

A comparative study of Pearl S Buck's 'The Good Earth' and Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's 'Verukal' in the perspective of Space and Culture

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Abstract

Cultural forms are the expression of unique sequences of historical events, but they are the results of underlying processes that represent constants in human experiences. The present paper would attempt to amalgamate these cultural formulations of Man and his soil through study of Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth* and Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Verukal*, two harvest narratives, as they stand spaced out in time and distance.

Key words: *Self-identity, Universality, Universal human bond, Paradigm of culture*

The publication of *The Good Earth* on March 2nd, 1931, proved to be a literary phenomenon. This lengthy narrative covering many years in the history and life of a Chinese peasant family, embarks the reader on a quest for self-identity through a hegemonical return to his soil. From her life in China, Pearl S Buck had conceived a warm admiration for the ordinary people of the land. China was an agricultural country, and these farming folk comprised four-fifths of the total population. Despite their overwhelming numbers, these peasants were the most abused group in the country: they were continually mistreated by the government officials, bandits, and landlords. In addition, they had to struggle to exist against the terrible perils of flood and famine. Even when they were forced to flee southwards or to other areas because of such catastrophes, they invariably returned to the land whenever possible.

Miss Buck was convinced that these good solid farmers formed the basic heart of China. Her interest in them as people gave her a starting point, and love, and affirmation for the Chinese peasant became one of the principal ingredients of her thought and writing. The vividness of both character and scenes distinguishes *The Good Earth*. One recalls Wang's apprehension over his approaching wedding, the suffering induced by famine and flood, O-Lan's (Wang lung's wife) industry and stoicism, Wang's choice of a concubine when he becomes wealthy

and restless, and his sons' almost indecently eager desire to sell the land as soon as their father passes away. Part of the reason for this vividness rests in the universality of the novel's various portraits.

Not only does the particularity of the wedding day loom on a general level of credibility, but several other events ring true, surpassing mere time and locale: the expectation and joy over the birth of the first child, the suffering induced by poverty and sickness, the malice of some relatives, the tragedy of death in a family, the father's pride in his educated sons, the ingratitude of children to parents, the jealousy and quarreling of brothers, the difficulties caused by war and the catastrophes of nature. These and numerous other happenings convey, as one critic remarks, "the continuity of human experience" and render "into universal terms immemorial human attitudes." It is just this similarity to truth and to our own individual lives that makes 'The Good Earth' stir deep patterns of recognition in the mind and heart of the readers.

It portrays life as it is: all true, all believable. Portrayed too, with graphic authority is the ebb and flow of life, its change, and perpetual movements, not only seasonally from spring to winter, from seed planting to harvest, but also a cycle of both family and humanity. Past links with the present, and present link with

future. Miss Buck refers to China as a “tremendous country, when time is measured in centuries and space by landscapes as various as the world provides, without being shaped by eternities” (*Pearl S. Buck, page 126*) and this same sense of being shaped by eternities is one of the characteristics of *The Good Earth*.

The book carries us through several generations of the Wang clan and analyzes the growth of the family as it develops in power and wealth. Such families in China, Miss Buck has declared, begin on land, and, if favorable circumstances present themselves, the family increases in stature and importance. But she insists, such families develop from their land roots; they grow from the soil. Another notable aspect giving *The Good Earth* much of its appeal is its ability to present universality even though it deals with a race with which people in English speaking countries are not especially familiar, expect, of course in *Fu Manchudistortions* and similar fanciful exaggerations. James Gray declares that *Miss Buck has enabled the Western reader to know China with sanity, compassion and understanding*. Yet another critic maintains that *The Good Earth made American readers aware in the lives of a completely alien people of universal human bonds. (Pearl S Buck, page:51)* The second narrative that employed in the paper to explore this concept of the universal human bond is Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s Verukal. The novel seeks to portray the life of the orthodox Brahmin community, the conventions, and superstitions, and all those passions which man is heir to as its main disconcerting reality. Iyer (Raghu) an I.A.S officer hailing from an orthodox Brahmin family, is married to Geetha, daughter of a business tycoon settled in Chennai. Geetha is easily discerned as the symbol of the flawed and upcoming new generation depending merely on material possession and comfort. Her aspiration of building their new house on a four thousand five hundred square feet land is all that her consciousness can retain as she insists that her husband either sells his ancestral land to make up the sum for their purchase or accept in all humility financial assistance from her rich

father. The latter choice is however unacceptable to Raghu, as he fights to retain his identity in the social milieu and at home, and it is in the clash between the forces of the new and the old, between progress and blind conservatism that Malayattoor Ramakrishnan portrays in vividness the flux of basic human values and emotions. Land here becomes a paradigm of culture and is born out of the initiatives of the social fabric.

The conflict is serially arranged and logically developed through many episodes unwinding itself thus making the reader survey the whole scene dispassionately and comprehensively to understand the precipice of social and moral degradation. Thus, it is with Raghu’s acceptance of the challenge to sever his ties with his ancestral property that the conflict becomes inevitable, as people of different temperaments and traditions are brought together to unfold in realistic detail the novels essential meaning. The conflict in the novel reaches its peak with the arrival of Devassy, the toddy shop owner, whose attempt to purchase the ancestral land would not only plunge him in greater agony but would be simply ignoring his father’s sacrifice for him:

If only you had got good medicines and proper treatment, would you not have been with me today? How many things did you abjure to spend on my education to see that money was sent to me regularly? (Verukal, page 131) The situation becomes unbearable in Raghu’s mind as he fights to ward off temptations to sell his land and finally emerges victorious when it dawns on him that his ancestral land was: *not just an item of property, or a mere house and compound but an entire tradition (Verukal, Page 131) His roots were in the piece of land. They were in the ancient soil. What a fool he had been realize it. Hadn’t he tried to cut off his own roots? The roots of man and the roots of trees were in the earth, in the soil (Verukal, page 118)*

Man is but what his soil shapes him into. It many a time becomes, not just the background in his life’s drama, but a leading character in it, exercising an active influence on the course of events, more often adorning the attire of a spiritual agent, coloring the mood, and shaping

the disposition of human beings. Even as Pearl S Buck attempt to blend the East and West in her writings, Ramakrishnan too perceives life on a bigger canvas... Miss Buck is a product of two worlds- the worlds of her American missionary parents and the world of a vast and captivating China. She declares that *it would be hard for me to declare which side of the world is most my own... I am loyal to Asia as I am loyal to my own land* (Autobiography with letters, page 53)

The worlds of East and West blend together to broaden the perception of man spiritually and increase his understanding of himself and his world. It is the earth that socially bears witness to the chaotic evolution of human life on it. The East and the West do meet there by awakening a deeper realization of their similarities. Narratives like *The Good Earth* and *Verukal* encompasses this intermediary between two worlds and two culture

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