

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF WOMAN: A STUDY OF PEARL S BUCK'S *IMPERIAL WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Pearl S Buck, a popular novelist of the twentieth century is the first American woman to win the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature. Buck's *Imperial woman* is the unparalleled success story of a third-rate concubine Orchid (Tzu Hsi) who eventually ascends the throne and becomes the Empress of China by defying tradition and facing challenges posed by life.

When woman achieve power or positions of authority, the society often scrutinises her keenly to examine how they execute their socially expected duties. This makes the position of these women highly problematic. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the difficulties encountered in achieving and sustaining power by Tzu Hsi, the strong self-made woman of Pearl S Buck's *Imperial Woman*.

Keywords: *Imperial woman*, Power, Tzu-His, Chinese woman, Identity

Introduction

The role that gender plays in any society can be comprehended only by examining the socio political structure of a society and this necessitates an examination of the socio political structure of the society. Tai P Ng opines that Chinese society gives prominence to individual obligations and the Chinese thoughts are more oriented toward co-existence, integrity, unity, harmony and mutual respect. According to Tai P Ng the images of women in China have been changing through history, while maintaining a focus on the primacy of a family (17). Her cosmological identity is first of all her *Dao* the way by which she is to achieve her own distinctive fulfilment as a human being. Tai P Ng reiterates that women enjoyed high status during the early imperial period of Han, Tang and Song dynasties. Chinese woman's social roles as daughter, wife and mother are their embodiment of their *Dao* and it is her role as mother, daughter and wife which provides her the strength to achieve. Her each role has its own specific virtues and the task of self-cultivation happens in all these roles and this enables her to make significant contributions to the society.

When woman achieve power or positions of authority, the society often scrutinises her keenly to examine how they execute their socially expected duties. This makes the position of these women highly problematic. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the difficulties encountered in achieving and sustaining power by Tzu Hsi, the strong self made woman of Pearl S Buck's *Imperial Woman*.

Pearl S Buck, a popular novelist of the twentieth century is the first American woman to win the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature. For her, creative writing is a political and didactic tool. And she excelled in nonfiction –the biographies of her parents, her own memoirs and in the argumentative essays on race, war and gender. Buck's *Imperial woman* is the unparalleled success story of a third rate concubine Orchid (Tzu Hsi) who eventually ascends the throne and becomes the Empress of China by defying tradition and facing challenges posed by life. Though Tzu Hsi realises that it is a burden to be a woman due to the influence of culture as, "the Chinese did not trust a woman for their ruler. Woman they said was evil rulers" (IW 169). Tzu Hsi always believed that place and power and the pride of being above all is a necessity. She believed that she had "a man's mind in a woman's body" and this realisation enables her to ascend the throne.

The tale of Orchid, a member of one of the lowly ranks of the Imperial dynasty is the story of the last Empress in China during a period of extreme turmoil. In Buck's words, Orchid "was self controlled her strength apparent in the smoothness of her movements and the calm of her manner". (IW 2)As per the prevailing custom she was taken to the Forbidden City at the age of seventeen to become one of the hundreds of concubines. Tzu Hsi (Orchid) is clever enough and distances herself from the riffraff and shows great reluctance when called for her turn to promenade in front of the emperor. Her lack of interest intrigues the Emperor. She mesmerizes him with her tranquil and nonchalant manner. She is bold enough to defy social conventions and looks directly into the emperor's eyes and this gesture reveals the grit of this young woman. This defiance of social conventions immediately ensures her a place among the enlisted group of the imperial concubines. Tzu Hsi takes extreme care to be in the good books of the Empress Dowager as she commanded her son the emperor as though he were a child. Tzu Hsi realises that the concubines must be clever enough to amuse the emperor with witty sayings and pieces of poetry. With uncanny skill she is able to wheedle herself into an intimacy with the old woman and for this she uses the library extensively, takes painting lessons and does useful tasks for the Empress. Her enthusiasm to improve herself gratifies the Empress. Against all odds she attempts to stand out and asserts her unique identity.

Tzu Hsi tries to avoid the eunuchs as her mother had warned that since their maleness is denied, they are bitter and cruel. "Avoid the eunuchs from the highest to the lowest. Pay them money when you must. Never let them see that you fear them." (IW15). This also indicates the power and influence enjoyed by the eunuchs in the Forbidden City. No male can stay in the Forbidden City at night hence all women are dependent on them. A young eunuch Li Lien –Ying is interested to serve Tzu Hsi as he is confident that she has a great future and he says, "I know what your destiny is. You have a power in you that is in none of the others." (IW 18). Once she ascends the Dragon Throne he hopes to increase his own power and improve his status among other eunuchs. Li informs Tzu Hsi the latest news regarding the Emperor, his consort and progress towards conceiving an heir. This knowledge enables Tzu Hsi to plan so that she can secure a prominent position within the palace. Buck portrays Tzu Hsi as a scheming and manipulating woman and to consolidate her position within the palace she is willing to go to any extent and her tie up with Li Lien Ying, the eunuch, is her first step towards that.

Tzu Hsi's next step is influencing and impressing the old empress and she makes use of Li. With Li's help she presents the Empress with a ripe melon which the old woman relishes and the Empress gives a share of it to her son, HsienFeng, to eat when he visits her in the evening. Thus, Tzu Hsi manages to grab the attention of the emperor. Eventually she becomes genuinely interested in the well being of the Empress and her death affects her deeply. The Empress and Tzu Hsi discuss the evil ways of the eunuchs which is an indication that the eunuchs are immensely potent in Imperial China. No one including the empress dares to challenge them. The eunuchs catered to the base needs of the emperor, they encouraged the emperor to indulge in drinking, taking drugs and consorting with prostitutes both male and female and thus they tried to control the emperor.

Tzu Hsi learns from Prince Kung, (brother of the Emperor) the history of Imperial China, the entire state of the nation, invasion of enemies and the weakness of the throne. She learns about Russia and England and resolves to throw out her enemies and reclaim the empire. Prince Kung felt that she is flesh, mind and heart, three in one, a trinity complete and unified.

After the birth of her son Tung Chih, Sakota, the Consort of the emperor does not bother to pay the mandatory birth visit and Tzu Hsi is clever enough to understand that she has joined the faction taking side against the child but Tzu Hsi compels her cousin by reminding her of the social conventions and forces her to bind her allegiance to the child, thus she brilliantly thwarts the possible attempt of vendetta by Sakota. Sakota is unwell after delivering her daughter and she is unable to stand for long yet she cannot sit unless her visitor Tzu Hsi sits because that is the court etiquette. Tzu Hsi refuses to sit until she gets a promise from Sakota that no harm will befall her child. When Sakota refuses to budge Tzu Hsi took her hands and crushed it and this act compels Sakota to agree to Tzu Hsi's demands. Tzu Hsi does not yield to the circumstances but turns the circumstances according to her convenience. She can meet any challenge and emerge triumphant. She maintains her grace and dignity even at times of intense mental anguish and thus displays exceptional qualities of mind.

Often Tzu Hsi was afraid yet determined not to let others know the secret that her son is not the offspring of the Emperor. She ensured that he remained the son of the Emperor HsienFeng and heir to the Dragon Throne.

After consolidating her position and power within the court, Tzu Hsi takes up the role of an adviser to her ill husband on matters of state. She advises him not to permit white men into China. He is impressed by her wisdom that he comments that she is sent to him by Heaven to guide and support him. Tzu Hsi enters into an alliance with the chief eunuch and starts her rule in the name of the Emperor. And to concentrate more on state matters she entrusts the care of her son to the chief eunuch.

The illness of the Emperor was a golden opportunity to Tzu Hsi and she bequeathed him to throw the burden of state upon her and offered to sit in the throne hall behind the screen. Sitting screened off behind the throne as the emperor holds audience; she later gives him advice on all matters of state brought before him. Her help is so valuable and struck by her wisdom the emperor comments that "you are more to me than any man". But her marriage to the depraved emperor had at one point of time pushed her to the verge of madness but she overcomes her problems and moves ahead in life.

To protect her son's life she cleverly seeks the help of the chief eunuch and thus influences the emperor so that her rank would become equal to that of the consort and thus is elevated to the rank of Tzu Hsi, the Empress of the Western palace. Thus, she ensures the protection of her son. By the time the emperor dies, Tzu Hsi is elevated to the post of the First Consort for the protection of the heir. She could not spend time with her son as she is busy with the affairs of the state and at times she rues the destiny which demands such heavy price.

Though she tries to avoid the eunuchs ruining her son, she fails and her son dies and his widow commits suicide by swallowing opium. She tries to ensconce two more unsuccessful emperors on the throne and things become so bad that she had to strip all powers from him and the final one is just a child when she dies. Throughout her reign she endeavours to maintain the control of the ruling house and country and strives to keep out the alien influences of the white people. With great willpower she outwits her enemies and with the help of Su Shan, Princess Yi and Cheng manages to get the emperor's signature on the parchment declaring her son as royal heir at his death bed. The document will be valid only if it is attested by the imperial seal and her kinsman obtains this for her hence her enemies had to forfeit their claim to the throne.

To stop the gossip in the courts that she favours Jung Lu, the handsome Chief of the Imperial Guard and kinsman of the Fortunate Mother, she decides to marry him off to Lady Mei the young daughter of Su Shan, Prince and Grand Counsellor. Though Su Shan is her secret enemy she never takes revenge on his gentle daughter. Tzu Hsi wants to be near Jung Lu but wanted to evade the watchful eyes of the courtiers thus the marriage of Lady Mei and Jung Lu serves a double purpose as she can now raise Jung Lu to a higher post.

At times she is penitent that by choosing royal life she has missed life itself as she had to sacrifice her love and life with Jung Lu. Jung Lu's death devastates her and she feels that no one could 'light the inner darkness of her heart' (IW 370). Being an imperial woman she could not cry her heart out to alleviate her angst. Though she resisted modern changes as long as she could she realised the necessity for adapting to change and she accepted change with grace but unchanged heart. The memory of her beloved brings about a transformation and

consequently inspired by ancient wisdom she transforms defeat into victory. She acquiesces with poise and permits the younger generation to travel abroad and pursue knowledge of the West.

Although she is guilty of various crimes and transgressions she reveals her strength, tenacity and worldly wisdom. In spite of being strong she had her softness, fears and longings. She displays a dual character and could be lenient which prompted people to call her “our benevolent” and “scared mother” and often she could be tough and forbidding as a headman at the block. She is capable of cruelty as well as kindness.

Decades after her death when Pearl Buck met people in the interior villages of China, they were scared when they heard of her death. This Buck wrote is “the final judgement of a ruler.”

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Abbreviations used

IW—*Imperial Woman*