

Deconstructing Race: Gobinism and Miscegenation in Pearl S. Buck

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The 17th and 18th centuries saw the emergence of the idea of race, along with the rise of colonialism and transatlantic slave trade. By the end of the seventeenth century, the racial category of "black" evolved with the consolidation of racial slavery, in the United States. The specific identities of Africans were engulfed and rendered "black" by an ideology of racial exploitation, leading to the establishment and maintenance of a "color line." The consolidation of racial slavery was an outcome of a period of indentured servitude. This led to a racially polarized society and shaped specific identities for the slaves as well as white. With homogenization of the colonies as a whole, the new term of self-identification evolved as white (Omi and Winant).

In the conception of race, the discovery of the most perfect female human skull at the Caucasus Mountains, near the purported location of the Noah's Ark was used to establish and explain racial hierarchy starting from the Caucasoid on top. Theologically, humans are supposed to have come from Adam and Eve, but it is alleged that with the increase in population, some groups in later descendants degenerated and digressed into deviations, which is also used to explain racial hierarchy. On the other hand, the polygenists believe that human had different ancestors. Till the beginning of the 20th century, the notion of archaic subspecies was held, with corresponding cultural and biological manifestations. But the contemporary anthropologists do not hold the idea of race as valid. Race as a scientific reality is no more accepted. The macroracial terms used in order to categorise, e.g. light and dark are not able to cater to the diversity of humanity and therefore are being rejected (Mukhopadhye and Henze). The Columbia Encyclopedia documents that many physical anthropologists believe that the concept of race is unscientific and flawed, since the genetic variations within one race are as many as there can be found between the macroracial groups, ("Race."). Hence, the term race is unsound especially when applied in order to ethnopsychologize and hierarchize the human species. As to the question how the colours and physiognomic differences marking one set of people different in appearance from others come about, the answer lies in "mutation, selection, and adaptational changes in human populations" ("Race.") that took place with the passage of time. Race is commonly understood to be the colour of skin or difference in physiognomy that goes into the making of one race different from others.

Despite the scientific truth, race has been used, throughout human history in varying degrees, as "a disfavored means of judging human reality and potential" (Brown). For centuries, the western society has perceived the world as Eurocentric, in terms of exploiting it for albocratic purposes. The various kinds of Eurocentric social discourses reflect and endorse the notion of superiority of white race to the coloured. For sociologists, psychologists and phrenologists there are various ways to define race and explain the reason why there exist hierarchical parameters that declare one race to be superior to the others. Historically speaking, the success of the white race has led to Gobinism or the belief that comparative lightness or darkness of skin colour is a determiner of superiority or inferiority of a particular race. Using the differentiation between essence and existence and Hegelian distinction between 'to be' and 'to have become' as used by Simone de Beauvoir, (Beauvoir 15), the concept of race and racialization as a basis for another kind of hierarchization can be taken as another human folly to maintain the status quo of global power politics. To Howard Winant, notion of race as an "objective condition" is illogical and flawed. Race can only be understood as a "dynamic flexible social construct" (Chancer and Watkins 50). If an amount of uncertainty or accidental occurrence may be considered to be the

law of the universe (Madison), little validity remains to hold the view that success as well as its resultant seeming superiority of one race is decisive of human worth and not the result of chance and accidents in the history of evolution. It leaves space for a change in the fortunes of the history of peoples.

Race as a notion of hierarchy is also invalidated by the fact that “All human groups belong to the same species (*Homo sapiens*) and are mutually fertile” (“Race”). This reality of mutual fertility at the same time, has given rise to one of the biggest social problems of human history, the mixed race children.

Even a cursory glance at Pearl S. Buck's fiction reveals the fact that as a transnational and what she calls a “culturally bifocal” (Conn xiii) person, she subscribes to the constructionists' idea of race. She holds the view that mutual fertility is a boon for the human species as it creates better progeny that the humanity should be proud of instead of being ashamed of and embarrassed about. For Pearl S. Buck, the cause of the coloured people and the mixed race children was very important and she devoted much of her time and energy for the new breed with different colours and physiognomic features. Laura the chief protagonist in *The New Year* reads *Man's Most Dangerous Myth, The Fallacy of Race* by Ashley Montague which echoes the author's idea about miscegenation:

When we combine oxygen and hydrogen, we obtain water...When we combine zinc and copper, we obtain an alloy, bronze, which has far greater strength, and numerous other qualities, than the unalloyed metals comprising it; that is certainly getting more out of a mixture than was put into it. When two pure bred varieties of plants or animals unite to produce offspring, the latter often show many more desirable qualities and characters than the stock from which they were derived. Surely the varieties which man presents in his various ethnic forms would suggest that something more has been produced out of the elements than was originally brought into association. (Buck, *The New Year* 217)

Pearl Buck's is a perfect eugenic solution. She extols the result of miscegenation. Laura like Pearl S. Buck reaches the conclusion that hybrid is an improvement upon the originals and should be valued as an example of human's forward march in the process of evolution. It is a symbol of unity rather than of discord and dispute between the progenitors. Kim Christopher and the likes are “a step into future” (Buck, *The New Year* 218) and so is her husband's recognition of his son publicly.

Pearl S. Buck mostly had a simple, yet emphatic way to bring home her moral truth about racial biases and prejudices that led the entire world asunder: that America and the entire white race should chasten themselves of their falsity of white superiority in order to prove their civilization. The black on the American soil, the other dark races around the world and the war time progeny of white and dark mingling and the white in minority in Asia all evoked her sympathy. In her life it had made her launch a lifelong mission to bring about the much needed changes at mental, attitudinal as well as pragmatic levels. With her writings in *Asia*, Pearl S. Buck kept talking against apartheid. In the March, 1941 issue of *Asia*, she published a powerful political manifesto, “Warning to Free Nations” in which she raised her voice against the injustice imposed on the people by way of compulsory military enrolment whether they understood or agreed upon the cause they were fighting for or not. Drawing a parallel between American black-and-white segregation and European colonialism including the Indian situation, she spoke for the Chinese peasants victimized by their own government and her dark compatriots at the home turf, the twelve million Negroes who were forced to fight for equality and liberty not their own, while putting up with Jim Crow laws, economic and social exclusion (Conn 248-9). She called the self-

acclaimed democracies as big failures in “political morality”, even if they defeat Hitler and Japan:

To fight with England for Europe’s freedom while India is governed by tyranny is a monstrous contradiction, and no more monstrous than that while the United States prepares for a mighty defence of her democracy twelve million Americans should be denied equality in a nation founded upon equal opportunity for all . . . (qtd. in Conn 249)

Inter-racial marriage, miscegenation and mixed race children are among recurrent thematic foci in Pearl S. Buck’s fiction. She has complete empathy for people other than her own as she knows how it feels to be on the racial margins with her experiences as a part of white missionary family in China. She also talks about anti-white sentiments in China during the dynastic, the Nationalist and the Communist rules. But instead of developing racial xenophobia, she broadens her mental horizon of sympathy and compassion for the sufferers of racial persecution whether light or dark. This paper specifically takes into account the novels with American characters reacting and responding to the issue of inter-racialism.

Talking about American situation at the time of war between the North and the South in the middle of the 18th century, *The Angry Wife* addresses the issue of segregation based on colour. It recounts the story of a family standing at the crossroads at a time when the North-South anti-slavery war of 1850s ends in America. The white Delaney family with an ideology-based-cleft between the brothers represents the two points of view; one, in favour of the black slavery and the other, struggling to abolish it. Pierce Delaney and Tom Delaney who participate in the war represent the two sides respectively. Pierce Delaney is shown as a triumphant rich man well-satisfied with the remaining vestiges of the old feudal society and determined to continue his life of luxury with an engine room taken care of by the slaves-turned-servants, despite the loss of his side and cause. Tom comes back home starved and emaciated after spending a term as a war prisoner despite the fact that his side wins the war and his anti-slavery mission seems to be accomplished. The Eurocentric power equation ingeniously finds ways to corroborate the rationale behind the belief in the inherent superiority of the white and the justification of the black servitude to them. The war with a partially positive result in favour of the Abolitionists does not bring about an attitudinal transformation with regard to the colour hierarchy and the novel concerned shows the partial nature of success of the Republicans led by Abraham Lincoln and expresses tribulation at the subsequent secession of the south.

The Angry Wife also debunks the white physiognomic parameter of beauty that tries to exclude the coloured. The exposition of Pierce Delaney’s attraction towards the black girl Georgia and his fair and beautiful wife’s insecurity and jealousy suggest that the detestation for the black, their exclusion from the canons of beauty is to Pearl Buck a superimposed construct having no natural foundation. The civilized mannerism and appealing tone and voice of the black sisters also come as a surprise to Pierce Delaney which again debunks the myth of their being uncivilized and uncouth by birth. Here Hegelian differentiation between ‘to be’ and ‘to have become’ works well in order to explain the behavioural patterns of different people.

In the ‘mulatto’ slave girls, there seems to be no conscious effort to assert the right to individual dignity. Yet behaviourally they convey clearly that they are not to be relegated into a corner as unnoticeable creatures. The elder sister proves to be an attractive diversion for Pierce Delaney while the younger sister starts a family with the younger brother Tom. The house where Tom and Bettina live is modest yet well kept and maintained aesthetically. Ironically, Pierce Delaney looks askance at this miscegenation. The children of his own brother and Bettina are strange looking creatures better kept at a distance than be a cause of embarrassment for the

Delaneys. At the same time he has a secret desire for Georgia. Surprisingly, the slave girls have a sense of pride and self respect. Contrary to the popular belief and expectation, Georgia is indifferent and feels no pride in Delaney's admiration for her. Knowing that her character would be assassinated and she would be labelled as a cheap 'mulatto' girl, who hankers after a white man adding to the white presumptuousness, she herself decides to leave the house and save the Delaneys and herself from a great embarrassment. By this move she establishes her psychological and emotional strength and superiority. Tom with his wife Bettina leaves the white locality followed by Georgia in the Jim Crow way. The change in the external world is shown to be at war with a stubborn social mindset that still needs much cleansing and improvement.

Ironically, the other black slaves for whom the war is fought do not realise the meaning and portent of the war of their freedom which suggests the partial nature of this great change. For some of them, their mental colonization is a hindrance in accepting their new free status. The old habit of servility and servitude is as natural to them as the air enveloping them. Jake, the groom and stable keeper does not want to get wages and lose what he had been getting from the Delaneys for his subsistence:

That was the trouble, Pierce thought. You fought a war for people, you all but died, or you rotted in a prison, the way Tom had rotted nearly to death, and you come home and the people don't know what's it's all about, or why you fought and rotted. They want everything just the way it was before. (Buck, *The Angry Wife* 21)

The external reality of the Abolition does not equally correspond to the inner workings in the minds of the characters. Albocracy has innocent and clever advocates among all hues of people. The long habit of thinking in terms of racial hierarchy is strong and refuses to cease to exist even after the Abolition, not only among the beneficiaries but also the victims.

Pierce Delaney is an exposé of the American hypocrisy and dualism which Pearl S. Buck condemns in her political diatribes of American policy at home as well as at an international level. Delaney "hated slavery, while he loved his own slaves. Some deep conservatism in his being, love of form and order, necessity to preserve and persist, made him know that union was essential for their country, still so new" (Buck, *The Angry Wife* 3).

Set in 1920s, a post-Slavery America, *The Time is Noon* takes up as its subject-matter different attitudes and attitudinal transformations taking place in the white Americans towards the black and the mixed blood people. The central character unarguably has a remarkable resemblance to Pearl S. Buck's own self. This novel with an autobiographical note is a recount of the gradual awakening in the protagonist of her sensitivity towards racial victimization. Joan gradually gets initiated and interested in the matter of colour based marginalization. She dramatizes the dilemma between a just, egalitarian and unbiased mind and a strong sense of social propriety.

Fanny's character has resemblance with the dark slaves in *The Angry Wife* in her attractive complexion, voluptuous figure and deep voice. However, she seems to be much different from a character like Georgia who possesses integrity and a sense of pride to save herself as well as Pierce Delaney from much embarrassment and stigmatization by the society. Fanny follows Francis like a nightmare in his white-centric mind. With an element of humour, the novel describes her to be promiscuous with children by other lovers also. She christens them by coining a nickname for each resembling their fathers' names. Francis is an obsession for her while other men including her husband are just temporary flings. Francis is ashamed of feeling attracted to a dark girl and has a sense of doom associated with her. The metaphors of darkness

and lowly earth are associated with Fanny to make Francis's sense of destruction and doom vivid to the readers' minds:

... she was like earth in him. She was a sediment in him, a clay. If he could run away he would be like clear water, escaping from a muddied pool. Sometimes when he was with her, though he was deep in her, he wished he could rise straight up into the sky. (Buck, *The Time is Noon* 123)

In Pearl S. Buck's fictive world, the metaphoric correspondence between light and sky with the white skinned, and darkness and earth with the dark skinned is Blakean (Blake 22-3). The analogy gathers problems with every further Manichean association with white and black as the former is ascribed virtues and the latter all vices in essentialist terms. Pearl S. Buck's fiction does not establish this binary opposition strictly on the basis of colour. Fanny belongs to the underprivileged ghettoed people of South End with a relaxed sense of morality as a natural outcome of their environment. Fanny is a dark gravitational force that threatens Francis's White transcendence. Aided by his sister, he becomes a pilot and kills himself to make permanent his separation from the weight, darkness and earth that Fanny symbolizes. To Joan, Francis's liaison with Fanny is a shock having magnitude of a family crisis which she needs to manage to save her younger sibling and the family. Nevertheless, she is not inebriated with colour superiority in a rigid way and succeeds to shed off her sense of discomfiture about social propriety. Her separation from her husband marks a new stage in her life. She has a new lease of courage to breathe free from the social norms. She finally ends up taking Francis's son under her shelter.

Before Joan takes the responsibility, Frankie remains under the custody of the mother, reversing the European tradition of patrilineality. In case of white and dark mingling, the low-ranking parents, who are often mothers, are left with the sole burden of the progeny which is called hypodescent (Mukhopadhye and Henze). Georgia and Bettina are also victims of hypodescent. Georgia and Bettina's father behaves as if he has nothing to do with the mixed blood children. They serve the Delaney family despite the fact that they have a white father.

Pearl S. Buck calls mixed race children "world children" (Buck, *The Hidden Flower* 196). *The Hidden Flower* takes up the issue of such unwanted mixed race children whom Pearl S. Buck admires and loves as most exotic and gifted creatures on the planet. Dr. Steiner undergoes the same strange trauma that the author must have gone through for the child of an American soldier and a Japanese woman, when she tries to find an adoption home for it. She finally decides to adopt the baby herself in the way Pearl S. Buck herself did because of her desire to have a massive family full of children and her inability to have it in a biological way. Dr. Steiner is a rational and sympathetic spinster who tries hard to find a home for the unborn child of Josui Sakai and Allen Kennedy. Miss. Bray, despite having three hundred and seventeen pairs of ready-to-adopt parents disappoints Dr. Steiner by telling her that none would like to adopt Lennie because of his mixed blood. Voicing Pearl S. Buck's thoughts, Dr. Steiner exclaims with vexation about the sham that she thinks American democracy is: "Hah! Such democracy makes me think about damned Hitler! I myself am one-eighth Jewish, but for Hitler I was a whole Jew" (Buck, *The Hidden Flower* 211). The ugly Dr. Steiner is one of Buck's affectionately portrayed characters. She never hopes to have a child of her own. She is moved to feel maternal attraction toward the lovely child and finally decides to keep him with her. His mixed blood which puts him at a disadvantage with others endears him to Dr. Steiner more: "A very remarkable child," she exclaims, "There is something here. It is more than the individual...There is racial bounty here, which one often sees when races mingle. This is what Hitler never understood. When old stocks cross, something new is born" (Buck, *The Hidden Flower* 215). She believes that knowledge beyond the ordinary is required to appreciate a racial

bounty that Lennies of the world are: “Ignorance could not discern him, the ignorance of the narrow in mind, the small in heart, but she, she could know” (Buck, *The Hidden Flower* 238). Dr. Steiner knows that her triumph lies in her true knowledge which is beyond prejudice. Dr. Steiner, a loveable character, cast somewhat in the image of the author, cannot come alive in the fictive world of Pearl S. Buck, had Pearl S. Buck been an ardent anti-Semite.

Mrs. Markey, the nurse Dr. Steiner employs to look after Lennie also dotes on him. She is often chastised by her neighbours for her love for Lennie who is a half Japanese while her son was killed by some Japanese. Though she is an unlearned woman, yet she possesses the necessary sense that Pearl S. Buck admires and dreams of inculcating in the entire human race. She simply responds to the neighbours’ insensitive reproach: “It wasn’t Lennie that did it, for sure” (Buck, *The Hidden Flower* 216).

Dr. Steiner in *The Hidden Flower*, Laura in *The New Year* and Joan in *The Time is Noon* are characters that the author portrays and uses to explain the responsibility of sharing love with those who are neglected and even tortured for no fault of their own for having mixed blood.

The Time is Noon describes the black of the South End with humour coupled with pathos. Joan admires life and energy in the black by which her father is irked. His concern to expand his evangelical enterprise to the South End people puts him in a comic situation. The contrast between his solemnity and the grandiloquent seriousness of his religious intentions, and their boundless energy and bubbling life lends lightness of humour to the novel:

... those large dark young men and the dark painted girls. He was helpless before their singing. They could take a hymn straight away from him, as they did “Oh, Beluah Land” the other day, and so with singing of it that it had ceased to be a hymn. They became stamping feet and clapping hands. There was one girl especially who snapped her fingers like a horsewhip at every intensified beat. Once she had leaped on her feet and begun to sing alone a song he had not announced or not even heard of. “Singin’ with a sword in mah hand, Oh, Lawd. She sang it with her hands on hips, swaying as though she were dancing. He had pronounced the benediction hastily and come away. “The Lord is not pleased”. (Buck, *The time is Noon* 148)

This version of religion is what a white mind makes it, normative, prudish, uninformative and clannish. Joan’s missionary father would like the black to be merged into the mainstream White Christian culture.

Joan’s answer to such exuberance is what the author’s must be: “Let them live—let them live—let all life go on” (Buck, *The time is Noon* 149). It is a rainbow paradigm that is suggested here. Pearl S. Buck envisions a world with a variegated humanity adorning it in a peaceful and merry symbiosis with all the hues and colours and shades.

Pearl S. Buck’s another female protagonist is a step ahead of Joan. For Elizabeth in *Letter from Peking* (1957), racial exogamy is like an ethereal dream. Nevertheless, it is asserted that it should be qualified by love. The novel is in the first person narrative, revealing the profound feelings of a female narrator in love. There is an element of exoticization of Oriental physiognomy and a romance that blooms between an American girl and a half Chinese. Love is idealized, worshipped and even sentimentalized only to be ruptured by “history, past and present” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 193). The novel sets an undercurrent fear and a sense of foreboding of the future separations from the very beginning by mentioning the racial difference as a hurdle. Forced by the xenophobic tendency in China under Communist regime, the “more” American members of the family come back to Vermont valley, Elizabeth’s forefather’s land. Gerald MacLeod stays back in China, his motherland, as a University president. In spite of their deep love which is idealised throughout the novel by the narrator, the couple cannot reunite.

Gerald is killed perhaps making an attempt to flee China to meet his American wife and child. Despite all his attempts to be Chinese, Gerald is unable to forget his family and his own American half.

A sheer Pearlean revelry and celebration can be noticed in the description of a man with a Scotch for grandmother, an American for father and a Chinese for mother:

. . . Gerald was half Chinese. He can pass for a dark Caucasian, for his eyes are slightly almond-shaped, they are large and his brows are handsome. He is far more beautiful as a man than I am as a woman...For indeed there is some magic in the mingling of blood. Yet from which side the magic comes, who knows? It is the formula that provides the freshness . . . (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 20-1)

Elizabeth can appreciate the beauty emerging out of the mingling of blood. With a robust conviction, she helps her son not only to come to terms with but also to be proud of his ancestry and “a noble inheritance” which is “on both sides of the world” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 96). She wants him to use his lineage as a positive identity without denigrating others. Allegra finds Rennie queer after the knowledge about his ancestry. Elizabeth is a big critic of shallow girls like Allegra who have only a “cupful” of love to offer.

From an American woman's perspective, the Chinese beauty lies in the smoothness of complexion “which only Chinese ancestors can bequeath...the colour of Guernsey cream” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 14), a grace in overall demeanour and an enigmatic reticence. Elizabeth can observe and appreciate it all due to her open mindedness which is her father's legacy. Elizabeth prides in her unbiased attitude: “The windows of my father's mind were open to the world. When he died, I kept the windows open” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 22). On the other hand, Mrs. Kirke, Elizabeth's mother is described by the narrator as “a limiting influence” having no large emotions and no world feelings” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 97). Mental and attitudinal openness is not sex-specific qualities to Pearl S. Buck. The kinship between the author and the narrator is to be found in an unbiased appreciation of all the human varieties, a romantic glorification of the various hues of love of and scepticism about the otherworldliness of religion. That religion is not able to stop the world from going asunder perplexes the author as well as fictive Elizabeth and Joan. Elizabeth does not feel indebted to the Church for her broad mindedness or “world feeling”: “The Church which we went taught me nothing of the much talked-of and seldom practised brotherhood” (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 97).

While Pearl S. Buck glorifies miscegenation, she hates loveless and irresponsible copulations. Elizabeth criticizes American men whom she declares to be irresponsible, incorrigibly adolescent and stubborn enough to refuse to grow. On one hand, they try to pretend to be shy and decent to desire all the conversations to be bowdlerised in the presence of their wives, mothers and middle-aged women:

For all their adolescent interest in physical sex, they are singularly pure and unsophisticated. They scatter their seed around the earth these days, begetting children in Europe and Asia as innocently and irresponsibly as young tomcats in spring. They pause to mate and wander on. (Buck, *Letter from Peking* 119)

The political history and human meanness either strangle love or separate lovers. *Letter from Peking*, *The time is Noon*, *The Hidden Flower* and *The New Year* are such novels that prove that love, though so much idealised, has no power in the face of stark reality of human meanness manifested in racism. Nevertheless the writer is able to make a plea for the fruits of such love. The Rennies, Frankies, Lennies and Kim Christophers of the world need support and love as much as any white male child of any prosperous family does.

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