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From Sensibility to Sublimity: Worshipping Land Community in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

Dipendra Raj Regmi 

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Dipendra Raj Regmi, Email: regmi789@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper explores and analyses the kind of ecological sublimity the protagonist goes through despite poverty and significant modern development in China in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931) from an eco-critical perspective. Wang Lung, the protagonist, experienced wonderful transformations in China during his lifetime. The colonization, arrival of Christian missionaries, urbanization and construction of a railroad signal modernity in China. However, Lung feels ecological sublimity despite the ups and downs brought about by the series of transformations in China. The paper draws on ideas from the eco-critical insights anticipated by Aldo Leopold and E. O. Wilson. As a qualitative applied research, the focus lies on Leopold's concept of "land community" and Wilson's idea of "biophilia". Ecological sensibility is the only way to feel the earth's community's bliss even during modern development. The reverence for land community unbelievably renders the vibration of ecological sublimity. It provides spiritual freedom to people of all classes, religions and nationalities from around the world. In this sense, the land community offers sublime happiness in the world if we stop coveting its domain.

Keywords: Eco-centric, ecological sensibility, ecological sublimity, biophilia

Introduction

Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* portrays the heroic journey of the protagonist named Wang Lung in a rural Chinese village. His journey from an ordinary peasant to a capitalist occurs when China underwent a series of transformations. Colonization, urbanization, construction of the railroad, arrival of Christian missionaries, etc. affect him a lot. But, his emotional attachment to the land never decreases either in the village or in the town. He finds his identity in the soil ever since his wedding to O'lan. His incomparable love for the soil, plants and animals indicates his profound ecological sensitivity. This is the reason why he returns to his native land rejecting the glamour of capitalism from the town. However, Lung shifts from the concrete house to the old earthen house in the last days of his life. He grows anxious when he overhears the plan

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of his idle sons soon after the construction of a railroad in China. His anxiety is settled by the sons because they promise to keep their integrity with the land. In conclusion, Lung's journey from a peasant to a prosperous landlord ends with his wonderful experience of ecological sublimity.

Buck's novel explains the heroic transformation of the protagonist, Lung, in China. He tolerates unimaginable natural catastrophes during his stay in the village. Later, he shifts to the town with his family members in search of a bright future. With the rise of urbanization and industrialization, he experiences wonderful things in life. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions: What motivates the protagonist to tolerate massive starvation? Why does Lung reject the glamour of the city? Why does he prefer the old earthen house over the concrete house near the end of life?

This paper aims to explore how the protagonist feels ecological sublimity despite the series of ups and downs in Buck's book. Thus, the study is limited to her single text, and the researcher does not discuss the other aspects of the novel.

Buck depicts a realistic portrait of China in her novel published in 1931. The publication of the novel is followed by numerous responses from the readers. Qian Suoqiao writes, "What *The Good Earth* offers is 'China', a panoramic view of the vicissitudes of ordinary Chinese life through the rise and fall of an archetypal peasant family" (163). Suoqiao understands what China really is through the ups and downs of a peasant family. Robert Shaffer appreciates Hilary Spurling for her way of representing Chinese life. He claims: "Spurling demonstrates that Buck remained steadfastly independent as an observer of Chinese life, rejecting the orthodoxy of American missionaries and elite Chinese literary figures, of ruling Chinese Nationalists and insurgent Communists" (Shaffer 675). Spurling finds Buck as an independent writer, who can ignore any kind of influence in her writing. Similarly, Harold R. Isaacs observes that Buck "created" China in the same way Charles Dickens "created" Victorian England (155). Isaacs finds a similarity in the portrayal of characters and setting between Buck and Dickens. In doing so, Buck contributed Chinese literature a lot in comparison to her contemporaries.

Buck's identity in China remains as an interpreter of China to the Western world. Barbara A. White finds, ". . . Buck as a major interpreter of China to the West" (198). Westerners understand China through the interpretation of Buck's pen. Buck develops a controversial relationship with Asians throughout her lifetime. Randall J. Stephens describes her as ". . . a public enemy, and her books were forbidden" (27). Stephens's portrayal of her as a civic enemy and the banning of her books signal her provocative image in China. She admits this sensational fact even with Hilary Spurling in a dialogue.

Most importantly, Buck reflects her ecological sensibility powerfully in her novel as Michael H. Hunt argues, "Throughout her work, she stressed the virtues of an agricultural community, close to the soil and hence to nature, where men understood the fundamentals of life and were content with their simple, stable community" (51). Hunt perceives Buck's attachment to the land community. In the words of Richard Jean So, "Buck also argues that the Chinese peasant reveals a uniquely harmonious vision of social life, one founded on principles of cooperation, equality, and order" (90). Buck's argument relies on the fact that Chinese peasants and the environment exists side by side. There is a strong sense of attachment between the Chinese peasants and the environment. She offers, ". . . the sense of belonging to a particular piece of earth is deep in the heart of every people" (qtd. in Cheung et.al. 67). She concretizes the idea of place attachment by providing the reference of a human being. It lies at the heart of human beings unknowingly. In the words of Stephen Spencer, "It reflects their valuing of land and

nostalgia for rural life in a time of expanding industrialism and urbanization” (2). Industrialization and urbanization instigate a sense of place attachment. Anyway, devotion to the land provides unexplored joy in the course of time.

This study, therefore, argues how devotion to the land community provides profound joy and happiness and then opens the gateway to ecological sublimity in the age of rapid modernization. For instance, in the novel, Lung feels the blissful pride of ecology in his native land. It becomes possible when he integrates himself with the other members of the earth community realizing their existence. Thus, this paper aims to convey the message that deep respect for the land community offers sublime joy and happiness if we stop intriguing it.

This study is based on the descriptive textual interpretation of Buck’s novel through the lens of eco-criticism. The researcher has used Leopold's concept of “land community” and Wilson’s idea of “biophilia” to analyze how the protagonist feels ecological sublimity near the end of his life. The ideas and opinions of other eco-critics have also been incorporated to reinforce the main thesis of the study.

The Concept of Land Community and Biophilia

Land community and biophilia are crucial concepts to understanding environmental ethics. Aldo Leopold originates the concept of land community in his land ethic in 1949. He argues, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land” (204). Leopold's concept of a land ethic sounds philosophical. According to him, the soils, waters, plants and animals are collectively addressed as the land. On the other hand, E. O. Wilson's idea of “biophilia” reveals the sense of human connectedness to nonhuman living beings (157). Wilson sees biophilia, in terms of human beings' connection to non-human living things in the world. Both concepts are highly eco-centric and provide abundant clues to understanding life and the world.

Veneration to Land Community

Lung, the protagonist, appears as a strong supporter of the land community from the beginning of the novel. Despite poverty and significant changes in Chinese society during the early decades of the twentieth century, he displays tremendous love for the land where he resides. His devotion to the land shows his ecological sensibility. In this way, Lung experience a kind of feeling that is different from what is offered by the materialistic world during the rise of urbanization in China.

The protagonist displays his religious faith by showing deep respect for Earth God in the novel. Reverence to Earth God develops human beings’ integrity with the land community. Lung and his wife O’lan’s understanding of the Earth community echoes the idea of Cheryll Glotfelty. Glotfelty brings the concept of an “earth-centered approach” to the study of ecocriticism (xviii). The earth-centered approach, according to Glotfelty, is essential to the study of human beings’ treatment of the earth. Buck describes the self-regulating system of the earth through the eyes of her protagonist. She explains Lung's attitude towards the earth as follows:

. . . He had no articulate thought of anything; there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. The earth lay rich and dark, and fell apart lightly under the points of their hoes. Sometimes they turned up a bit of brick, a splinter of wood. It was nothing. Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone back into the earth. So, would also

their house, some time, return into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth . . . (22)

Buck articulates the majesty of the earth through the monologues of her protagonist. Lung realizes that everything comes from the earth and goes into the earth. Obviously, his realization depends on the earth-centered approach that Glotfelty talks about above. Buck's intention is to connect Lung with the Earth; the ultimate destination of all human and non-human beings. It offers a supreme sense of self-realization despite the impact of modernity.

Lung's unconditional love for the land begins with a reaction to the news of Old Mistress from the House of Hwang is going to sell the land. Selling land for material prosperity is a sign of degeneration. But, bell hooks argues: "When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully" (51). The way we love Earth determines our ability to love ourselves. Lung's affection for the earth or the soil dispels powerfully in response to the news of Old Mistress. In the words of Lung, "Sell their land!" repeated Wang Lung, convinced. "Then indeed are they growing poor. Land is one's flesh and blood" (Buck 37). Selling land, according to Lung, is a sign of growing poor. He considers the land as one's flesh and body. Moreover, his attitude towards land resembles Leopold's broader spectrum of land ethics. The degeneration of Hwang's family is the result of their detachment from the earth. Anyway, Lung's transformation from a peasant to a landowner indicates his profound love for the land.

Similarly, Lung keeps himself intact with the earth even in times of severe drought in that region of China. He focuses on the importance of water to plants, animals and human beings. The dry and cracked cultivated field in the eyes of the protagonist shows the helplessness of humanity in front of nature. Here, Aldo Leopold claims: "Land, then, is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals" (216). Leopold regards land as an absolute source of energy. The absence of energy affects the whole depending upon the land. Lung says, "Well, and they must all starve if the plants starve." It was true that all their lives depended upon the earth (Buck 48). Water is an indispensable element to all living beings. The life of the plants in the field determines the future of the Lung family. In this way, he realizes the interdependence of humans and the non-human world after the shortage of water. This realization, ultimately, expands his understanding of the land community.

Next, Lung understands the immortality of the land in contrast to the transitory human life. This is why he is against all kinds of damage at the heart of nature. Rather, he shows the way to be a genuine human. In this context, Peter Mortensen notes: ". . . the vital connection to nature that makes humans human" (179). In the words of Mortensen, being human in a real sense is integrating with nature. Lung never imagines destroying the integrity of the land since his family depends on agriculture. He is not ready to sell the land even in a time of adversity. "I shall never sell the land!" he shrieked at them. 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!" (Buck 61). This utterance is an answer from Lung to the client who has come to purchase the land with his uncle during adversity. His reply signifies how much he integrates himself with the land. He can hardly imagine selling land for material prosperity. In short, his spiritual relationship with the land is incomparable. He attains power from the land even at the tough time of his life.

Lung suffers from nostalgia when he migrates to the South with his family. He longs for a home as there is no place for him in the city. He rejects the glamour of the city to avoid the feeling of placelessness. In this regard, Edward Relph claims: "Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centres of our immediate

experiences of the world” (141). Reciprocity between humans and the natural world offers a way to experience the world. Lung's reminiscence, therefore, is the result of his desire to experience ecological sublimity in his own land. Buck writes:

But Wang Lung thought of his land and pondered this way and that, with the sickened heart of deferred hope, how he could get back to it. He belonged, not to this scum which clung to the walls of a rich man's house; nor did he belong to the rich man's house. He belonged to the land and he could not live with any fullness until he felt the land under his feet and followed a plow in the springtime and bore a scythe in his hand at harvest. He listened, therefore, apart from the others, because hidden in his heart was the knowledge of the possession of his land, the good wheat land of his fathers, and the strip of rich rice land which he had bought from the great house. (87)

Lung looks impatient in the South because he has deferred hope to return to his own land. His incomparable love for the land is his real identity. Similarly, his desire to feel the land is different from what is offered by the modern city. The imagery of ploughing and harvesting recurs in his mind because of his supreme knowledge that there is a connection between humans and the non-human world. The same connectivity is the root of the celestial joy that land offers.

Ecological Sensibility and Sublimity

Lung's ecological sensibility rises while making preparation to return to his land. He reflects ecological conscience by showing an understanding of the value of seeds in the life of a peasant in China. Vandana Shiva defends the value of seeds while discussing the effect of globalization in South Asia: “The tiny seed is becoming an instrument of freedom in this emerging era of total control” (Shiva 574). Seed, according to Shiva, symbolizes freedom in the age of globalization. Lung's narrative suggests how he tries to avoid the impact of globalization. Buck writes:

. . . With three pieces of the gold he bought good seed from the south, full grains of wheat and of rice and of corn, and for very recklessness of riches he bought seeds the like of which he had never planted before, celery and lotus for his pond and great red radishes that are stewed with pork for a feast dish and small red fragrant beans. With five gold pieces he bought an ox from a farmer ploughing in the field . . . (99-100)

Lung's ecological conscience instigates him to purchase a variety of seeds and an ox. Like Shiva, Lung's purpose to buy seeds is to enjoy spiritual freedom because he has observed the impact of globalization. His attitude resembles Leopold's philosophy and the land community appears as a perfect place to enjoy the bliss of nature.

In addition, Lung perceives his native land with due respect after returning from the South. His perception reminds us of Leopold who stands critically while perceiving the environment. Leopold asserts: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (214). Leopold focuses on our sense perception because it also determines whether we are ethical or not. Lung's microscopic observation of the native land occurs in this way:

Then in the evening he stood in the doorway of his house and looked across the land, his own land, lying loose and fresh from the winter's freezing, and ready for planting. It was full spring and in the shallow pool the frogs croaked drowsily. The bamboos at the corner of the house swayed slowly under a gentle night wind and through the twilight he could see dimly the fringe of trees at the border of the near field . . . (Buck 101)

Sense perception of the protagonist resonates with his place attachment. The pleasantness of the wind provides spiritual nourishment and heals the impact of the materialistic rupture that he experiences in the town. He perceives the whole land community with due respect. His understanding of the land community signifies what exactly he prefers: love, respect and the existence of others in the eco-sphere.

At last, Lung expresses his intense desire to return to his old earthen house rejecting the concrete house that he purchased from the Old Mistress. By that time, his family falls apart because his sons treat land as a commodity after the construction of the railroad in China. He asks his sons not to sell the land at any cost. Rather, he tries to integrate them with the land to secure their future. hooks also talks about, "...respect for the life-giving forces of nature, of the earth . . ." (51). Harmony with nature is a way of connecting to the earth. Most importantly, Lung's journey from a peasant to a landlord becomes possible through his connection with the land or mother earth. He refutes the idea of selling land that offered him a lot. In the words of him, "It is the end of the family—when they begin to sell the land," he said brokenly. Out of the land we came and into it we must go—and if you hold your land you can live—no one can rob you of land. . ." (Buck 260). Lung's fragmented utterance concentrates on the human relationship with the land. For him, selling land is a sign of destruction. He tries to convince his sons why they need to connect themselves with the sacred earth rather than sell the land. To connect oneself with the land is to show one's ecological sensibility which ultimately provides a chance to feel the bliss of nature.

Conclusion

Lung's journey from a peasant to a capitalist includes numerous upheavals in China. Even in the time of urbanization, concretization and industrialization, his attitude toward the land community parallels the philosophical insight of Leopold. Like Leopold, he loves the soils, waters, plants and animals with due respect. Similarly, his idea of human integration with the land echoes the philosophy of Wilson. The combination of both provides profound spiritual happiness and freedom even in a tough time. It is inevitable to enjoy the virtue of nature as well as to fight against the impact of modernity. Lung's ecological sensibility drives him on the way to feel the celestial joy of a unique kind. As a result, the land community offers him sublime happiness. One can attain such ecological sublimity at least by being eco-centric or by keeping union and harmony with nature instead of intriguing it. He dissolves into the natural sublimity when he finds himself in the totality of the land community. This is the reason why he rejects the glamour of modernity and integrates himself with the cosmos. In conclusion, this is the kind of ecological sublimity that he feels in the old earthen house. The same nobility prevails in the Buddhist scriptures and Upanishads for ages. As a result, the young generation will play a crucial role to preserve their ecology and theology simultaneously in the modern age.

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