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Female Images from the Perspective of Ecological Feminism: Taking O-lan in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* as an Example

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Abstract: Eco-feminism, as the product of the combination of ecology and feminism, inherits and develops ecological thought and feminist thought in theory. Based on the relevant theories of eco-feminism, this paper analyzes the female images of O-lan in Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. From the perspective of the ecological environment, it mainly exposes the dual oppression of nature and women under the shackles of feudal patriarchy and feudal ideology. It aims to build the proper role and status of women in nature and society, to give the new women enlightenment to strive for a better world in which men and women coexist in harmony under the new social environment by improving the ecological environment.

Keywords: O-lan; ecological feminism; female image; enlightenment

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1 Introduction

The foreign country with researchers who conduct most of the academic researches on Pearl Buck is the United States. Experts and scholars in the United States focus on the arrangement of Pearl Buck's life and biography. Among them, there are three most important biographies about Pearl Buck. The first one is named *The Exile's Daughter: A Biography of Pearl S. Buck*, which is written by Cornelia Spencer in 1944. The second one is *Pearl S. Buck: A Biography* written by Paul A. Doyle in 1968. The third one is *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* by Peter Conn in 1997. These three writers' biographical account of Pearl Buck's life has contributed to a certain degree of understanding of this neglected female writer.

Domestic researches on Pearl Buck are mostly the analysis of texts, focusing on the ideological content of Pearl Buck's works. With the diversified development of literary criticism perspectives, Chinese scholars began to interpret Pearl Buck's literary works from a new cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective. Although there are domestic scholars who have analyzed Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* from the perspective of eco-feminism, most of them write in Chinese, and they are relatively lacking in the in-depth analysis of the character of the heroine, O-lan (Yang 2012: 46). Pearl Buck, as an important writer of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, studied her work *The Good Earth* with the relevant theories of eco-feminism and introduced the current Chinese researches on Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* in English, which is conducive to promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

Therefore, based on the relevant theories of eco-feminism, the second part of this paper will mainly analyze the female image of O-lan from different aspects (Yang 2012: 47). In addition, the third part will explain the formation of O-lan's characteristics from the perspective of the ecological environment. It mainly exposes the dual oppression of nature and women under the shackles of feudal patriarchy and feudal ideology. Compared with the former researches, this paper aims to build the proper role and status of women in nature and society to inspire new women to strive for a better world in which men and women coexist in harmony under the new social environment by improving the ecological environment.

2 O-lan's Connection with Eco-feminism

As the combination of ecology and feminism, eco-feminism inherits and promotes ecological thought and feminist thought in theory. In practice, eco-feminism researchers, from the perspective of the ecological environment, have completely and thoroughly revealed the oppression of women and the destruction of nature under the capitalist system (Wang 2019). Some eco-feminists suggest that examining the environment from a female perspective is conducive to promoting the emancipation of women and solving ecological crises. Thus, using the theoretical viewpoints related to eco-feminism, this part will analyze the relationship between O-lan and eco-feminism.

2.1 *Strong will for facing her early hardships*

At the beginning of the 20th century, China's rural areas were exceedingly backward, because they were still deeply influenced by the old feudal social thought (Ma 2003: 253). Moreover, in that turbulent social environment, many low-income families were often forced to sell their children for some money to support their families. O-lan, as a child who lived in the early 20th century, suffered from hunger and cold like many contemporary Chinese girls. She chose to live with a strong will.

2.1.1 *Enduring her miserable childhood strongly*

O-lan's childhood was unfortunate. When O-lan was a child, her father sold her to abig family as a maid. This big family, surnamed Hwang, was a big landlord family in ancient China. Influenced by Confucian traditional thoughts, China had a strict concept of the hierarchical difference in ancient society. As the person with the lowest status in the hierarchy, O-lan was bound to be strongly oppressed by the upper class. Since O-lan was sold to the Hwang as a servant girl, she had been humiliated and abused by the Hwang every day.

Moreover, she got up early and worked hard every day to accomplish the tasks that a servant should complete. Otherwise, she would be severely punished. O-lan was often humiliated and oppressed by other maids because of her ugly appearance. In the long run, O-lan became silent.

2.1.2 *Leading a tough maid life with a strong will*

To survive safely in the great House of Hwang, O-lan had to keep obedient, submissive, and silent. It was also in such a poor living condition that O-lan developed a strong will. She had not become cynical and pessimistic because of these poor conditions, and she had not lost a woman's daily spiritual appearance. Her appearance was still clean and tidy.

In the novel, when Wang Lung proposed to the great House of Hwang, the author made a characterization of O-lan's presentation. "It was a good enough voice, not loud, not soft, plain, and not ill-tempered. The woman's hair was neat and smooth and her coat clean" (Buck 2005: 18). It's not hard to see through the details of these character descriptions that only a woman with a strong will can maintain such a clean and neat mental outlook. The material determines consciousness, and consciousness reacts to matter so deeply. These details fully reflect O-lan's tenacious will. In addition, her strong will has become the spiritual pillar of her difficult life in the future.

2.1.3 *Strong will to withstand the famine*

O-lan helped the whole family through the famine with her strong will. She had never flinched from the harsh famine. When she found out that they had no food in the house. O-lan said to her husband, "I and the children can beg and the old man also. His grey hairs will move some who will not give to me" (Buck 2005: 106). We can learn from that it was O-lan's strong will that enabled their whole family to survive during the famine.

Compared with O-lan's strong will, her husband was exceedingly incompetent. "'You must have begged off a foreigner this day,' he said to O-lan. But she, according to her habit, said nothing" (Buck 2005: 118). Thus, Wang Lung was a very cowardly person. In a word, it would be difficult for them to survive during the famine without O-lan's strong will.

2.2 *Diligent image in her daily life*

As Li Yinhe said in the book *Feminism*, from the perspective of social-ecological feminism, women were close to nature through the social roles they had fulfilled for a long time. In addition, the various characteristics and ethics of women were constructed by society, such as pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and housework. O-lan was also in close contact with nature through the so-called social role.

2.2.1 *Being a common woman*

As an ordinary servant of the great House of Hwang, O-lan was a normal girl, not so pretty. On the contrary, her appearance was not only simply mediocre but also badly ugly. In the first chapter of *The Good Earth*, it was mentioned that Wang Lung was intensely disappointed the first time he saw O-lan. The reason why he felt depressed was that O-lan was not as beautiful as he imagined.

Also, he felt so dissatisfied, because O-lan's feet were not very bound. When the Old Mistress of the great House of Hwang saw his disappointment, she told him that O-lan was a virgin although she was not beautiful. She was not only extraordinarily diligent and capable, especially in housework and farm work, but also had a

good temper. One of the most vital points was that O-lan could “bear sons and yet more sons” (Buck 2005: 19). Only when he heard these words did he feel happy.

2.2.2 Diligent in her married life

Indeed, when O-lan married Wang Lung, she was exceedingly diligent and competent. All day she either did housework at home or went to the fields with her husband. Even so, Wang Lung and his father did not regard O-lan as one of the family members. However, O-lan was a strong woman, and this kind of strong will had been trained as early as when she was a servant of the great House of Hwang. Although in such a situation without family status, she showed her great diligence and competence. Although Wang Lung was the backbone of his family, he did many things imperfectly. But after getting married, O-lan not only kept her house in order but also helped Wang Lung do farm work every day. O-lan was more diligent and careful than Wang Lung. Even if she was pregnant, she still worked in the fields with her husband.

On the day she gave birth to her son, she insisted on cooking dinner for her family. When she gave birth, she preferred to suffer the pain of having a child herself rather than seek help from her husband and neighbors. After having a son, she still worked hard in the fields with her husband to support the whole family, and she could not ignore slow. This was not what any woman could stand. All in all, these matters are enough to reflect O-lan’s tenacity and diligence.

2.2.3 Supporting the family diligently during the famine

When the famine came, Wang Lung behaved helplessly, but O-lan acted calmly and suggested killing the cattle in their family. As a woman, instead of being helpless, she was the first person who “took a great iron knife she had in the kitchen and cut a great gash in the beast’s neck” (Buck 2005: 76). It was because of her diligence and competence that the whole family could survive during the famine.

O-lan’s diligence and expertise were reflected in another aspect. When they lived in Nanjing, Wang Lung did not know how to build a shack. At the critical moment, O-lan relied on her childhood memory to construct the whole shed successfully and to give the entire family a place to live. O-lan’s diligence and bravery at critical moments and her adaptability made her an essential pillar of the whole family. Her role in the entire family was beyond Wang Lung’s.

2.3 Clever quality for suffering changes in her family

O-lan’s connection with nature was mainly reflected in her connection with the land (Yang 2012: 46). With her ingenuity, she helped her husband buy land. She was also like the earth, playing the role of a mother, and helping her husband to support the whole family during the famine. In addition, she also assisted her husband to protect the land so as not to be looted by others.

2.3.1 Helping her husband get rich

O-lan was smarter than her husband because she knew how to cope with difficulties in their life. O-lan was not only good at housework, but also better at farm work than Wang Lung. To support the family’s life, she became more and more calm and brave. She made many wise decisions with her bright mind and extraordinary wisdom. She assisted her husband, and enabled the whole family to ride through many hardships in life smoothly. She also let the entire family live a better life gradually.

When O-lan went to the great House of Hwang with her first child and her husband Wang Lung, the smart

and wittygirl inferred from the details that the great House of Hwang was not as luxurious as in the past, and one day they would sell their land to support their family. When they returned home, O-lan told her husband and gave him a detailed analysis of the great House of Hwang. At the same time, she advised her husband to seize the opportunity. She kept urging Wang Lung “to buy the good land of the great House of Hwang at a low price” (Buck 2005: 53). In this fashion, Wang Lung changed from a poor peasant who had nothing at the beginning to a rich man who owned a lot of land. Consequently, they broke through the poverty barrier, and it was O-lan who did it.

2.3.2 Showing her clever quality in the famine

As the famine worsened, the entire family was forced to go to southern China to seek a livelihood. In a broke situation, O-lan showed a lower profile firstly and took her children to beg on the streets, which enabled the family to survive during the famine. It is not difficult to see that O-lan is a woman with a long-term vision. Moreover, compared with Wang Lung, O-lan’s ability to assess the difficult situation in life was highly laudable. Besides, it was commendable that O-lan put her pride in her pocket rather than gave in to difficulties.

Subsequently, “Wang Lung made a fortune accidentally in the process of escaping famine” (Buck 2005: 146). O-lan had made a sage decision that she suggested that her husband should make good use of the sum of money and go back to their hometown to buy a lot of quality land. Wang Lung naturally took his wife’s advice. In this way, all of them returned to their original hometown and acquired a lot of land, which made the whole family’s life better all of a sudden.

2.3.3 Protecting the land cleverly

However, after Wang Lung’s insatiable uncle learned that Wang Lung owned a lot of the fine land, he offered to buy a part of Wang Lung’s land. Hearing these words, Wang Lung was furious and lost his calm composure. In this case, O-lan’s attitude even her performance contrasted sharply with Wang Lung’s. She firmly told Wang Lung’s uncle, “The land we will not sell, surely” (Buck 2005: 92).

Although shewas only an unknown woman, she had more courage and intelligence than Wang Lung. This laid a solid foundation for Wang Lung to become rich in the future. To conclude, it was O-lan’s clever quality that enabled her to protect their land. We can learn that O-lan was cleverer than her husband.

3 Analysis of the Causes of O-lan’s Characteristics

Wang Huan pointed out in the book *Research on Eco-feminism*, “Eco-feminism discovered that the problem was in the patriarchy in the early stage of its development, and it was also truly realized that women in society were constructed as the existence of gender” (Wang 2013: 43). O-lan was a typical woman under the oppression of patriarchy. At the same time, the traditional feudal thought of “men are superior to women” also shaped O-lan’s traditional rural female image. In addition, influenced by western progressive feminism, O-lan had advanced eco-feminist thoughts that resisted the patriarchy (Yang 2012: 46).

3.1 High oppression of patriarchy in old China

The high oppression of patriarchy on O-lanwas profound, which was mainly reflected in two aspects: the restriction of patriarchy on O-lan’s thought; patriarchy’s shape of O-lan’s strong will. The relationship between

man and nature also reflected the relationship between man and man to some extent. Since the emergence of ecofeminist theory in the 1970s, it has followed the theoretical premise of combining traditional feminist theory and ecological theory. It emphasized the use of a diverse perspective to criticize the worldview under patriarchy (Zhang 2021: 97).

3.1.1 The restriction of patriarchy on O-lan's thought

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, "patriarchy" means "a social system in which men have all the power" or "a social system in which the oldest man rules his family and passes power and possessions on to his sons" ("Patriarchy" def. 1843). Thus, in Chinese feudal society, men had the supreme social and family status. On the contrary, women could only obey men unconditionally. Under the influence of Chinese feudal thought, women had strong ideological consciousness of "three obedience and four virtues" and "men are superior to women" (Zhang 2013: 51). Thus, women couldn't choose by themselves and put forward their own opinions. They must be obedient and tolerant, and always obey men's arrangements. At the crucial moment, the interests of women should be subordinated to those of men. Women had no complaints about that, and they even took it for granted that they accept their low status and destiny.

Because women in feudal society had no independent personality and economic domination, they could only rely on the men around them to survive. Although the men around them do not treat themselves well, they should bear the humiliation and obey fate unconditionally (Dlnya 2014: 27). Under the forceful repression of patriarchy, a woman's duty was to take sons to carry on the family line. Besides, the social environment and the fetters of feudal doctrine also made the life outcome of women in feudal society miserable. Even if they were willing to resist the restraint and suppression of patriarchy, their strength didn't match their ambitions. Ultimately, they could only control themselves and suppress their anger. Gradually, they became victims and maintainers of feudal patriarchy (Dlnya 2014: 28).

In *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck expressed her sympathy for O-lan, and at the same time, she showed that O-lan was an ignorant rural woman. When O-lan was sold to the great House of Hwang as a servant by her parents in her childhood, she did not resist but obeyed her father's hard decision. After entering the great House of Hwang, she suffered the humiliation and abuse of the host. From this, we could see that O-lan was a woman deeply influenced by patriarchy and unable to resist. However, her bitter experience had turned her into a stronger person. She was bearing up well against all her misfortunes.

3.1.2 Patriarchy having shaped O-lan's strong will

In ancient Chinese feudal society, women took foot-binding as their beauty. However, O-lan was not only ugly but also did not bind her feet (Li 2009: 118). In this regard, Wang Lung was very disgusted from the beginning. In the first chapter of the novel, when Wang Lung went to the great House of Hwang to propose, he saw O-lan without foot-binding and expressed his disappointment. O-lan realized that Wang Lung always took this to his heart. Therefore, she painfully bound her daughter's feet later, although she knew that it was a badly damaging thing to her physical and mental health. Thus, O-lan sacrificed her daughter's physical and psychological health to obtain her husband's satisfaction. At the same time, the forced foot-binding of daughters also showed that in feudal society, daughters must unconditionally obey their fathers.

During the famine, O-lan offered to sell her daughter in exchange for some money to help Wang Lung return to their hometown to buy land. This incident also showed that in Chinese feudal society, women had a

pessimistic sense that the “husband’s interests are above everything else.” As a result, they had a negative idea of “putting men above women.” They think sons were the most valuable, while daughters were of no worth. Although this thought did not benefit O-lan much, in the novel, she eventually did not receive respect and pity from her husband and sons, so she ultimately died with hatred on the day of her eldest son’s marriage.

O-lan’s life was quite tragic because she was deeply influenced by the negative influence of patriarchy and was forced to become a maintainer of patriarchy. Her experience showed that she was also a victim of patriarchy. Under the oppression of patriarchy, they had no fame or wealth, and could only accept men’s arrangements in silence. However, it was the great repression of patriarchy in the feudal society that enabled O-lan to develop a strong will, which supported her to survive in this cruel old society for a lifetime.

3.2 *The restriction of Chinese traditional ideas*

In ancient China, the appearance of a woman was not important. A woman’s duty was to work and bear sons to carry on the family line (Chang & Chang 2009: 91). This was under the impact of the fertility concept on women, including O-lan. Besides, the view of marriage gave O-lan a durable endurance, which enabled her to endure her husband’s infidelity. These two aspects will be analyzed below.

3.2.1 *The impact of the fertility concept on making O-lan diligent*

From the view of historical development, China’s concept of marriage can be mainly divided into two types: “reproductive type” and “love type” (Zhang 2013: 50). In feudal society, most of the Chinese people’s views on marriage belonged to the reproductive type. It was believed that the primary purpose of marriage was to carry on the family line. And love was secondary. In the Chinese feudal doctrine, it pointed out that “having no male heir is the gravest of the three cardinal offenses against filial piety.” Accordingly, in the old society, the discrimination that men were superior to women was still dominating many people’s minds. The more cruel reality was that women became tools to bear sons. Their social and family status was the lowest in the feudal hierarchy.

According to *The Characteristics and Impact of Chinese Traditional Marriage View*, “the essence of marriage in feudal society lies in the continuation of the clan” (Zhang 2013: 50). Marriage was utilitarian, and this kind of utilitarianism was mainly to safeguard the interests of people’s families. The purpose of having a son was to increase the family’s labor force. Besides, sacrificing ancestors and continuing descendants had become the primary task of both husband and wife. Accordingly, compared with the concept of reproductive marriage, the idea of love marriage seemed insignificant. Under the yoke of this decadent marriage, women could only obey men and fate forever.

In chapter four of *The Good Earth*, it was mentioned that O-lan gave birth to Wang Lung’s first son. Wang Lung was so excited that he went to the market to buy some sacrificial items. He turned into the candlemaker’s shop abruptly and bought four sticks of incense. After that, he went into the small temple of the gods of the earth with his wife. We can learn from it that people in a feudal society were very superstitious, and Wang Lung is included. In the temple, “he watched the four sticks well lit and then went homeward. These two small, protective figures, sitting staidly under their small roof – what a power they had” (Buck 2005: 41). To put it in another way, Wang Lung owed the thing to give birth to a son to the gods of the earth but not his wife. Thus, the status of O-lan was negligible. But one thing worth affirming is that the hardship of childbearing made O-lan

more diligent. It was her diligence that enabled her to support such a big family.

3.2.2 *The view of marriage giving O-lan a durable endurance*

In the novel, O-lan slaughtered the cattle to feed the family during the famine. Wang Lung felt quite sad about this. He complained to O-lan, “We will eat a man next” (Buck 2005: 75). He reacted so because he thought the cattle was his excellent companion, and it had been working intensely hard. Hence, Wang Lung was reluctant to slaughter it. Compared with the cattle, O-lan’s experience of her life looked sorrowful.

Nevertheless, she had never been loved by her husband. Thus, in Wang Lung’s mind, his wife’s status was far inferior to that of the cattle. Even her daughter could not escape her tragic fate. Affected by the idea of “men are more important than women,” during the famine when her husband put forward the idea of selling their family belongings, O-lan gave a straight answer, “There is nothing to sell except the girl” (Buck 2005: 124). Her remark showed that in feudal marriage, the consciousness of male superiority and female inferiority was harmful to women’s thoughts.

Despite Wang Lung’s betrayal, O-lan still adhered to the principle of women and ran the whole family for herself. In O-lan’s ideology, she thought it was normal for a man to have three wives and four concubines. Even though Wang Lung’s concubines did not treat O-lan and her children kindly, she still stuck to her duty. She also regarded submitting to her husband as her responsibility. For the sake of her children and family, she chose to endure her husband’s infidelity to herself. In conclusion, the traditional concept of marriage was badly harmful to O-lan. On the other hand, it also gave O-lan a durable endurance.

3.3 *The impact of western progressive feminism*

This part mainly shows the impact of western progressive feminism on O-lan. The impact is manifested in two aspects: the author endowed O-lan with progressive feminism; the progressive feminism highlighted O-lan’s clever quality. These two aspects will be demonstrated below.

3.3.1 *The author endowed O-lan with a progressive feminism*

Since Pearl Buck is an American woman writer who has lived in China for more than 40 years, she has a profound understanding of Chinese society in the early 20th century (Yin 2018: 40). In most of her literary works, readers can feel strong traditional Chinese culture and customs. Moreover, her literary works are more about the status of women in the old society of China (Snow 1977: 28). *The Good Earth* is one of these literary works. In *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck expressed her affirmation and sympathy for women in the old society of China by describing O-lan, a mournful female image. In a fashion, Buck often projected onto Asian women her desires for American women (Shaffer 2016: 26). In brief, Pearl Buck integrated her Western progressive feminist ideas into her literary works.

In *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck endowed O-lan with an ideology of Western progressive feminism, which enabled O-lan to survive with great mental pressure in the poor living environment of the feudal society (Guo 2011: 91). Pearl Buck described O-lan as a passive enduring and obedient Chinese rural woman. At the same time, she also injected a resistance force into O-lan’s life, so that O-lan could continuously strive for more survival rights and space for herself. In other words, Pearl Buck used O-lan’s image to highlight her feminist ideas. Pearl Buck not only praised women’s tenacious vitality and maternal greatness but also severely attacked the hegemony and patriarchy.

3.3.2 *The progressive feminism highlighting O-lan's clever quality*

Facing the oppression and humiliation of the host and other servants in the great House of Hwang, O-lan lost her right to express any personal opinions. However, such humiliation and oppression exercised her strong will and admirable wisdom. Besides, after she got married, she used her intelligence to help her husband to get rich. It can be said that the reason why Wang Lung could become a wealthy landlord was that his wife helped him to achieve it. Also, O-lan took the trouble to bear children for Wang Lung and support the whole family with her husband. These things reflected the brilliance of motherhood in feminism. According to Helens Noble's idea, Pearl Buck is a woman writer who writes for women and is full of motherhood when she writes about women's problems.

Furthermore, O-lan was more sophisticated and braver than Wang Lung. In the process of escaping from famine, when someone broke into their house to rob them wantonly, O-lan summoned up courage and behaved calmly. She persuaded the thieves with quite powerful words, and the whole family saved their lives from danger. Facing Wang Lung's disloyalty and the humiliation of his concubines, O-lan showed her perseverance. A series of O-lan's actions showed that although she was suppressed by Chinese feudal society, she had the precious thought of Western feminism. This idea was not only progressive but also commendable and encouraging.

4 Conclusion

Pearl Buck pays close attention to women's social status all her life. As a feminist, she is intensely concerned about women's life experience and fate. In her decades of living in China, Buck deeply realized the great injustice brought to women by Chinese feudal society. She expressed her concern and sympathy for traditional women with her literary works and showed her feminist thoughts.

In her literary work *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck proved her attitude and position through the image of O-lan. She supported the women's liberation movement by participating in various social activities. Moreover, she continually advocated that women strive for higher social status and more social rights for themselves. O-lan was a traditional Chinese rural woman with a feminist ideology. She was diligent, smart, brave, and had excellent endurance. However, O-lan received the brutality of feudal society. Hence, it was hard for her to break the traditional Chinese ties.

This article mainly analyzes O-lan's connection with ecological feminism and then explores the three main reasons for the character image of O-lan. What's more, the primary purpose of this paper is to encourage modern women to learn about the shimmer of O-lan's soul. At the same time, we should support our modern women to try our best to win more choices and rights for ourselves and truly achieve equality between men and women in social life. Furthermore, it is critical to improving women's social status, so that they can play an important social role in the post-epidemic era. Moreover, it is also conducive to the governance of the ecological environment.

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