

Multiculturalism in the artistic and philosophical understanding of Pearl Buck

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Abstract: The article explores the issue of the plurality of cultural traditions in US literature and art, focusing on the interplay between Western and Eastern influences, particularly in the context of American multiculturalism. The work of Pearl Buck is examined as a precursor to contemporary discussions on multiculturalism, focusing on themes of national, ethnic, and cultural identity, as well as the complexities of "us" versus "them" dynamics. Buck's exploration of hybridity and her quest for harmony between East and West are noted as pivotal in bridging cultural divides and fostering mutual understanding.

The problem of the plurality of cultural traditions in US literature and art is one of the most relevant problems of the modern era. As A. Genis noted: “The marriage of the West and the East did take place, and its fruit was modern art... So the West and the East became what they always were: the Yang and Yin of the world soul.”[1] Indeed, at the moment in American literature, the national specificity of which has always been its racial and ethnic diversity, there is increased attention to the peculiarities of the processes of transculturation and overcoming the marginality of ethnic minorities. “The virtualization of the concepts of “race,” “nation,” and “state” makes the cultural boundaries between them transparent, implying the possibility of hybrid ideological constructs and, no less important, the rejection of hierarchy, the division into more and less significant, dominant or subordinate.”[2]

In her work, Pearl Buck often addressed the problems of national, ethnic, and cultural identity, the relationship between “us” and “them,” and the problem of

“hybridity” long before the development of the ideas of multiculturalism, defined as “the concept of dialogue and interaction of cultures, based on an understanding of the Other, on ambivalence of culture as the ability, stepping back, to look at oneself from the outside, to be dialogical about oneself.”[3] “Life between two worlds”[4] led to the writer’s interest in building “bridges” between East and West, searching for a path to harmony and mutual understanding of different cultures and peoples. Researchers note the important role of Pearl Buck in preparing the ground for the development of multicultural literature, however, the problems of hybrid identity and dialogue of cultures in the writer’s work remain unaddressed to this day. The white American woman Buck cannot be included in the ranks of writers of Asian-American literature due to race; while the missionary orientation of some of her books became the reason for classifying Buck’s work as mass literature, reflecting the gender aspect of American Orientalism. During her lifetime, Pearl Buck commented: “They don’t know what to make of me... they’re not quite sure whether I should be included in the history of American literature or whether I belong at all among the American writers.”[5] Indeed, it is difficult to consider her work in the context of one national cultural tradition and only in the literary and aesthetic categories of Western thought. Researchers cannot do this without thorough orientalist competence.

Based on his own experience of social and cultural marginality, P. Buck creates a whole series of multicultural characters in which the problem of national identity is actualized. Thus, according to P. Conn, the novel “Earth” is “innovative concerning “genuine multiculturalism.”[6] The novel's close attention to the structure of Chinese life in general and rural life in particular, as well as the absence of stereotypical oriental motifs generally accepted in Western depictions of China during this period, allows us to transform the binary relationships “us-them”, “friend-foe”.[7]

The theme of the universality of human existence is included in Buck's prose in large quantities. In one of his articles, Buck writes: “Philosophers of the East and West, throughout the entire conscious history of mankind, without realizing it, thought alike. A person remains a person both in the West and in the East. Today we need practical evidence of our similarities, and here is one of them - not only is there nothing alien to us in Chinese philosophical thought the thoughts of our philosophers are the same... Our differences in thinking are superficial, but our similarities are



enormous. It's time for us to know this.”[8] Hence follows Buck’s desire to emphasize the fundamental similarities in the value orientations of all people in the world. Her works are united by the idea that “we all live under the same sky”; her work is permeated with the desire for freedom, peace and the protection of universal ideals. “Under Heaven”, they say, “all men are one family”. Heaven is the father, Earth is the mother, and human beings are the children.”[9]

Pearl Buck is concerned about the fragility and conventions of any cultural and national tradition. In her novels, the writer seeks to answer the question of how, in personal experience and the formation of one’s own identity, a person changes national and cultural stereotypes, accepting and recognizing in an unexpected way completely heterogeneous elements of cultures. Reconciliation with the otherness of the Other deepens the self-knowledge of the “I”.

Viewing China and America “within” and “within” the interstitial space, the writer analyzed and questioned the unequal relationships between races and cultures. Buck writes: “We cannot believe that we are the same. Differences in skin color, hair, and height give us reason to think that we differ from each other in more fundamental ways.” For Buck, differences between language, religious characteristics, territory, traditions, values, and norms cease to be the main distinguishing national criteria.

Let us draw attention to the fact that Buck’s American creativity falls during the period of the emergence of the struggle for civil rights and equality of all ethnic groups in American society. It is no coincidence that the idea of equality for all peoples of the world is the leitmotif of her work. The current problem of racism and ethnic discrimination in the United States shocked the writer upon returning to her homeland and came into conflict with the romanticized image of a multicultural and multiethnic America formed by Buck during her life in China. In her address to African-American students at Harvard in 1942, Buck remarked: “I must confess that I was shocked by the racial prejudice in my own country. Having previously lived in China, where there are almost no racial prejudices as such, I did not at all expect this from my homeland.” Accustomed to the atmosphere of Chinese tolerance, Buck could not come to terms with racial problems in America and until the end of her days, she took an active part in the fight against racial and ethnic discrimination.

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