appearance of dull and reticent, she is a capable housewife. As a new wife, she used simple ingredients made a delicious meal, praised by the guests, and also won the recognition of her husband and her father-in-law. After marriage, O-lan assumed all the household chores--- fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking, Serve the elderly, mending clothes and cleaning the house. She finished these housework quietly, and no one asked her to do so. In the evening, she did not go to bed till she fed the cows in the kitchen to drink enough water. O-lan is very thrift and ingenuity. After finishing the housework, O-lan help Wang Long did farm work positively. Even during her pregnancy she did not reduce her labor and had a good rest, until just before giving birth she still did farm work in the field with her husband. O-lan is very Kind-hearted, she takes care her father-in-law, help her husband and love her own children. Before her death her last wish is to personally involve in her eldest son's wedding. When she was conscious, she reminded her family full of concern.

"Now I am content and this thing in me may do as it will. My son, look to your father and your grandfather, and my daughter, look to your husband and your husband's father and his grandfather and the poor fool in the court, there is she. And you have no duty to any other."

Because of her silence, she has long been ignored by her family, but when she suddenly fails to perform her "duties", everyone in the family comes to realize how indispensable she is to them. There are no great deeds done by O-lan and her importance as a mother only depends on trivial details such as "lighting the grass" and "frying fish." However, it is through those ordinary scenes that one feels connected with her selfless image and the great motherhood she represents. Like any ordinary housewife who devotes her life and talents to her husband and children, O-lan does not achieve anything spectacular or extraordinary in her life, however, it is her ordinariness that provides her with a universal appeal.

1.3 The tough and Tenacious Woman

O-lan is the typical representative of Chinese traditional women who are hard working and perseverance. Beneath her calm and dull appearance, there is a strong heart. The best example showing her firm and tenacious endurance character is the plot of her childbirth. Until the day she was going to give birth to her first baby, she still worked with her husband on the field till the evening.

She began to cut more and more slowly as noon wore on to afternoon and evening, and he turned to look at her with impatience. She stopped and stood up then, her scythe dropped. On her face was a new sweat, the sweat of a new agony. She stopped and stood up then, her scythe dropped, On her face was a new sweat, the sweat of a new agony.

"It is come" she said, "I will go into the house. Do not come into the room until I call. Only bring me a newly peeled reed, and slit it, that I may cut the child's life from mine"

Then she returned home, be ready for meal for Wang Long and his father first.

When he reached the house he found his supper hot on the table and the old man eating. She had stopped in her labor to prepare them food! He said to himself that she was a woman such as is not commonly found. Then he went to the door of their room and he called out,

"Here is the reed!"

He waited, expecting that she would call out to him to bring it in to her. But she did not. She came to the door and through the crack her hand reached out and took the reed. She said no word, but he heard her panting as an animal pants which has run for a long way.

Pearl used her exquisite description depicted a very strong female image, which readers impressed deeply.

2. The Rebellious O-lan

In old China, Chinese women were oppressed by double forces, the feudal autocracy and the patriarchy. For thousands of years, they were excluded from social life and became the servants of the families and the dependences of lives who endured great scorn and neglect. According to the concept of feudal ethical code, man is the head of the family and the woman's status is humble and low, although they are indispensable family members. Under such living environment, O-lan did more yield and obedience. Although weak, and hardly breaking the shackles of the powerful force, but she still relied on her own courage and wisdom to rebel the injustice and unequal treatment imposing on her silently. She actively searched for her own living room in the harsh environment.

2.1A Wise Decision-Maker

O-lan broke the doctrine of man deciding the affairs outside the family and woman manage the affair in the family, in feudal system. She actively participates in family decision-making and external affairs, and shows her superior wisdom and decision-making capacity to her husband Wang Lung. In several crucial moments, it is O-lan's decisive and smart decision-making that resolves the family crisis, and create to the living way out for the whole family.

Quick-witted Alan through her experience as a maid in Grate Huang House, by her careful observation, she judge Grate Huang Family is going to decline, then she supported her husband to buy a piece of fertile land from Huang family. Later the Wangs became rich, and then became the richest family in the village.

During the period of famine year, there was severe drought, in the field, the pellet nothing collects. The Wang Longs did not have food to eat. The family has arrived at the border being at death's door. At home, the eatable god of the earth is left over with an ox. Wang Long is at a nonplus, but Alan is calm and decisive. She took a great iron knife from the kitchen, killed the ox very agilely as food for the whole hunger family.

When Wang Long's father's younger brother takes person to come to blackmail and impose exactions on land by force, O-lan's behavior and Wang Long's behavior also are extremely large contrast.

He shrieked at the three men. "I shall never sell the land!" "Bit by bit I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth!" He was weeping violently and his anger went out of him as suddenly as a wind and he stood shaking and weeping.

But Alan shows calmness "as though every day such things were."

"The land we will not sell, surely," she said, "else when we return from the south we shall have nothing to feed us. But we will sell the table and the two beds and the bedding and the four benches and even the cauldron from the stove. But the rakes and the hoe and the plow we will not sell, nor the land." "There was some calmness in her voice which carried more strength than all Wang Lung's anger"

O-lan never speaking if not has to, at this moment, how calm and reasonable she appeared! This behavior formed the striking contrast with Wang Lung's behavior.

During the family was in the city of south, a rich family was looted. O-lan, according to her experience of being a servant in great Huang house, found the location where the rich master of the house hid the jewelry before releasing. So she got some jewelry. It is these jewelry that give a chance for the family returning to their hometown and making fortune once again.

To a great extent, O-lan, has played a more decisive role in the favorable changes of her family. O-lan is more capable, witty and flexible than her husband on almost every occasion. Without O-lan's help, how could Wang Lung have gone through such a hard time in life and finally acquire the position and satisfaction as a landlord?1

These facts have proved that O-lan is more intelligent and has more determination comparing to her husband, the head of the family, Wang Lung. By participating in the decision-making process, O-lan broke the shackles of the feudal ethical code, fight for more living room and get a certain degree freedom and rights.

2.2 *The Silent Resister*

although O-lan always speak few word, there is consciousness of resistance for her terrible situation in her mind too. While this awareness is limited by the social environment and her own status, so her resistance is just weak and silent.

2.2.1 The Resistance to Great Huang House

During the 10 years in the great Huang house, O-lan is tortured. After married Wang Lung, she had her own home, she hope to seek a happy life and win the respect of others by her own hand. So when she comes to pregnancy, she begins to plan her visit to the House of Hwang.

When I return to that house it will be with my son in my arms. I shall have a red coat on him and red-flowered trousers and on his head a hat with a small gilded Buddha sewn on the front and on his feet tiger-faced shoes. And I will wear new shoes and a new coat of black sateen, and I will go into the kitchen where I spent my days, and I will go into the great hall where the Old One sits with her opium, and I will show myself and my son to all of them.

Then on the second day of the new year, the couple with their son dresses up beautifully and take a visit to the House of Hwang.

To O-lan, this visit is more than a new-year greeting. She wants to show that now

she has been getting along fairly well by means of industry and frugality, and she is proud of her husband, of her son, and of her marriage. She wants to make an exhibition, so to speak, of her success and pride. Her new baby is a symbol of her honest and prosperous new life. She demonstrates to her old mistress and her peers that though she is no longer under the roof of a rich household, she lives the life of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law.

When the visit is over, O-lan feels “*satisfied with what she sees in the House of Hwang.*” She talks her feels to her husband with “*A slow smile spread over her face*”.

“I saw not one slave with a new coat like mine.” And then after a while she said again, “As for our son, there was not even a child among the concubines of the Old Master himself to compare to him in beauty and in dress.”

As a weak woman in the feudal society, O-lan would not have thoughts to use the uprising and revolutionary way to express her anger to the bullying suffered in the Huang house. She can only use the things which she believe to show the value of life, such as the new clothes, her beautiful son and so on to fight back those who abuse and look down herself. The new clothes reflected her economic abundance, the son reflects her value and significance as a woman. Although the intensity of resistance is limited, the resistance of this unique way of rural women revealed O-lan’s resentment to the feudal landlord system.

2.2.2 The Resistance to Her Husband

When O-lan faces the unfair treatment in her life and marriage, she can not afford to change the situation, but she also use her own unique way to resist silently. And in some degree, she achieved victory.

When Wang Lung rushes two pearls that O-lan is left over with only, in order to please the prostitute Lotus, O-lan still keep silent and speak no word, but to beat clothes with a stick lamenting and resenting. That is a symbol----- she beats the clothes as beats Wang Long self to give vent to his discontenting. This one of proofs showing O-lan is resists Wang Lung. O-lan cannot stop Wang Lung to marry with Lotus as his the second wife, but she told him : "*I gave birth to your sons.*" She use this brief and forceful words to criticize Wang Long making him feel ashamed and uneasy.

Another example is that Cuckoo who was ever a maidservant in Great Huang House, and now as Lotus's maidservant also came to Wang Lung' home. Alan wants to let Wang Long oust the azalea, for The azalea very unruly, bullies by all means to Alan, but Wang Long does not achieve. Then O-lan revenges her by her own way. And, this revenge is also to be aimed at a lotus's on one certain degree. She cooks meal only for herself family, but not for lotus, as well as heats water. Interrogate disregarding how loud the azalea is, Alan refuses to answer. Finally, Wang Lung is forced to let azalea set up a separate kitchen within lotus's courtyard. We also can perceive Alan contending from Wang Long 's feeling of being ashamed and uneasy achievement getting.

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