

10.70711/frim.v3i2.6043

Paradox of Obedience and Rebellion: Duality of Personality Traits of O-lan in *The Good Earth*

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Abstract: Pearl S. Buck's novel *The Good Earth* is considered an epic, telling the ups and downs of Wang Lung, but the central role O-lan is the driving force for his rise to prosperity and higher social status. O-lan in *The Good Earth* obeyed Chinese traditional morals, following every limitation and positions set by the Chinese patriarchal society; and therefore in her, we can see Chinese woman's conventional characteristics -- being silent and obedient. However, behind O-lan's silence and obedience, there actually hides another independent and smart woman, who pulls her family out of poverty through her experience from life struggling. The true O-lan is actually a woman who tries to break up the convention of "man works outside while woman tends the family at home". She makes every effort to prove to the family and the society her value as a woman.

Keywords: O-lan; *The Good Earth*; Radical feminism; Paradox; Obedience; Rebellion

In a feudal society sustaining more than 2000 years in China, all principles are based on the patriarchal society in which female position is extremely low, and women become the "page of the blank" in Chinese history, which means that female identity has no historical circumstance in patriarchal society. O-lan in *The Good Earth* obeyed Chinese traditional morals, following every limitation and positions set by the patriarchal society, therefore in her, we can see she has Chinese women's conventional characteristics—being silent and obedient.

1. O-lan's Silence in the Patriarchal Society

Joseph Conrad said in *Heart of Darkness*, "We confirm our existence by voice". The right to speak is closely related to one's social existence and social status.

O-lan is Wang Lung's wife, the main character of this novel. She is a typical woman in old China, who follows Three Obedience and Four Virtues, serves her husband, and bears children. O-lan's childhood hardship life is like distressing rains and depressing winds. She was sold to the Hwang household as a servant girl or slave at the age of ten during famine. Keeping silent and wildly hardworking, O-lan gets used to living the kind of life all day. Silence means that O-lan like other women is submitted to others and at the mercy of others. She has suffered all kinds of distress in the great house of landlord Hwang since she was sold by her parents at age of ten. The life of being a servant is so endless to her; naturally, one of her most crying wish is to have a home that definitely belongs to her. Therefore, the marriage with Wang Lung, to a great extent, has helped O-lan free from the miserable life of a servant and given her quite a little freedom and status in the family. However, after marrying Wang Lung, O-lan still keeps silent. The right to speak is closely related with social status and social existence, so silent O-lan is always submitted to others as a subordinate role. People almost took the inferior and humble position of woman for granted at that time. So women don't have right to speak, so is O-lan.

When Wang Lung came for O-lan at Hwang's home, she just answered "ready", then quietly sat there listening to the talk between her master and Wang Lung. At the ceremony, O-lan kept silent, following everything Wang Lung arranged; married to a completely strange man, she never expressed her thoughts, nor did she feel nervous, she just naturally accepted everything, as if the day she got married was nothing special. After being married with Wang Lung, O-lan still said less and kept silent. She was hardworking all the time, unless there happened something very urgent, or you would hardly hear anything O-lan said, hardly heard her communication with her husband. O-lan was so silent that Wang Lung had got used to her silence.

When O-lan got pregnant, she also told Wang Lung this news calmly; even when she delivered, O-lan did not scream like other women, but silently bore her first son, and then another after another. For this, Pearl S. Buck deliberately depicts the astonishment of the wife of Wang Lung's first son. With such distinct comparison, Pearl S. Buck displays O-lan's silence when faced with the same situation, thus from another aspect, we can see O-lan's peculiarity.

In the society of patriarchy, women had no right of speech. They had been deprived of the right to speak; therefore, what they could do was to keep silent and did what had been arranged for them. Some feminists think women's use of silence can also be resistance to the dominant discourse. The dominant establishment of patriarchal society, not only is it a symbol of rights of economy, politics, social structure, but it is a deep and subtle symbol—the right to dominant discourse, right of owning the secret code of creation, and mastering and interpreting discourse right. (Mary Daly 20)

2. O-lan's Obedience under the oppression of patriarchy

It is generally regarded that it is natural for women to be passive, subdued, weak and gentle. Simone de Beauvoir has a famous slogan: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In the society of China, the feudalism has long affected the thoughts and life styles of Chinese people, and its feudal rites have faltered Chinese women from all aspects. Lin Yu-tang pointed out, "Something in the Chinese blood never gave women her due from primeval times, ... The progressive subjection of woman followed pace by pace the creasing development of Confucianism." (Liu Yu tang 135)

Confucianism, as the most influential school of thought in China, was held as a dominant social ideology by almost every feudal dynasty from approximately 200BC to 1911 when the Qing dynasty was toppled, and by the nationalist government that ruled the country from 1911 till 1949. Based on the Confucius's prejudice about women, his followers developed a series of ceremonial "rites" for women in accordance with male's point of view. Meanwhile, "three obedience and four virtues" of women, which worked as the moral principles and laws, had put the concept superiority of males and inferiority of females up to a higher level, lawfully oppressing the females in both physical and spiritual aspects. Accordingly, women were forced to accept the submission and self-effacement before the authority of father and husband. In such context at that time, O-lan was too weak to directly fight against the powerful male-oriented society, which led to one of her typical personality--obedient.

3. O-lan's Struggle and Fight in Silence

The ideal family model in Chinese feudalism is "Men do farm work while women engage in spinning and weaving", which in fact distributes their each role in the family, in which men is responsible for the bread-and-butter issue while women responsible for taking care of the family. Therefore, the main task for women is to weave, wash, cook and produce. As for taking care of family, O-lan does a very good job. She is highly individualized and plays a more central role in the family than many people give her credit for. Actually she breaks the routine of men earning money outside. She carries the hoe on her shoulder to do farm work like her husband, which is one of actually rebellion against the unequal treatment between men and women. She participates in the public work to struggle for herself more space and freedom. From this point, we can say what O-lan fights for is what the radical feminists fight for.

As O-lan actively takes part in the outside work, she, to some extent, has attained some freedom and rights. What's more, she is brave, smart and diligent, which appears a distinct characteristic compared with her husband's weakness. In fact, the comparison between Wang Lung's character and O-lan's personality has displayed the value of radical feminism in this novel.

When the family flees to Nanking where most of the famine paupers beg for living, Wang Lung would not condescend to beg, and then the heavy burden of making the family alive again has been mainly put on O-lan's shoulder. Although Wang Lung finds a job of dragging a yellow rickshaw, the poor income cannot support the living of his family. Therefore the chief income is again from what is begged by O-lan with her children. When the whole family was faced with famine, it was O-lan who was brave enough to kill that bull, while Wang Lung had nothing to do but stood there for he treated the bull as his friends. Later, when there was someone with intent to buy their land, Wang Lung refused without any hesitation, while O-lan accepted it calmly, and her gentle and low voice appeared more powerful than the anger of Wang Lung. When they were escaping the famine in the south, it was also O-lan who had taught the whole family how to gain lotus seed, and taught the whole family how to beg for money, how to pluck their courage to eat the meat they stole, all of which help the whole family escape from the famine. During the famine, when everyone fled to the city, it was O-lan again who found the place where hid the gold with her experience in her previous master's home, while Wang Lung appeared very confused and had no idea what to do. O-lan's invisible power and selflessness perform a distinct comparison with Wang Lung's weakness to some extent.

O-lan is a woman of definitely independent self-consciousness from the restraint of the male authority. Regardless of the traditional division of labor between men and women, O-lan breaks the convention and goes out of the home to open up a way leading to a broader space. Each time O-lan finishes the housework, she will go to the fields with a hoe carrying on her shoulder and get down to hoeing together with her husband, never stopping even before the moment she gives birth. Later when they have saved some money and intend to buy some lands, O-lan does not just stand by but participates in the decision. It is O-lan that finds out the hint of decline in the great house of Hwang and knows Hwang's family will sell out some of their land. When the family discussed their plan of buying land, O-lan bravely expressed her own idea, "It

is a good thing to buy land. It is better certainly than putting money into a mud wall. But why not a piece of your uncle's land?...”(52) She has made herself a member of the family, not a slave wife of blind subjection to the husband.

Under the influence of feudalism of old China, it is not only many women's feet are bound but also their minds are bound, they have become the slavery of mind. But O-lan's mind is not bound. She always pretended to be weak and innocent, but when faced with difficult situation, she always appeared very persistent and smart. She is actually the real leader in the family. Whenever something happens in the family, O-lan would, taking her silence off her surface, undertake the difficulties and try her best to solve these problems with her calmness and wisdom.

Although the character O-lan in *The Good Earth* lives in a seriously oppressed patriarchal society, burying her whole life into the social roles of servant, wife, and mother, she is brave, strong, persistent, and diligent. She seems as if she never forgets what she is. Mary Daly defines radical feminism in terms of the selfhood of women. Reclaiming and remarking language she exhorts women to take their true selves back, and become self-acting, self-respecting. O-lan made it. She took her true self back, and became self-acting and self-respecting. She got her value in this patriarchal society.

Silence and obedience, like O-lan's skin, turns out to be forgotten when she dies, while the result of rebellion and bravery is to stay. It is the duality of O-lan's obedience and rebellion becomes the true O-lan.

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