

Psychology Of The Sexual Politics Of War In Pearl S. Buck's *Dragon Seed*

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Abstract

The socially constructed toxic masculine norms are inculcated in men from their early stages of childhood. In their attempt to fit the stereotypical notions of masculinity, men are forced to showcase themselves as emotionally insensitive beings. In the initial stages, men resort to aggression as it is the only way for them to express distress and emotions. Later, they use aggression to ascertain their dominance over others. Male aggression thus leads to violence in all forms. Due to the undeniable link between masculinity and violence, war is essentially considered as a male activity. Pearl S. Buck's *Dragon Seed* is an incisive piece of writing on the Japanese invasion of Nanjing in 1937. In addition to addressing issues of nationalism, Buck reiterates the sexual politics of war.

Keywords: Second Sino-Japanese War, Nanjing Massacre, gender binaries, patriotism, violence.

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Pearl S. Buck is a 20th century American writer known for her works about China. *Dragon Seed* published in 1942 is Pearl S. Buck's invigorating account of the Second Sino-Japanese War which is still regarded as one of the most terrifying massacres in the history of World War II. The Nanjing Massacre that lasted for six weeks is also called the Rape of Nanjing. *Dragon Seed* is yet another novel that helped Pearl S. Buck to portray the devastation and destruction caused by any form of nationalism. It is written in such a way that the countries involved in the Second Sino-Japanese War fit perfectly to the gender binaries of masculinity and femininity.

The novel centres on the closely knit family of Ling Tan. Ling Tan's life comprises of his family and the agricultural community of his village. His simple, yet peaceful life is destroyed due to the Japanese invasion in the city of Nanjing. In contrast to the savage Japanese soldiers, who exhibit toxic masculine traits, the innocent Chinese peasants are feminised. The peasant community in the novel is ignorant to the extent of neglecting the initial signs of war. The illiterate peasants, who are least exposed to the world outside their village, are bothered about nothing other than their family, land and agriculture. Though they have witnessed the political turmoil that accompanied the transition of their country, they are completely unaware of the impending war that will forever turn their life upside down. The ignorance of the peasants can be understood from the way they foolishly laugh at a hole created by a bomb dropped at their farming land. The owner of the piece of land says:

"I have wanted a pond on my land for ten years and never had time to dig it and here it is," he said joyfully, and they decided together that such was the purpose of these machines, to dig ponds and wells and waterways where they were wanted. Thirty paces the pond was one way and a little longer the other, and every man paced it off to make sure and envied the man in whose field it had fallen. (*Dragon Seed* 68)

Ling Tan's daughter-in-law, Jade is literate and has a deep passion for reading. Unlike all the family members, Jade seems to be fully aware of the horrors of war. With much terror, Jade says: "Lust and fighting and killing were what they did in war and even to torture and the eating human flesh, and all those wild and beastlike things men do when peace is lost" (75).

The Government entirely abandoned the city of Nanjing and the villages surrounding it, leaving the poor peasants with no other options other than protecting themselves by resisting the Japanese invasion. Driven by a strong sense of patriotism, Jade and her husband, Lao Er decide to join a rebel group of students to fight the Japanese army. Ling Tan supports their decision, as he foresees the condition of women in the enemy's hands. Though he realises the gravity of the situation, Ling Tan chooses to stay behind in his ancestral home, close to his land, along with the rest of the family. When the villagers confront the enemy, they decide to greet them on friendly terms. As opposed to the Japanese soldiers, the Chinese peasants initially have no intention of fighting them, despite the atrocities they face. As mentioned in the "Japanese Crimes in Nanjing, 1937-38: A Reappraisal":

Thousands died: crushed to death trying to cross the unique narrow gate, falling from the city wall, drowning in the icy water when their overcharged embarkations capsized or when they attempted to swim across, or killed by their own troops. Many more, probably, were shot by the deadly fire of the Japanese flotilla, already positioned on the river. Fighting was then completely one-sided, as the Chinese has almost no means and even less will to counterattack. (Margolin 4)

Pearl S. Buck offers glimpses of several instances of Japanese brutality. There are numerous accounts of rape and torture against unarmed civilians in the novel. Rape is used as a means of psychological humiliation in warfare. Ling Tan's eldest daughter's mother-in-law is the first rape victim in the family. The enormously fat old woman, who is too slow to move and hide with the rest of the family, is mercilessly raped and murdered regardless of her old age. Terrified by the reports of Japanese brutality, several Chinese women seek refuge in a shelter provided by an anonymous White female Missionary. Ling Tan also takes the women and children of his family to the shelter where they are warmly welcomed. The White Missionary, providing shelter to the desperate Chinese women is Buck's reference to a real woman, named Minnie Vautrin, an American Missionary who lived in Nanjing in the first half of the 20th century. Buck's *Dragon Seed* is perhaps her only novel in which she depicts the Missionary presence in China to be valuable to the Chinese. As recorded by Sheng-Ping Guo:

Under Vautrin's leadership, the Ginling campus, well beyond its capacity, accepted refugee women and children during their hardest time. In the course of her work, Vautrin displayed an unusual ability to organize available sources and mobilize official support to deal with the unprecedented catastrophes associated with the occupation of Nanking. She provided a small harbour to protect the endangered Chinese refugee women and children. With her neutral American identity, Vautrin seriously struggled with Japanese soldiers who attempted to seize Chinese women from Ginling campus to rape. (3)

The rape and the murder of the old woman is just the beginning of a series of sexual assaults Buck portrays in the novel. In her depictions of rape, Buck avoids detailed descriptions. At the same time, she does not omit information, in which case, it would lessen the intensity of the horrors of the massacre. Ling Tan's eldest daughter-in-law, Orchid, who steps out of the safety zone of the shelter, is immediately raped by a group of Japanese soldiers. The lady dies on the spot unable to bear the violence. Even her dead body is not spared by the lecherous soldiers.

At one point, the soldiers who are restricted by the Japanese rulers from raping women in city streets, start visiting villages to satisfy their sexual desires. The restriction is nothing but a precaution taken by the Japanese authorities to avoid public criticisms from other nations about the army's brutality. One of the most terrifying scenes in the novel is Buck's account of the rape of a young boy in front of his family. Once, a bunch of barbaric Japanese soldiers barge into Ling Tan's house with hope of finding women. In the absence of women, the angry soldiers, who could not contain their disappointment, tie up Ling Tan and his eldest son, Lao Ta together and brutally rape Ling Tan's youngest son, Lao San. Apart from the above mentioned instances of rape, Buck also highlights other forms of violence associated with war. There are several instances where Buck provides vivid descriptions of tortures and mutilations undergone by the unarmed Chinese civilians. The Japanese soldiers torture and shoot Chinese men for no reason. Even children are subjected to Japanese brutality. The sexual atrocities of the Japanese army against the Chinese, regardless of their gender, further proves the sexual politics of war, as Japan and China exhibit features of masculinity and femininity.

Pearl S. Buck assumes that the two sexes are psychologically different. Male fascination with violence and war has no national boundaries. Men's attraction towards war can be attributed to the social misconception that considers aggression as a feature of masculinity. In *Dragon Seed*, Buck boldly highlights the sexual politics of war by drawing a clear contrast between the ruthless Japanese army and the innocent Chinese farmers who prioritise peace over violence.

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