

Psychological Trauma and the Human Psyche in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, *A House Divided*, and *Dragon Seed*: A Psychoanalytical Study

Dr. K. RAGUPATHI MA., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor in English
PSG College of Arts & Science
Coimbatore 641014

Abstract

Trauma has emerged as one of the most significant areas of literary and psychological inquiry because it reveals the profound impact of painful experiences on human consciousness and behaviour. Pearl S. Buck's novels *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, *A House Divided*, and *Dragon Seed* vividly portray the psychological consequences of poverty, famine, war, displacement, social oppression, and cultural transformation in twentieth-century China. This paper examines the representation of trauma through a psychoanalytical framework, drawing primarily upon Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, repression, repetition, and psychic conflict. Buck's characters are not merely victims of historical circumstances but individuals whose emotional suffering shapes their identities, relationships, and moral choices. Wang Lung's obsession with land, O-lan's silent endurance, Wang Yuan's identity crisis, and Ling Tan's psychological devastation during the Japanese invasion illustrate different manifestations of traumatic experience. Buck demonstrates that trauma extends beyond physical violence and becomes deeply embedded in memory, family relationships, and cultural identity. The study argues that Buck's fiction transforms historical events into psychological narratives that expose the resilience of ordinary people while revealing the enduring emotional scars left by social injustice and war. Through realistic characterization and psychological insight, Buck establishes trauma as both an individual and collective experience, thereby contributing significantly to twentieth-century literary representations of human suffering.

Keywords: Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth*, *Dragon Seed*, Psychological Conflict, War Trauma.

Trauma occupies a central position in modern literary studies because it enables readers to understand the invisible wounds inflicted upon the human mind by violence, oppression, displacement, and loss. Unlike physical injury, psychological trauma continues to affect individuals long after the traumatic event has passed, influencing memory, behaviour, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Literature serves as an important medium for exploring these hidden emotional realities because it provides insight into the inner consciousness of individuals who struggle to cope with unbearable experiences. Pearl S. Buck occupies a unique position among twentieth-century American novelists because her intimate knowledge of Chinese society enabled her to portray not only the external realities of poverty, famine, war, and revolution but also the psychological consequences experienced by ordinary men and women. Her novels reveal that historical events are inseparable from personal suffering, and that the emotional scars created by violence often persist across generations.

The concept of trauma derives from the Greek word *trauma*, meaning "wound." While the term originally referred to bodily injury, modern psychology extends its meaning to emotional and psychological wounds that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope with distressing experiences. Sigmund Freud pioneered the psychoanalytic understanding of trauma by arguing that painful experiences often remain repressed within the

unconscious mind and continue to influence behaviour through recurring memories, dreams, anxiety, and emotional disturbances. Freud maintained that traumatic events cannot always be fully assimilated into consciousness at the moment of their occurrence. Instead, they return repeatedly in disguised forms, compelling individuals to relive painful memories through what he termed the "repetition compulsion." This theoretical framework provides an effective approach for understanding the psychological complexity of Pearl S. Buck's characters, whose emotional struggles frequently originate in experiences of deprivation, violence, and social instability.

Buck's fiction demonstrates that trauma is rarely confined to isolated individuals but becomes a collective social experience shaped by historical circumstances. The political instability of early twentieth-century China, including the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the rise of regional warlords, the Civil War, and the Japanese invasion, created widespread psychological devastation among ordinary citizens. Unlike historical documents that primarily record political events, Buck's novels explore the emotional lives of individuals living through these crises. Her characters experience fear, grief, helplessness, guilt, and emotional fragmentation while attempting to preserve family unity and cultural identity amidst continuous upheaval. Consequently, Buck transforms historical conflict into psychological narrative, illustrating how national trauma becomes deeply embedded within personal memory and family relationships.

In *The Good Earth*, Buck presents psychological trauma through the experiences of Wang Lung and O-lan, whose lives are shaped by poverty, famine, and rigid patriarchal traditions. Wang Lung's intense attachment to the land reflects more than economic necessity; it functions as a psychological defence against insecurity and fear of deprivation. Having experienced severe poverty during his youth, Wang Lung associates ownership of land with emotional stability, social dignity, and personal identity. His repeated insistence that the land must never be sold reveals an unconscious attempt to secure permanence in a world characterized by uncertainty. Freud argues that individuals often develop obsessive attachments as protective mechanisms against anxiety, and Wang Lung's devotion to the earth exemplifies this psychological response. The land becomes not merely a material possession but an extension of his own identity, providing emotional reassurance against the recurring fear of loss.

Equally significant is the silent trauma endured by O-lan, whose psychological suffering reflects the oppressive structures of patriarchal Chinese society. Sold into slavery during childhood and later treated as a servant within her own marriage, O-lan internalizes emotional pain rather than expressing it openly. Her silence should not be interpreted as weakness but as evidence of repression, a central concept in Freudian psychoanalysis. Throughout the novel, she suppresses humiliation, loneliness, and disappointment in order to ensure the survival of her family. Even after enduring repeated childbirth, relentless physical labour, and emotional neglect, she continues to perform her responsibilities without complaint. Wang Lung's infatuation with Lotus intensifies O-lan's emotional isolation, particularly when he forces her to surrender the pearls she had secretly treasured. This episode symbolizes the destruction of her personal identity and emotional self-worth. Her inability to articulate her suffering reflects the psychological consequences of prolonged oppression, where emotional expression itself becomes impossible. Buck thus portrays trauma not through dramatic outbursts but through silence, endurance, and gradual emotional deterioration, revealing the devastating psychological effects of gender inequality.

Pearl S. Buck extends the psychological dimensions of trauma in *Sons*, where the legacy of Wang Lung is inherited not only through wealth and land but also through emotional conflicts and generational anxieties. The novel demonstrates that trauma is transmitted across generations, affecting the identities, aspirations, and relationships of Wang Lung's sons. Freud's concept of repetition compulsion is particularly relevant here, as the sons unconsciously repeat patterns of conflict inherited from their father while simultaneously attempting to escape them. Although Wang Lung devoted his entire life to acquiring and preserving land, his sons view it

merely as property that can be divided and sold for personal ambition. Their rejection of the land symbolizes a psychological rupture from the values that had sustained the previous generation. This ideological conflict reflects not merely economic transformation but a deeper emotional fragmentation that accompanies social change. Buck illustrates how inherited trauma often emerges through conflicts between tradition and modernity, leaving individuals uncertain about their identity and moral responsibilities.

The death of Wang Lung becomes one of the novel's most psychologically significant moments because it reveals the emotional disintegration of the family. Even before their father dies, the sons begin preparing for the distribution of his property, demonstrating emotional detachment rather than filial devotion. Freud argues that unresolved emotional conflicts frequently manifest through displacement and repression, and Buck portrays these mechanisms through the sons' materialistic attitudes. Their concern with inheritance rather than mourning exposes the erosion of familial affection under the pressures of social ambition and political instability. Wang Lung's lifelong fear that the land would eventually be sold becomes reality, confirming his deepest psychological anxiety. His emotional attachment to the earth represents stability, whereas his sons' desire to dispose of it reflects their disconnection from both family heritage and cultural identity. Buck thus presents trauma as a continuing psychological inheritance that shapes future generations long after the original suffering has ended.

Among Wang Lung's children, Wang the Tiger embodies another dimension of trauma resulting from violence and warfare. His transformation into a military leader reflects the psychological consequences of growing up in an unstable political environment where power becomes synonymous with survival. Constant exposure to violence gradually diminishes his emotional sensitivity and normalizes brutality as an acceptable means of achieving authority. Freud observed that prolonged exposure to violence often alters the individual's moral consciousness, producing emotional detachment and aggression as defensive adaptations. Wang the Tiger's increasingly authoritarian personality illustrates this transformation. His leadership depends upon fear rather than compassion, revealing how traumatic experiences reshape personality by suppressing empathy and reinforcing aggression. Buck does not portray him simply as a cruel military commander but as an individual psychologically conditioned by an environment dominated by war and insecurity.

The emotional struggles experienced by the younger generation become even more pronounced in *A House Divided*, where Buck explores the psychological crisis of identity during China's transition from traditional society to modern nationalism. Wang Yuan represents a generation caught between conflicting worlds, unable to reconcile inherited cultural values with emerging revolutionary ideals. Unlike his grandfather, whose identity was firmly rooted in agriculture, Yuan's consciousness is divided between Eastern traditions and Western education. His repeated attempts to escape his father reveal an unconscious desire to construct an independent identity free from inherited authority. Freud emphasizes that conflicts between parental authority and individual autonomy constitute a central element in personality development, and Yuan's emotional turmoil exemplifies this psychological struggle.

Yuan's relationship with his father, Wang the Tiger, reveals the profound emotional consequences of authoritarian parenting. Their confrontation, in which Yuan defiantly exposes his chest and challenges his father to kill him, represents far more than political disagreement. It symbolizes the psychological conflict between oppressive paternal authority and the individual's search for selfhood. Yuan's rebellion reflects years of emotional repression and accumulated resentment rather than sudden ideological opposition. His inability to establish emotional security within his family forces him into a prolonged search for belonging, illustrating Freud's argument that unresolved childhood experiences continue to influence adult personality. Buck demonstrates that psychological trauma frequently emerges through fractured family relationships, where emotional neglect produces lasting identity conflicts.

Yuan's experiences abroad further deepen his psychological complexity. Exposure to Western education broadens his intellectual perspective but simultaneously intensifies his emotional alienation. Rather than finding

certainty, he becomes increasingly aware of his fragmented identity. His inability to commit fully either to revolutionary politics or traditional values reflects what psychoanalysis identifies as internal conflict between competing aspects of the self. Yuan remains emotionally suspended between past and future, unable to identify completely with either world. Buck portrays this psychological uncertainty with remarkable sensitivity, illustrating how cultural transition itself becomes a source of trauma. The search for identity thus becomes inseparable from the search for emotional stability.

Throughout *A House Divided*, Buck repeatedly suggests that historical transformation affects not only political institutions but also the unconscious lives of individuals. Memories of family conflict, obligations toward ancestors, and responsibilities toward society continually shape Yuan's decisions. Even when he attempts to escape his past, emotional memories continue to influence his actions, illustrating Freud's observation that repressed experiences invariably return to consciousness. Yuan's relationship with Mei-ling ultimately represents the possibility of psychological reconciliation rather than complete escape from trauma. Their mutual understanding demonstrates that healing does not require forgetting the past but integrating painful experiences into a renewed sense of identity. Buck therefore presents recovery as an ongoing psychological process grounded in acceptance rather than denial.

Collectively, *Sons* and *A House Divided* reveal Buck's sophisticated understanding of intergenerational trauma. The emotional wounds experienced by one generation inevitably influence the psychological development of the next, creating patterns of conflict that persist across changing historical circumstances. Family relationships become the primary medium through which fear, guilt, anxiety, and unresolved emotional conflicts are transmitted. By examining these processes through a psychoanalytic perspective, Buck illustrates that trauma extends beyond individual suffering to become a shared familial and cultural inheritance. Her novels demonstrate that political revolutions and social transformations cannot be fully understood without recognizing their profound psychological consequences for ordinary individuals whose emotional lives remain deeply shaped by memory, loss, and the persistent search for identity.

Among Pearl S. Buck's novels, *Dragon Seed* presents the most intense portrayal of psychological trauma because it is set against the historical backdrop of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre. Unlike *The Good Earth*, where trauma emerges from poverty and social inequality, *Dragon Seed* examines the catastrophic psychological consequences of war, displacement, sexual violence, and collective suffering. Buck moves beyond individual experiences to portray trauma as a shared condition that engulfs entire communities. The ordinary farming family of Ling Tan becomes representative of countless Chinese civilians whose peaceful lives are shattered by military invasion. Through realistic characterization and emotional depth, Buck demonstrates that war destroys not only homes and livelihoods but also the psychological stability that sustains individuals and families. The novel reveals that traumatic experiences continue to haunt survivors long after physical violence has ended, leaving invisible wounds that shape memory, identity, and human relationships.

Ling Tan's psychological suffering exemplifies Freud's understanding of trauma as an overwhelming experience that exceeds the individual's capacity to comprehend reality. As a farmer whose identity is deeply connected to his ancestral land and family, Ling Tan is emotionally unprepared for the brutality of war. His repeated questioning of why destruction has occurred reflects the psychological confusion that frequently accompanies traumatic events. Unable to find logical explanations for violence, he experiences helplessness, fear, and emotional paralysis. His desperate concern for the safety of his wife and children further intensifies his psychological burden, illustrating the anxiety experienced by individuals who cannot protect those they love. Buck portrays Ling Tan not as a heroic warrior but as an ordinary man confronting circumstances beyond human understanding. His emotional conflict illustrates Freud's observation that trauma shatters an individual's sense of security, leaving behind persistent feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty.

The psychological effects of war become even more devastating through Buck's representation of sexual violence. The brutal assaults committed by invading soldiers are not merely physical crimes but acts that permanently destroy personal dignity and emotional stability. The rape and death of Orchid and the sexual assault on Lao San represent traumatic experiences whose consequences extend far beyond the immediate victims. Buck deliberately avoids sensational descriptions, choosing instead to emphasize the emotional devastation experienced by family members forced to witness such violence. Ling Tan's horror, helplessness, and inability to rescue his son illustrate the profound psychological consequences of witnessing traumatic events. Freud maintained that trauma often produces feelings of guilt and emotional helplessness even among survivors who bear no responsibility for the violence. Buck effectively captures this psychological reality through Ling Tan's silent suffering and the emotional numbness that follows these atrocities. The trauma experienced by the family becomes collective, affecting every relationship within the household and transforming their understanding of humanity itself.

Buck further explores the psychological consequences of displacement, demonstrating that forced migration creates lasting emotional wounds. Families who abandon their ancestral homes lose not only material possessions but also their cultural identity and emotional security. The departure of Ling Tan's children from their village symbolizes the painful separation between past and present. The destruction of familiar landscapes intensifies feelings of alienation and uncertainty, illustrating that trauma often involves the loss of meaningful places as much as the loss of human lives. Buck portrays displacement as an emotional experience characterized by grief, loneliness, and fragmented identity. Survivors continue to carry memories of their former lives, revealing Freud's assertion that traumatic memories remain active within the unconscious and repeatedly influence present experience. Through these portrayals, Buck demonstrates that the consequences of war extend far beyond the battlefield, permanently altering the emotional landscape of ordinary civilians.

An important contribution of *Dragon Seed* lies in its representation of collective trauma. Unlike individual psychological suffering, collective trauma affects entire communities whose shared values, traditions, and social relationships are disrupted by violence. Buck illustrates how fear becomes a common emotional condition among villagers, replacing trust with suspicion and hope with uncertainty. Everyday activities such as farming, preparing food, and raising children are transformed by the constant presence of danger. Even after the immediate threat subsides, survivors remain psychologically imprisoned by memories of violence. Their inability to return to their former lives reflects the enduring nature of traumatic experience. Buck thereby emphasizes that war damages not only physical environments but also the emotional foundations upon which societies depend. Her depiction of communal suffering broadens the scope of trauma from an individual psychological condition to a historical and cultural phenomenon.

Throughout the four novels examined in this study, Pearl S. Buck consistently demonstrates that trauma assumes multiple forms, including poverty, famine, gender oppression, family conflict, political revolution, displacement, and war. Although each novel presents different historical circumstances, the psychological responses of the characters reveal striking similarities. Fear, grief, guilt, repression, emotional silence, identity conflict, and resilience repeatedly emerge as defining features of human experience. Buck's characters rarely overcome trauma completely; instead, they learn to endure its presence while continuing their struggle for survival and dignity. This realistic portrayal reflects Freud's insight that traumatic experiences cannot simply be erased but must gradually be integrated into consciousness. Healing therefore becomes an ongoing process rather than a complete recovery, requiring acceptance, resilience, and emotional adaptation.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Buck's fiction reveals the complex relationship between individual psychology and historical experience. Her characters are shaped not only by external events but also by unconscious memories, emotional repression, and unresolved inner conflicts. Wang Lung's obsessive attachment to land, O-lan's silent endurance, Wang Yuan's search for identity, and Ling Tan's emotional

devastation each illustrate different manifestations of psychological trauma. These characters demonstrate that external violence often produces invisible psychological wounds that persist throughout life and influence future generations. Buck's emphasis on memory, family relationships, and emotional survival aligns closely with Freud's understanding of the unconscious, making her novels particularly valuable for psychoanalytic literary criticism.

In conclusion, Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, *A House Divided*, and *Dragon Seed* collectively present one of the most comprehensive literary explorations of psychological trauma in twentieth-century fiction. Through realistic characterization and profound psychological insight, Buck reveals that trauma extends beyond individual suffering to encompass families, communities, and entire nations undergoing social transformation and political violence. Her fiction demonstrates that historical catastrophes are ultimately experienced through the emotional lives of ordinary people whose memories continue to shape their identities long after the original events have passed. Employing Freudian psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, unconscious conflict, repetition, and emotional fragmentation enables a deeper understanding of Buck's portrayal of human resilience and suffering. Ultimately, Buck affirms that while trauma leaves permanent psychological scars, the enduring strength of human relationships, cultural memory, and hope enables individuals to confront suffering with dignity and perseverance. Her novels remain significant contributions to trauma literature because they illuminate the universal psychological consequences of violence, oppression, and displacement while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit.

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