



TRAJECTORIES OF MULTICULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN PEARL BUCK'S NOVEL 'COME, MY BELOVED'

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ABSTRACT:

Pearl Buck is one of the most popular novelists of twentieth century. Her novel 'The Good Earth' fetched her Pulitzer Prize and the Howells medal in 1935. She was the first American woman to win Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Her father was in Christian Missionary who lived in China for forty two years to teach Christianity. Her visit to different countries facilitated her to infuse the essence of multiculturalism in her novels. Her novel 'Come, My Beloved' portrays colonial Indian society and duly records the religious confrontation of the east and the west. The dialectical presentation of the motif reveals the expertise of the novelist. The novel registers life journey of three generations of a rich American family, in India during colonial period. This paper attempts to exude how multicultural environment of India confuses a foreigner and also reveals how the west perceives Indian culture and society. Most part of the novel is engaged in intercultural dialogue illuminating clash of ideologies pertaining to culture and religion. The novel displays diverse points of view, plurality of descriptions of the same events. The theme of the novel is chronologically arranged highlighting cultural tensions prevail in India during colonial period. The theme is very relevant today as scholars and philosophers attempt to establish religious tolerance for better society. Pearl Buck's sincere efforts to create the democratic utopia are lucidly evident but the novel ends with the blatant truth that social inequality and racial discrimination cannot be eradicated from a society easily.

Pearl Buck is one of the most popular novelists of early twentieth century. With culture as a motif, her novels endeavour to reveal different facets of diverse cultures of the world. Her sole objective is to establish racial equality and to promote religious tolerance. The novel 'Come, My Beloved' published in 1953 portrays colonial India and the impact of British culture in Indian society. The novel records trajectories of multi-cultural consciousness and registers different perceptions of people based on their respective cultures.

The novel depicts the life journey of four generations of MacArd family in Indian soil. The first part of the novel highlights the visit of an American millionaire MacArd to India. After his wife Leila's death MacArd alights at the Bombay port along with his teen age son David. This part projects how Americans and the British perceive Indian culture. His visit to the Tower of Silence in Bombay illumines the culture and tradition of the Parsee community. This is his first experience with a foreign religion in India. He is amazed to note that certain philosophical concepts of the Parsee run parallel to



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Christianity. This episode implicitly reveals the fact that though apparently people adopt different cultures and traditions, underneath all are one under the sun.

MacArd is astounded to note the gulf between the rich and poor in the Indian society. On one side the aristocratic rich families live in pomp and grandeur and on the other side poverty stricken people who live in hand to mouth existence. His mind starts comparing the life of people in America and India. Thus he concludes,

“I saw the enormous contrast between the English and the Indian, or between ourselves and those wretched natives, for that matter. There must be some reason why the western world has risen in wealth and power. Call it in favour of God, if you like to use religious term, which may be as true as any other. But the fact is that the people over here are oppressed by the weight of an evil and superstitious religion, whereas our religion has made us free” (49)

His short sojourn in Pune, India, propels him to propagate Christianity in India as he considers Christianity is the only *practical religion*. He decides to start ‘Leila MacArd School of Theology’ in memory of his late wife Leila. He returns to his homeland with this hidden agenda. Back in America he shares his wish with Dr. Barton, a highly reputed and knowledgeable clergy, but David’s keen interest in the mission dissuades MacArd to pursue the matter further.

David’s acquaintance with an Indian aristocrat Darya, a native of Pune

motivates him to learn more about India and Indian culture. Thus against his father’s wish he leaves for India to start a school of theology for girls, in Pune. He renews his friendship with Darya. He firmly believes “to know a man’s religion is the best way to know him”(35). David’s experience with the culture and practice of Hindus in India permeates the second part of the novel.

Dialectical Presentation of the east and the west:

Dialectics refers to an argument where a final position is achieved through dialogue pertaining to the main argument. In other words, dialectic is an art of debate by means of questions and the art of classifying concepts dividing things into general and species. The second part of the novel is replete with religious debates illuminating the conflict between the dominant and oppressive culture. For instance, the debate between Darya and David exudes confrontation of two different cultures. Darya becomes the spokesperson of his religion. He is aggressive and anxious to protect the dogmas and practice of his religion. His anxiety reveals the cultural tensions prevail in colonial India. David on the other hand is milder than his father in defending his religion, yet, very firmly believes in superiority of his religion. Darya visits America along with his friend David and the argument between MacArd and Darya further asserts the cultural tensions that exist between the east and the west. MacArd argues, “Your temples are full of superstitious litter.....I believe that



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your poverty proves the validity of our religion. God has been with us”.(83)

Darya responds quietly, *can it be because your people are free and mine are not?* (84) Darya further questions his friend David,

“Would your people accept our men? If so, I offer myself, I will come here and preach our gospel, the gospel of faith of our people. Will your father accept me, do you think?”(89)

The blatant presentations of this cultural confrontation in this novel earned the wrath of her father and her friends who believed that she had betrayed her religion. But the negative response did not deflate her enthusiasm from reading and interpreting various culture and religion. Darya’s friendship kindles the interest of David to know more about Indian culture and thus appoints a Marathi teacher to gain knowledge of native literature. He peruses the poems of Sant Tukaram with great interest and his intellectual brain compares Sant Tukaram with Jesus Christ. Even when his Marathi teacher declares that all religions are good, he firmly believes in superiority of his religion.

David marries Olivia Dessard and starts living in India. Though he loves his wife, his total commitment to his religious preaching makes her unhappy and neglected. Their dull life is brightened with the birth of their son and Olivia names him *Theodore*, which means *a Gift of God*. She falls prey to the fatal disease of plague and dies. The second part of the novel ends with the death of Olivia which devastated David to the core.

David’s arguments with Ramsay, a supervisor in his institution further reveals different facets cultural pluralism. Ramsay is an Anglo-Indian, son of an English father and Indian mother. His appearance reveals mixed race and he makes futile attempts to imitate the British. He is proud to call himself British and vehemently criticizes the culture and practice of India. Olivia, on some occasions sympathises him for his mixed identity. In the past religions were the parameters of cultural identity and Ramsay’s character exemplifies the dubious status of mixed race in India. Such people undergo a conflict of cultural identity resulting in constant friction with the native culture. They value British culture and dismiss other religions as insignificant.

Pearl Buck’s primary objective is to assert that *all are one under the Sun* is very much evident in this part of the novel.

Cultural Distance and Plurality:

David further develops his *Olivia MacArd Memorial College for Girls* into a network of schools with hostel facilities. Though he takes sincere attempts to learn Indian culture and tradition, he sends his son back to America for education. His father senior MacArd receives his grandson with great love and affection. This episode vividly reveals the cultural distance between the east and the west and accentuates the fact that racial discrimination cannot be eliminated easily from a society. MacArd bestows all his riches on his grandson and Ted has a happy childhood.



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The third part of novel narrates Ted's life in India. His affinity towards India is deeper than David. To Ted it is home coming. He maintains good relations with Darya through letters who regularly briefs about the political situation in India. Ted comes to know that his uncle Darya has become a freedom fighter.

Ted meets Agnes Linlay, a daughter of the British Governor in Eastern Province, in the ship on his way back to India. Ted's aristocratic background attracts the attention of Agnes. Cultural distance among diverse cultures is the predominant factor in the last two parts of the novel. Different perceptions of people belonging to varied culture groups are recorded in this part. What is good in one culture may not be so in the other. Mahatma Gandhi who has been worshipped and extolled as father of our nation is perceived as wicked and trouble maker to the British. Agnes describes Gandhi as "wretched Gandhi". She criticizes Indian freedom struggle vehemently, "..... it seems to me the grossed ingratitude in these new Indians to be so disloyal to the Government" (189)

The different perceptions lucidly reveal how the ethical system of each culture varies and the sharp distinction of *right* and *wrong* are moral agents of diverse cultures. These moral agents are firmly imbedded on diverse cultures which are ruled by special set of ethical principals determining *inner moral judgement*. The moral judgement of the British is different from that of Indians. David's disapproval of Gandhi's freedom struggle further reveals cultural distance pertaining to ethnography. But Darya becomes an ardent

follower of Gandhi which leads to his imprisonment for his participation in freedom struggle. Ted's affinity for India grew intense facilitating him to understand the principles of Gandhi better than his counterparts.

Jehar, a student of MacArd University is carried away by the philosophy of Christian religion yet his beliefs firmly anchored in Hinduism. Hence, he plans to become a *Christian Saint* after his graduation. The hybrid term *Christian Saint* blends the concepts of Christianity and Hinduism. Here the novelist experiments with the amalgamation of two different religions to assert solidarity. This concept echoes the views of Leroy S.Rouner, who attempts to elicit commonality from diverse religions. He thus he views, "Gandhi wrote repeatedly that he was a Hindu because he had been born a Hindu and he thought everyone should stay in their own religious tradition because 'all religions are true' and are in some sense complementary."

David disapproves the revolutionary decision of Jehar whereas Ted supports it. Moreover the hybrid term *Christian Saint* also states the universal fact that the ultimate objective of a pious religious person irrespective of any religion is to create peace and harmony, protect human virtues and values and to renounce all worldly pleasures. David's disagreement of Jehar's decision of becoming a *Christian Saint* also reveals the fact that though David learnt scriptures and poems of Hindu religion, his beliefs firmly rooted in superiority of his own religion.



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Richard J. Berstein observes, “The metaphors of *imperialism*, *colonization*, *domination*, *mastery*, and *control* are not to be taken as “dead” metaphors. For the “logic” at work here is the logic at work in cultural, political, social, and economic imperialism and colonization- even the “logic” of ethical imperialism, where the language of reciprocal recognition and reconciliation masks the violent reduction of the alterity of the “other” to “more of the same”. The issue of David’s objection to the term *Christian Saint* stems from a sense of radical singularity that defies any facile total reconciliation.

The Concluding Part:

The concluding part of the novel encompasses the life journey of Ted in the village *Vhai* in India. Agnes marriage to David shatters Ted’s love. However he marries Ruth, a daughter of Fordham couple, staff of MacArd’s Christian Missionary School. Despite being married for practical reasons, they lead a happy peaceful life in the village. Ted becomes one of the most respectable persons in the village. The couple has four children, two daughters and two sons. While Daughters stay with their parents the two sons are sent to America for education.

Ted’s peaceful life in India is disrupted when his eldest daughter falls in love with an Indian doctor. Though Ted accepts Indian culture and practice, he cannot accommodate an Indian in his family. He dissuades his daughter from marrying an Indian. He decides to leave India and settle in his home land.

The expertise of the novelist is much evident in the concluding part of the novel enlightening the imperial gesture of the MacArd family implicitly resulting in the reduction of the “other” to the “same”.

The theme of the novel is very relevant today considering the efforts of philosophers and research scholars to bridge the religious differences and to establish inter-cultural understanding. The novel emphasise the fact that culture is not static, and constantly undergoes a change. But changes occur only gradually in a society.

The plot construction is chronologically presented highlighting the gradual change that occurs in the mindset of the characters. In the beginning MacArd wishes to start a School of Theology in India. His son David moves a step further by staying in India and learning Sanskrit to know more about Indian culture. He establishes a network of schools and promotes the education of girl children in India. Ted’s proximity to Indian culture is a step ahead of his father David. He understands Gandhiji’s philosophy of freedom struggle and ventures to live in a village adopting Indian lifestyle. His daughter moves further and falls in love with an Indian doctor. But she is taken back to America. The concluding part lucidly reveals the cultural distance between the east and the west.

Peal Buck’s quest for commonality among diverse culture is evident in the novel. But diverse cultures are driven by the forces of race, ethnicity, nationality and gender which rupture communal harmony. However constant quest for commonness



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among diverse religions and culture may reduce cultural tensions and promote better understanding and tolerance. Pearl Buck's revolutionary views are not accepted by her contemporary literary scholars. Amanda Fields, one of the biographers of Pearl Buck recalls Kang Liao's description of Pearl Buck as "neglected laureate". Today, in the world of globalisation where different culture groups cohabit for better living conditions, unearthing her novels for academic discussions may promote tolerance, understanding and accommodating "other" cultures.

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