



Madame Wu in Pearl Buck's *Pavilion of Women*: An Expedition of the Soul from Bondage to Liberty

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Abstract: Pearl S Buck, a popular novelist of the twentieth century has the distinction of being the first American woman to win the coveted Nobel Prize in literature. This paper focusses on the liberation of Madame Wu the protagonist of Buck's novel *Pavilion of Women*. The paper endeavours to discuss Madame Wu's emotional growth, spiritual fulfilment and her transformation from perfect mother to unconventional pioneer. After decades of devotion towards her family Madame Wu on her fortieth birthday makes it known that she plans to retreat from her life as a wife in the physical sense and wishes to find a perfect concubine for her husband. Madame Wu embarks on a new journey of focussing on her own life and fulfilling her goals in life. Madame Wu's friendship with the educated Christian priest Brother Andre urges her to reconsider her own views of life and there is a gradual alteration in her attitude. The momentous meeting with Brother Andre helps her realize herself and attain spiritual enlightenment.

Key words : Enlightenment, love, humanity, spiritual quest, fulfilment

Pearl S Buck, a popular novelist of the twentieth century has the distinction of being the first American woman to win the coveted Nobel Prize in literature. *Pavilion of Women*, a poignant novel by Pearl S. Buck, is about the liberation of Madame Wu, her emotional growth, spiritual fulfilment and her transformation from perfect mother to unconventional pioneer.

After decades of devotion towards her family Madame Wu on her fortieth birthday makes it known that she plans to retreat from her life as a wife in the physical sense and wishes to find a perfect concubine for her husband. The members of her household are shocked yet they lend her their support but her husband vehemently opposes this decision as he still loves his beautiful wife. But she manages to convince him about the feasibility of her decision and sets out to find a concubine. She wants a concubine who will take

care of her husband's physical needs so that she can devote her time to read books and learn about the world. She finally chooses a young orphan named Ch'iuming and everything runs smoothly initially and Madame Wu embarks on a new journey of focussing on her own life and fulfilling her goals in life. But her journey is impeded by her family's myriad number of problems. Madame Wu's retreat from wifely duties and attempt to find a concubine throws the house into more chaos. It's only when she meets Brother Andre, a foreign priest, that she understands the faults in her plans and reconciles her ideas of freedom with her responsibility as the matriarch of the family.

Madame Wu, the doyenne of a prominent Chinese family has a personality in keeping with her inner thoughts, attractive, delicate with no blemishes. She is portrayed as an emotionally deaf and blind person "exceedingly remote, cold and lifeless". She is dynamic and has the ability to overcome her blunders of the past and weaknesses. Realising her past mistakes she quietly moves around remedying the wrongs done by her due to her obliviousness. Buck describes her as a cool beautiful woman so perfect that she is beyond the reach of anger and reproach and decides to spend her life 'assembling her own mind and her own soul' which brings her inner calm.

Madame Wu exemplifies the figure of an intense, ambitious woman imprisoned in a man's world. Throughout her life, Madame Wu has always had to adjust: she is forbidden from reading certain books: she is forced to bear children and is burdened with the responsibility of running an ideal Chinese household and she desperately wishes to escape from this drudgery, When Madame Wu found a concubine for her husband, she removed herself from sexuality, when she detached herself from her sons, she removed herself from motherhood and she boldly defies all the age-old restrictions imposed on her. Madame Wu believes that for any woman it is "to defy heaven's decree" to cling to a man beyond the time of their fertility and when she affirms 'I will spend the rest of my life assembling my own mind and my own soul' (PW 47), she seems to be embarking on a quest of other worldly pursuits. Madame Wu reminisces on gender expectations imposed on her throughout her childhood and adult life. Eventually she deciphers her own emotions and needs and thus transcends societal expectations and she fashions her own valued space out of a constrictive patriarchal order. Madame Wu's father-in-law acquiesces that her "mind is an excellent one for a woman" (PW 59) yet he forbids her and never permits her to read his books as in his view "in a woman it is not well for the brain to grow beyond the body" (PW 60). Madame Wu defies his orders when she renounces the physical intimacy with her husband and gets ready to read the forbidden books.

Madame Wu wished for the happiness of all her family members and tries to achieve that goal but her well intentioned scheme fails. She intended to make Mr. Wu happy by bringing a concubine, but the concubine Ch'iuming fails to bring joy in Mr. Wu's life, and he starts visiting the flower house and falls in love with a young girl, Jasmine who settles in Madame Wu's house. Meanwhile, the old lady, Madame Wu's mother-in-law, dies. Her two sons, Liangmo and Tesmo, have already got married. Now she wants to marry Fengo, her third son, to Linyi, Madame Kang's second daughter. Madame Wu engages Brother Andre, a foreign tutor for Fengo, her third son's education, as the bride to be refuses to marry an illiterate man. Along with Fengmo, Madame Wu also becomes a student of Brother Andre and Brother Andre's teaching brings drastic changes in the life of both mother and son.

The first encounter of Madame Wu and Brother Andre, is interesting as she says to him: “I am entirely happy except that I feel the need of more knowledge of some sort. What sort I do not know myself” (PW116), and this is her spiritual quest to enlighten herself. Madame Wu is impressed by the intelligence, liberal thinking and deep compassion of Brother Andre. Madame Wu is so different from the usual home maker who is satisfied in nurturing their offsprings. She loves to learn and welcomed the chance of learning new ideas. Brother Andre has kindled something deep within her.

As a result of Andre’s influence Madame Wu experiences an intellectual awakening and she decides to send her most ambitious son abroad and allows her daughter-in-law to help open a school for impoverished children. The turbulence of the Wu household reaches a crescendo when Madame Wu’s husband rejects the concubine she has chosen for him, a “flower girl” from a local teahouse comes to live in his chambers, and Brother André is killed by a band of thieves, leaving Madame Wu to care for the orphans he had taken in.

Madame Wu’s friendship with the educated Christian priest Brother Andre urges her to reconsider her own views of life and there is a gradual alteration in her attitude. The momentous meeting with Brother Andre helps her realize herself and attain spiritual enlightenment. Father Andre has philanthropic nature and it is this quality in him that in fact brings about a transformation in the character of Madame Wu and this influence stays even after his demise. She takes care of the homeless girls who have been brought up by Brother Andre. Breaking out of the restraining influence of religious dogmas, Madame Wu becomes a better person and leads a more prolific life and her journey is not towards fulfilment through personal ideals, but through charity and empathy for others. She evolves eventually as a humanist and is not ensnared in any religious canons or the desires of the flesh and she rises above the trivial considerations of race or nationality as is evident in her remark “the seas no longer divide the peoples and heaven is no more our canopy” (PW 103).

Retreating into her inner self the only item she carries from the outer world, the world of her family is “the picture of the human creature struggling up the mountains”(PW 34). In this context Bhambar comments that it is symbolic of “her yearning for higher values of life, the seeds of which were already there in her mind years before”(22). Her association with Andre helps her in comprehending her weaknesses “you have despised your husband, you have held in contempt a sister woman and you have considered yourself unique and above all women” (PW 200). Her identity change is total when she accepts Andre’s suggestions “instead of your own freedom, think of how you can free others ---from yourself” (201). Inspired by him she thinks of others’ well-being. When Ch’iuming is brought to the household as a probable concubine, Madame Wu scrutinizes the young woman almost as if she was a “pound of pork,” noting her “sweet and clean” breath and her “sound white” teeth, observing that under “the washed cotton coat and trousers, the girl’s body was round and fat” (65, 202). In *Pavilion of Women*, Madame Wu understands only the elite woman at the beginning but the contact with Andre makes her rethink about other female characters who are not of the same class as herself.

One day while returning from Madame Wu's house, Brother Andre tries to save the money-lender from the robbers and in that skirmish he is fatally injured and before his death Madame Wu arrives and Andre asks her to look after the orphaned children. She follows Andre's footsteps and decides to live for love for her fellow human beings. With the death of Andre Madame Wu's disposition undergoes a sea change. Alone with his dead body she experiences a change in her whole being. She expresses this feeling "of course I am changed---- the springs of my being are different I shall no longer live out of duty but out of love" (PW214). She takes care of Brother Andre's orphaned children and she no longer dislikes anyone. Everybody is surprised about "this new Madame Wu"(PW 227).

The influence of brother Andre brings out changes in Madame Wu's attitude towards her family members and she deals with them with more compassion and love and veers Rulan and Linyi wives of Tsemo and Fengmo towards the right path. She permits her son Tesmo and sends Fengo for higher studies abroad.

For Madame Wu, Andre is not dead, but he is living, and he is with her because she loves him. Wisdom dawns on her and she realises that it was stupid of her to withdraw from everyone to become free. Love transforms and improves her. For instance, one day Madame Wu goes to Madame Kang's house, hearing the news that the child refuses to be born and saves her life. She stays there for two days at Madame Kang's bedside and returns with blood on her satin garment. Ying, her maidservant, draws her attention towards it, and Madame Wu, who was so fastidious, now only murmurs, "I forgot, myself" (243). Love and humanity make her forget herself. When ch'iuming tries to end her life Madame Wu saves her and having understood that she loves her third son Fengmo she allows her to stay in the house and look after the orphans instead of driving her away. After some days, Fengmo also returns to the house unexpectedly, and understands that the people in his village are illiterate and he remembers Andre's words "To know how to read is to light a lamp in mind, to release the soul from prison, to open a gate to the universe" (292). He wants to start a school for the farmers and their children. Rulan and Ch'iuming, too, wished to join him in this noble endeavour and he with his wife Linyi decides on this. Madame Wu gives them her permission and thus gives the freedom to Rulan, Ch'iuming, and Fengmo, and becomes happy. Thus, involuntarily, she does what Andre had asked her to do. She now realises that she is walking along a path of light, and "the light that lit this path was her Love for Andre" (243).

Madame Wu finds in Brother Andre the bliss of selfless love. Unlike Madame Wu, Brother Andre has focussed towards the world around him, not to control or use them but to establish a brotherhood. He believes that successful relationships are built by respecting others and paying proper attention to the people around them. And wishes to help every human being around them. He senses the presence of God in that which is around him and believes that "He is in the air and the water, in life and death, in mankind" (154). His humanity affects Madame Wu greatly.

Andre finds Madame Wu guilty of three sins and says:

You have despised your husband, you have held in contempt a sister woman, and you have considered yourself unique and above all women. These sins have disturbed your house. Without knowing why, your sons have been restless and their wives unhappy and in spite of your plans no one is happy. What has been your purpose, Madam?" ----- "Only to be free," she faltered. "I thought, if I did my duty to everyone, I could be free." "What do you mean by freedom?" "Very little," she said humbly. "Simply to be mistress of my own person and my own time." "You ask a great deal for yourself," he replied. "You ask everything [...] forget your own self." "But all these years", She urged, "I have so carefully fulfilled my duty." "Always with the thought of your own freedom in your mind." "Direct me" she said at last. "Instead of your own freedom, think how you can free others, [...] from yourself" he said gently. (200 - 201)

Thus Andre guides her towards higher values of life and wants her to be selfless and prideless.

Madame Wu's experience of Andre's death gives her extra spiritual strength. Being alone with his dead body in the room, she feels her whole frame grow light and strong and senses Brother Andre's spirit alive in her own heart and experiences a kind of spiritual peace.

Energy begins to work in her mind and her body. The change is evident in her remark, "Of course I am changed. [...] The springs of my being are different. I shall no longer live out of duty but out of love" (215), now for the first time in her life, she dislikes no one and it was Andre who caused this change in her. She accepts the orphan children and says, "All are my children" (226). The servants and the children are surprised to see "this new Madame Wu" (227). It is Brother Andre who has awakened love in Madame Wu.

Madame Wu finds that Rulan and Linyi, wives of Tesmo and Fengmo, unhappy in their marital life and teaches the lesson of "Love" to them. She says, "Love each other [...] Life is too short for such love. Love one another and do not waste one hour in anger. Divide your love from your passion and let there be no confusion between the two" (PW257). Thus, she veers them towards the true path.

Madame Wu becomes renowned for her patient heeding and calm rulings, and many people approach her for enlightenment. She struggled throughout her life against her abhorrence of human beings but after her meeting with Andre she has only love for every mortal and consequently she attains peace and wisdom. These deep changes cause the retreat of Madame Wu within herself and she attempts to comprehend eternal mysteries like life and death, love and commitment, grief and renewal. She is on a quest on enlightenment and eventually realises that life changes constantly and the soul is immortal.

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Abbreviations used :

PW Pavilion of Women

