

MEMORY AND RECOGNITION: THE MODE OF REVELATION OF THE STORY IN PEARL S. BUCK'S *THE GOOD EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

The Good Earth appeals most, because of the way in which Pearl S Buck has represented the patterns of life, memories, and perceptions, which while being exclusive to the Chinese culture, are yet universal to a large extent. The whole novel jumps in and out of the memory of the protagonist Wang Lung. In fact, we might realize that covering a span of forty years in this novel without making the use of the thought process and memories of the character wouldn't have been possible for the author. Analysing the novel in the light of imagination, we realize that the protagonist himself is all the time absorbed in this process. In his daydreams he starts enjoying himself, he imagines not getting up early, lying on his bed, he wants to enjoy the service of his woman. This paper describes memory as a process. In this paper, *The Good Earth* is analysed in light of this process of memory. To recall our past is one kind of memory. Memory also includes recognition, imagination, retention, and nostalgia to a certain extent. Readers can find all these kinds of memories used in the novel with different characters. This paper also includes some of the incidents by which the reader can analyse the characters of the novels in light of the different kinds of memories.

Keywords: Memory, Recall, Retention, Recognition, Nostalgia.

Introduction

Memory is a topic that bulks very large in the discussion of daily life. It may be defined as the awareness of the fact that a certain event has been experienced in the past. In complete form, it may be defined as the recurrence of a group of experiences with the knowledge of when and where they were experienced. Memory is a group of centrally excited sensations accepted as representing some earlier seen object or previous event. One may conveniently divide memory into four-part processes - learning, retention, recall, and recognition. Learning is no more than the formation of association and retention of their persistence. If learning has to do with the formation of connection, then recalling depends upon the degree to which the association may become effective.

To recall any old event, it is necessary to have some idea that is in some way connected with that event or has some elements in common with it. Usually, the desire to remember is either itself and associates of the memory desired or they are both connected with a common idea; in practical life, the Occasion for the recall is a need for a bit of knowledge. There is always something that makes it desirable to know the thing to be recalled, and this has also been associated with the fact. Not all associates of an idea are actually recalled. The reason for this is usually that the right content is lacking. The mental attitude of the next moment always plays a predominant part.

Pearl S Buck, has made incredible use of memory as a tool to narrate the story of *The Good Earth*. The whole novel jumps in and out of the memory of the protagonist Wang Lung. In fact, we might realize that covering a span of forty years in this novel without making the use of the thought process and memories of the character wouldn't have been possible for the author. Here we will analyse *The Good Earth* in the light of this process of memory.

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Starting with the very first chapter of the novel, considering the protagonist Wang Lung, readers find that a train of thoughts passes him on the last morning, the morning of his wedding, last because it was the last day when he had to do all the household work and all the work which his mother used to do. While lighting the fire he remembers or recalls the time after the death of his mother. He remembers all the pain he took for his father; he recalls how those six years after his mother's death had been, without a woman in the house. This was the last morning he would have to light the fire. He had lit it every morning since his mother died six years before. "He had lit the fire, boiled water, and poured the water...Now father and son could rest ...He could lie in his bed and wait, and he also would have a bowl of water brought to him, and if the earth were fruitful there would be tea leaves in the water." (Buck 2)

The emotional and psychological aspects of Wang Lung's personality have also been revealed through his own memories. All the time he keeps remembering, recalling, reliving, and comparing his past with his present. After marriage, life is a luxury to him; he remembered his past when after working in the field, he used to return home and then he had to prepare a meal for himself and his father, but now the food is already ready for him. The return of a woman in his house has brought rest to him. The writer has depicted the miserable condition of a farmer in the days of famine and drought. Buck has shown Wang Lung as a very emotional person, who is very much attached to everything, even to his ox. In this materialistic world where people don't care for their own parents' emotions and feelings as is shown in the end of the novel, where Wang Lung's own sons sell land without his wish, in a time when people are getting detached from their roots, he is still attached to an animal.

During the worst days of Wang Lung's life, a day comes when they have to kill their ox for food, but to Wang Lung, it is not a killing of an animal but of a man. He remembers that the ox was his companion in the fields and he had known that ox right from his youth when the ox was a small calf when it was bought. He is so emotionally attached to the ox and is not able to bear the thought of killing it and eating it. As he says "How can we eat the ox? How shall we plough again?" (Buck 51). Wang Lung is not a person who can share much of his thoughts with others, so most of the time he thinks and analyses himself. Memories serve not to arouse emotionally but become a part of the logical process of mind, where experience, and within its memories lend to wisdom. Once when he is upset with his eldest son and his love for Lotus he starts thinking, "Then he remembered this, that Lotus had known of his son's desire to go away, and how had she known? And he remembered that of late his son had said nothing of going away but had been content, and why was he content? And Wang Lung said to his heart, fiercely, "I will see the thing for myself!" (Buck 174). What leads him to think all these is his jealousy for his own eldest son and his love, passion, and possessive attitude for Lotus, his concubine.

After all, the nightmare of a son replacing a father in his wife's affection is as old as the Oedipus Myth. Wang Lung is always busy thinking of his future, planning for his land, the education of his sons, the marriage of his children and trying to keep peace in his home, that too, with two women in his house. When he was over with all his responsibilities, for the first time in his life he thought of O-Lan his first wife, "He had been busy and without time to spare and only now, when his children were settled and his fields cared for...now it seemed to him he had time to think of what he would and he thought of O-Lan" (Buck 181). With the passing time changes also occur in Wang Lung's life, he is going to become grandfather, he remembers the time he became a father for the first time "...he remembered within himself that day and how she had gone alone into the small dark room and alone she had borne him sons.... And how she had come to the fields and worked besides...O-Lan rested from work little..." (Buck 218). Wang Lung is happy but he remembers how differently O-Lan behaved during her labour pain. There was no commotion and O-Lan was soon back to work after the birth of the child.

The book is filled with thought processes; there are fewer speeches and more thoughts. In the time of drought, Wang Lung tries to use cobs as a fuel but O-Lan suggests not using them as fuel, and she remembers her past and tells him "No—do not waste them in burning. I remember when I was a child in Shantung when years like this came, even the cobs we ground and ate. It is better than grass." (Buck 50). Readers get a glimpse of O-Lan's past life when she says that they can eat the corn husks instead of using them for fuel.

To recall our past is one kind of memory. Memory also includes recognition, imagination, retention, and nostalgia to a certain extent. Readers can find all these kinds of memories used in the novel with different characters. This paper also includes some of the incidents by which the reader can analyse the characters of the novels in light of the different kinds of memories.

By recognition, it means that the idea has been accepted and given a place in the experience of the individual life. It is this in large measure that transforms the raw material into ideas, into objects and events that have a real relation to the past life of the individual and to his knowledge.

Recognition is a process that plays a very large part in mental life and has close relations with reasoning as well as memories and neither an object nor memory can be used if it is not recognized, or understood. So understanding is closely related to recognition. Recognition means the reference of an event or object to some earlier time and place. It is a tagging by which we assign the experience of a place in our life. Memory is like perception in that it deals with real objects of concepts, rather than with mere centrally exciting sensations.

When one does not have prior knowledge of anything, recognition becomes difficult or even impossible. Such is the condition of Wang Lung when some paper is given to him. He is not able to understand the meaning of those letters. He is not able to recognize who that person was who hung upon a crosspiece of wood "Wang Lung looked at the pictured man in horror and with increasing interest. There was character beneath, but of these, he could make nothing." (Buck 59). The picture of crucified Jesus Christ means nothing to Wang Lung, and his father tells him that he might have been an evil man to have been punished that way. He was not able to recognize the picture, because he does not have prior knowledge of the person in the picture. It means that at the time Christianity was quite new to China.

One believes when one reasons; one needs not to believe when one imagines. Analysing the novel in the light of imagination, we realize that the protagonist himself is all the time absorbed in this process. In his daydreams he starts enjoying himself, he imagines not getting up early, lying on his bed, he wants to enjoy the service of his woman. He dreams of children in his house, his thought is struck by the children running in and out of three rooms, he imagines how the house will look full of beds, which is presently half empty.

Wang Lung is terribly anxious before going to request his bride to marry him at the great house of Hwang to, his thought only brings sweat over his body, "He thought of going into the great House of Hwang and of asking there for a woman, sweat broke out over his whole body as though he was in the field" (Buck 9). After Wang Lung's marriage is consummated, the interweaving of new thoughts takes place in his mind. He starts imagining his future life. Thinking about what his wife might be thinking about him "he desired suddenly that she should like him as her husband and then he was ashamed" (Buck 9). Such imagination of his, tells the reader about his desire which is obvious and natural.

Throughout the novel, Wang Lung suffers the pain of nostalgia, the pain a sick person feels because he wishes to return to his native land and fears that he might not be able to see it again, this longing for the past is called nostalgia. Some of the incidents in Wang Lung's life can be seen in this light of nostalgia. When on the streets of the city Wang Lung has to pull a rickshaw with all the hard work and sweat, he can cash only a penny above his rent. The labour he does is greater than he did in his field, that too, to earn just a copper penny. His heart starts pining for his land "then there came flooding over him the memory of his land" (Buck 74). With the passing time, his longing for his land increases, the urge to go back to land disturbs him, while sitting, while standing, he only thinks of his land. In the southern city, when he sees his father taking care of his grandchild, while the cool wind is blowing, he is struck by the thought of his land even more. He says to his father, "on such a day as this the fields should be turned and the wheat cultivated" (Buck 83).

The longing for his land makes him cry for it, he can feel that he can't live his whole life in the city and that he, he has to go back, and to his homeland "shall I never see it again! With all this labour and begging there is never enough to do more than feed us today" (Buck 84).

The only thought which keeps coming to Wang Lung's mind is how he can go back to his native land, with each day his urge to go back, to see his land, to feel his land grows more and more. During the unrest in the city, the children of Wang Lung come back home and tell whatever they have seen. While listening to the desire of his grandchild of eating sesame seed- sprinkled cake, the old man remembered, his good days of harvest when such cakes were affordable to them "when we had a good harvest, we had such cakes at the autumn feast, when the sesame had been threshed and before it was we kept a little back to make such cakes" (Buck 93), and Wang Lung also remembers the cakes prepared by O-Lan. He remembers the occasion of New Year's Feast when O-Lan takes those mouth-watering cakes to old mistress during their first New Year Feasts. And remembering those cakes his mouth is full of water; his heart is full of pain and with all his longing for what has been passed for his land, he cries "ah, the fair land!" (Buck 94).

During the last days of his life, Wang Lung goes to his field; he goes close to the low hills where his close ones were buried and thinks that soon it will be his turn. He remembers all of them. These people's faces were clearer to him than his sons. He goes close to the place where he will be buried. He remembers his past "And his mind went back many years and he saw all clearly." (Buck 257).

The message to be inferred from *The Good Earth*, since it is never explicitly stated, is that diligent toil achieves some satisfaction but that luxury may corrupt and ruin the spiritual meaning of life. *The Good Earth* also shows the belief in hard work thrift, ceaseless enterprise and the value of living close to the land. Wang Lung, the protagonist of the novel, shows this belief and he fulfils his desires through this belief. *The Good Earth* was special to the outside world of that time not only because it revealed the hitherto curtailed life of China but also because it gave a deep insight into the mode of perception, memories and desires of the people of a culture, about whom little was known to the non-Chinese people. Buck had lived seventeen years in close association with Chinese peasants whom she profoundly loved and admired, and whose humour, wisdom, and philosophical acceptance of life she made essentially her own went into *The Good Earth*.

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