

## The Hidden Self: An Analysis of Pearl S Buck's Autobiography, *My Several Worlds*

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The Hidden Self: An Analysis of Pearl S Buck's *Autobiography, My Several Worlds*

Pearl S Buck published *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* in 1954. This was a tremendously successful book and got uniformly glowing reviews.

Like many literary self-portraits however, *My Several Worlds* conceals as much as it reveals. What is significant is the fact that it is the critics and reviewers who call it an 'autobiography', while Pearl Buck herself prefers to refer to it as a 'personal record'. The book's title is in fact slyly precise. It is not the story of Buck's life, but the story of the worlds she lived in. In this way she distances herself from the contractual assumption of an Autobiography. Philip Lejeune, one of the foremost names in autobiographical study defines his concept of 'le pacte autobiographique' as 'a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits herself or himself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.' **1**

With a certain amount of self-awareness Buck says on the first page of *My Several Worlds*:

*This book is not a complete autobiography...My private life has been uneventfully happy. A good childhood, marriage in its time, love and home and children, friends and more than enough success for a creature singularly without ambition and born with no competitive sense whatever. This is the story of my secret years.* **2**

Through such a bland dismissal of her highly unconventional and individualistic life, Buck smoothly dissociates herself from 'le pacte autobiographique' and uses the Autobiography less as a document of the Self and more as a Social/Historical document. Throughout the book, Buck does not give the proper names of her parents, her siblings, her children or her husbands. Nor does the scope of her multifarious public activities emerge effectively through the pages. In a richly textured book that exceeds four hundred pages, Buck instead takes the reader on a journey that spans the whole of China, Europe, US and parts of Asia. Through a vivid evocation of the sights and sounds and smells of these different worlds, she seeks to build a bridge between two cultures. In the process she gives the speaking 'I' in the book the role of a spectator rather than that of the main actor. This is an impersonal role, notwithstanding the fact that it is a ringside view of historical events of international importance.

There are several reasons that prompted Buck to erase her presence from the centre of the book's narrative and sweep it towards the margins. One of the important reasons was no doubt Buck's natural reticence that made her open up more frankly in her fiction and her novels but prevented her from revealing all in a 'factual' work like an autobiography. All the niggling questions and doubts in her mind relating to the Self had already been explored by her self-admittedly in her various novels. Fiction, paradoxically because it is not 'true', provides a space for a writer to explore ambiguities, contradictions and dissatisfactions which cannot be expressed openly. Buck's Self therefore, is well-hidden in *My Several Worlds*.

She leaves, nevertheless, several markers in the book that this Self can be found, for those interested in the pursuit, in the various books she has written:

*My father's story I have told in **Fighting Angel** and therefore I will not repeat it here. (257)*

*Years after I left India, I wrote **Come, My Beloved** against its background. (305)*

*I have told the story of my eldest daughter in a little book, **The Child Who Never Grew**. (162)*

As one of her biographers, Theodore Harris says:

*It is of little wonder to me that she has never been inclined to write the autobiography so many people have hoped for, for it has all been written in her many books. Therefore, it is in her books, in their rich variety, that we must find her.*<sup>3</sup>

*My Several Worlds* thus, in spite of its silence over personal matters does leave enough markers and directions to help a persistent reader towards an understanding of a sensitive writer's psyche.

Peter J Conn, another of Buck's biographers feels that it was also her unhappy years as a young wife and mother that made her permanently wary about opening up emotionally to others:

*Under the combined pressure of personal and political disappointments, Buck was divided against herself. She was still groping with the pain of her failing marriage and the guilt she felt in Carol's illness and her own sterility. Her life seemed to teach the lesson that passion and commitment inevitably led to disappointment...from this period forward she would continue to carry the burden of her insecurity, but she also took steps to protect herself emotionally. She became more cautious in bestowing her affections, more private, more selective in sharing confidences, even with women friends.*<sup>4</sup>

What is apparent in *My Several Worlds* is Buck's desire to dissociate herself constantly from her identity as a 'woman' and an attempt to portray herself as a 'World Citizen'. It is a gender-less role of a scholar-gypsy. She struggles to escape the enclosure that a 'woman' is culturally constrained to respect. The enclosure is her body and the social roles arising from it. Sidonie Smith has this to say on the subject in her essay:

*For 'woman', 'Anatomy is Destiny'. Culturally charged with constraining meanings, anatomy becomes the irreducible 'granite' at the core of woman's being. Embodiment also marks 'woman' as an 'encumbered self', identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny. Affiliated physically, socially, psychologically in relationships to others, her individuality is sacrificed to the constitutive definition of her identity as member of a family, as someone's daughter, someone's wife and someone's mother.*<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is this subconscious fear of being submerged within the cultural encoding of 'woman' that prompts Buck to refrain from a description of the private Self and to foreground her public identity. Her identity as student, teacher, writer, traveller, Nobel Prize winner, social worker and community worker are more apparent in *My Several Worlds*.

Buck deflects attention from her private Self in this way and gives to the narrative voice the role of a social commentator. This role lends to *My Several Worlds* the outward appearance of a 'public' man's autobiography. But on looking at the text closely, one discovers that it is not only the private life of Buck that is concealed it is also the progress of her public success. This is where *My Several Worlds* differs from a typical autobiography by a man. The Self in a typical autobiography of a man is placed firmly within the public persona and its progression is systematically recorded. Here, it is neither the public nor the private development that is explained. What is foregrounded is the socio-cultural reality of China and America. By moving the focus away from the Self towards history, Buck indicates her reluctance to use the autobiography as a confessional medium. In juxtaposition with important world events she sees herself as insignificant and unimportant indeed. She brushes off her private life in one liners and short paragraphs and goes back as soon as possible to the more important examination of international affairs.

What Patricia Meyer Spacks says about the autobiographies of Golda Meir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Day, Emma Goldman and Emmeline Pankhurst holds true of Buck's life story too. Even more so perhaps because she refuses to even call it an autobiography. This shyness and non-assertiveness, this declaration about a lack of ambition make her a classic example of the psyche of a woman who was successful in a time when success was the prerogative of men.

Buck's desire to shift the focus away from her private affairs towards the larger reality in which she grew up stems also from the bold steps she took to gain greater control over her life. After the enormous success of *The Good Earth* and after institutionalizing her retarded child, Carol, Buck decided also to walk out of her loveless marital union with Lossing Buck and marry her publisher Richard Walsh, who too had to go through a painful divorce before this happened. Years of loneliness and emotional emptiness had strengthened Buck's resolve to locate her identity within herself and not within any relationships. These were however rather revolutionary steps for a woman of her time and Buck had to face a lot of adverse criticism from her parents' missionary contacts and from the media. In *My Several Worlds* however Buck does not take her readers into confidence and does not reveal her emotional feelings following the divorce and remarriage but talks rather about the American media's and American society's reaction to such 'sensational' happenings in a celebrity's life.

The eminence that Buck arrived at in the literary world was isolating because she was often the only woman in a room-full of men. It was more prudent to blend-in, to integrate, rather than to highlight the difference. So, like Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi, who were the only 'men' in their cabinets, Buck too became an 'honourary man'.

Indeed, Buck is concerned in *My Several Worlds* with not only highlighting the dichotomy between her Eastern and Western worlds but also in discussing the place of women within a man-centred universe, in describing the dilemma of an immigrant, in talking about the injustice of racial prejudice, in discussing adoption, divorce, remarriage and various other questions of social and historical importance. Buck empathized with these concerns because she was a kind of immigrant in her own country, she lived in a patriarchal culture but managed to break free of the gendered status quo, she went through a painful divorce and remarriage but not before paying the price for it in terms of heartache and adverse media publicity, she went in for adoption but not before undergoing the trauma of bearing and rearing a retarded child. But when she talks about all these concerns, she does so in an impersonal way and does not allow her Self to be entangled in the discussion.

It is interesting to note that the heroes and heroines of Buck's stories and novels were ordinary men and women. For her own life story too she chooses to portray the protagonist as an ordinary person, 'a creature singularly without ambition.' But in reality Buck did not lead the life of the ordinary woman. She in fact took control of her life, displayed tremendous dynamism and drive and went about her many tasks with a streak of purposefulness that the autobiography entirely conceals. She was an exceptional woman who defied the fate for ordinary women spelt out by the narrator of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*:

*Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come their way and furnish them with a destiny.* 6

Buck carved out her destiny with her own hands. She accepted with a resigned air the failure of her first marriage, but did not let it bog her down. Instead, the loneliness in her marriage spurred her on to greater heights of literary creativity. She was not dependent upon either of her two husbands for sustenance--- emotional or financial. Instead, in a classic reversal of the patriarchal mode, she was the provider.

This control over her finances gave Buck control over her destiny and she became the unofficial head of the family. The shadowy husband referred to vaguely only as 'the man in the house' is never named and gradually completely disappears from the pages. Buck's views on marriage are startlingly modern and for a woman writing in the 1950s, she displays remarkable independence of thought:

*I do not like to see the American girls in this generation give up their own individualities in order to attract men, for if men can be attracted by such behaviour, then it is alarming. And it is alarming that girls stake so much on marriage that if they do not marry they consider themselves failures.* (390)

Similar to her views on marriage are her views on motherhood---modern and ahead of her time. Her only birth child was retarded. Buck compensated for this by adopting a girl. A few years later she adopted more children and soon became the mother of six children---one her own and five adopted. For a mother of such a large brood, she surprisingly claims to be 'not very maternal'. She told her biographer, Theodore F Harris:

*I am not primarily a mother. I love children as human beings and I respect them as individuals...I enjoyed my children as human beings and individuals, but not because I am a 'mother'.* 7

She goes on to reveal to her biographer that she was not in favour of adopting any children after her second marriage but Richard Walsh, her second husband, was keen on them. She told her biographer:

*It has been told me and I do not care if it is true that he particularly wanted children because he thought it would divert me from my many interests and give me a centre.* 8

This revealing fact is of course omitted from the autobiography where typically Buck veers away from the description of her own children to write pages and pages on the general subject of parenting in America and China. This restlessness, this struggle to escape the biological and social enclosure is textually revealed in the complete erasure of her role as wife and mother.

Buck is aware of the common obstacles that a writer of the autobiography faces, e.g. the problem of perspective. This is clear from her repeated references to the concept of 'versions of truth.' And yet, she approaches the writing of her autobiography more as a novelist and storyteller than as an autobiographer. She uses sophisticated skills from her rich and varied literary arsenal. The use of flashbacks, the abundant use of sense perceptions to link the past with the present etc. are used frequently by Buck. This unorthodox use of literary devices in the autobiographical genre serves however to distance the narrator from the reader.

Buck's technique of deflecting attention away from her Self and towards the worlds that she encountered is not straightforward. The notations on the top right hand corner give the date and place in America where she happens to be staying at that time.

By using the diary form for her autobiography Buck seems to indicate her willingness to share her thoughts with her readers. But while the form that she adopts i.e. the diary form, is an intimate genre, the content i.e. the small essays of socio-historical relevance, subverts the confessional mode.

Till the end Buck was unable to resolve the conflict within her. She was Chinese inside and American outside. Her Nobel Prize only served to isolate her further from her country people. She remained marginalized by the Establishment. And though internationally she was canonized, in her home country she continued on the periphery.

