



The Predicament Of Disabled Women In The 20th Century Chinese Society In Pearl S. Buck's *The Mother*

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Abstract

Women in the 20th century Chinese society were victims of extreme patriarchy and gender inequality. They were always assigned familial roles and were completely prohibited from participating in public affairs. They were literally restrained in their houses and were forced to fulfil domestic duties. Being confined in the inner courts of their houses, women had limited knowledge about the outside world and external affairs, which in turn resulted in them being highly ignorant. Women's ignorance was cleverly exploited by men to oppress them. They gradually became silent bearers of countless injustices targeted against them. In a society where women were considered as ill omen, disabled women faced double oppression. They were mercilessly cornered by everyone including their family members. They were isolated in the society for being a woman with disabilities. In *The Mother* Pearl S. Buck portrays the plight of disabled women in the twentieth century Chinese society through the character of a blind girl.

Keywords: Disability, double oppression, blindness, gender inequality, ostracism.

The Predicament of Disabled Women in the 20th Century Chinese Society in Pearl S. Buck's *The Mother*

The Mother is one of the masterpieces of the well renowned American woman writer Pearl S. Buck. The novel, published in 1934, is a story of survival of a poor peasant woman in pre-revolutionary China. *The Mother* is Pearl S. Buck's most ambitious attempt of the portrayal of marital abandonment and the feelings of sexual frustration associated with it. As the anonymous mother's discontented husband deserts her, the mother single-handedly looks after the entire family that consists of her three children and her old mother-in-law. The mother's daughter gradually becomes blind due to a rare eye disease. The blind daughter's story is the thematic concern of the present article.

Apart from the mother, the blind daughter is another character who encounters severe marginalisation in the novel. The blind maid remains a silent presence throughout the novel, as she is highly ignored by everyone in the society, including her own family. As stated in "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History", it is clear that disability acts as an agent that promotes inequality:

Disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups. That is, not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them. (Baynton 18)

The blind girl's parents never take initiative to get a proper diagnosis of her illness. Had she been given a little attention at the initial stages of her illness, she would not have gone blind. No one takes her condition seriously, even if she screams every day with pain. The father's indifference towards his daughter's painful illness proves the subordinate position of women in the family and the society. When the mother asks him to buy some medicine for the child's illness, he scornfully says: "And why should we use our scanty money for sore eyes when she can never die of it?" (Buck 26). The blind maid, on the other hand, is highly conscious of her blindness. She is well aware of her position in the family. So, she silently bears with her pain and illness without complaining, as she never expects any sympathy from others. The girl's silent acceptance of her physical deformity instantly evokes pity in the readers. Her helplessness is visible, when she tells her mother that her eyesight has worsened a lot than before:

"Oh, mother, I am blind—well I know I am blind! I cannot see your face at all now, and if I went out from our own dooryard across the threshing-floor, I could not see the way to go. Do you not see I never go away from the house now, not even to the field?" and she fell to weeping, wincing and biting her lips, for it was still painful to her to weep, and she would not unless she could not help herself. (189)

Physical disabilities prevent women from fulfilling their roles and duties assigned to them by the society. The blind girl is fully aware that her blindness has put her in a tough position. Being useless would further question her significance in the family. So, she never allows her deformity to defeat her in any ways. Her fear of ostracism forces her to work extra hard. She helps her family by doing everything she can to the best of her ability. She tries to overcome her fear of insignificance through her hard work.

The condition of the blind girl worsens, when her elder brother, who is now the head of the family, marries. The new wife has absolutely no compassion for her in-laws. She despises the blind girl even more. She fears that the girl would be a burden for her as long as she lives with them. She urges her husband to find someone for the blind girl as soon as possible. The blind girl's suppressed anxiety returns immediately, due to her sister-in-law, who treats her terribly. As she senses her sister-in-law's hatred, she helplessly asks her mother to find someone immediately for her to marry. She says:

But you know there are many things I can do, mother, and there maybe some very poor man, a widower, perhaps, or some such poor man who would be glad of the little I could do if he need pay nothing for me, and then would I be in my own house and there would be someone if you were gone whom I could care for. Mother, I do not think my sister wants me. (Buck 213).

The blind maid's sincerity and hard work is never acknowledged by her family members. The lack of recognition disturbs the maid immensely. Thus, getting married is her only option to establish an identity of her own.

The blind daughter suffers severe gender inequality in her family. The elder son is given the inheritance of the family. The mother has deep affection for her younger son to whom she often buys gifts to make him happy. But the blind maid is taken for granted by everyone including her mother. The Confucian attitude towards women in the traditional Chinese society is well explained by Lin Yutang, in *My Country and My People*:

The different ideal of womanhood in China involved a different training for our daughters. The training for girls differs, or used to differ, radically from that for boys. It was much more severe for girls than for boys, and, coupled with the general earlier maturity of women, girls learned this family discipline earlier and were consequently soberer and better behaved than boys of the same age. (146)

Even the betrothal of the blind girl is dealt carelessly by her mother. After her marriage, the maid is almost forgotten by everyone and no one really cares about her existence and well being. The mother decides to visit her daughter only a year after the marriage. After travelling for one whole day, the mother is soon struck with remorse and concern for her blind daughter, as she discovers that the house of the in-laws is situated in a remote and dark village with rocky walls and stony mountains. The mother pities her daughter when she imagines the problematic life the poor girl might have experienced in this strange village. To her disappointment, the mother realises that her son-in-law is nearly witless. She is highly terrified to see her in-laws who appear to be savage, unruly, impoverished and sick.

Soon the mother collapses, when she learns the truth about her daughter. Apparently, the daughter dies a few moments before her mother's arrival. The mother, who gets reasonable suspicions about her daughter's untimely death, blames the in-laws for mistreating her. But the whole family defends themselves without any guilt or remorse. One woman, in particular, shouts at the mother for blaming them. She says: "How did she die? She died of a cold she caught, being so puny, and that is how she died!" and she spat upon the ground and said again, screeching as she said, "A useless maid she was, too, if there was one, and knowing nothing—no, she could not even learn to fetch the water from the spring and not stumble and fall or lose her way!" (Buck 249). Ironically, the blind girl dies as a 'useless woman' just as she feared, despite her hard work.

Pearl S. Buck leaves all the characters in the novel unnamed in order to universalise the story. The predicament of the blind girl in the novel represents the condition of all disabled women in the traditional Chinese society. In a society where girls are only recognised for their ability to give birth, the blind girl is considered as nothing more than a burden by her own family. The only character who sympathises with the condition of the blind girl is her mother herself. The passages that describe the girl painfully rubbing her eyes, struggling to walk with stick and bells or stumbling while trying to help her family further prove the struggles and double oppression faced by the disabled women in the 20th century Chinese society.

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