

Narrative as Humanitarian Activism: Pearl S. Buck's 1931 Flood Stories and the Pursuit of Global Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarianism plays a constructive role in creating a better society and preserving human dignity. This study asserts the importance of the writer's humanitarian perspective, as it can foster empathy in readers and, in turn, help them understand real-world problems that are otherwise unknown to them. To substantiate this argument, two short stories by Pearl S. Buck from the collection *The First Wife and Other Stories*, specifically written against the backdrop of the 1931 Chinese floods, have been selected for analysis.

Humanitarian issues such as war or natural disasters gain emotional depth when presented in literary form, as literature provides readers with a sensory experience that journalism — with its reliance on facts and statistics — cannot replicate. One of the core aspects of humanitarian writing is the avoidance of propaganda in order to evoke universal empathy. The study also highlights the importance of verisimilitude in writing that engages with humanitarian themes, as it adds credibility by encouraging readers to suspend their disbelief.

Furthermore, the research argues that a humanitarian writer must assert the value of human dignity in order to move the audience effectively. Buck elevates her characters by portraying them as choosing starvation over indignity, thereby motivating readers to take charitable action. Ultimately, the paper concludes that societal well-being and the cultivation of global empathy are far more achievable when writers assume the role of humanitarians.

Keywords: Humanitarianism; Writing as activism; 1931 Yangtze-Huai River Floods; Fictional truth; Verisimilitude; Human dignity.

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Humanitarianism, according to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, can be defined as the beliefs and practices aimed at improving the conditions of people who are suffering. Literature plays a vital role in spreading humanitarian ideas by fostering empathy and moral values in individuals. It can transcend intellectual inquiry and appeal directly to the human heart. "Writing as activism" has become a trend, and it is gaining momentum. Literature's ability to disseminate ideas makes it one of the major tools of activism. It acts as a historical record of calamities, violence, and systemic injustices. History focuses on factuality and objectivity, whereas literature provides a sensory understanding of events. This makes literature an effective medium for conveying humanitarian ideas in order to create a better society. Literary works that address real human issues should be given greater importance than works that provide only aesthetic

pleasure. Literary works that focus solely on aesthetic values serve only the purpose of entertainment. Meanwhile, literary works that reflect real human issues can encourage readers to think critically and motivate them to take necessary actions to create a better world. This paper argues that Pearl S. Buck uses fictional truth and verisimilitude as tools to present a truthful humanitarian voice without impartiality, especially in her two flood short stories, "Barren Spring" and "The Refugees."

Pearl S. Buck is one of the writers of the twentieth century who dealt with humanitarian themes and produced a great impact on a global level. She was a writer and humanitarian who is best known for her best-selling novel *The Good Earth*. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and the Nobel Prize in 1938. She advocated for women's rights and racial equality. Pearl S. Buck's contribution to humanity cannot be limited to

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her writings. Her contributions as a humanitarian echo more strongly because she acted as the voice of certain vulnerable groups. Spending nearly 40 years in China enabled Buck to witness rural poverty and famine, which developed a sense of empathy in her. Due to this exposure, her missionary perspective evolved into a secular humanitarian view. Using her literary influence, she tried to aid the victims of the 1931 China floods, and it still stands as one of her most notable humanitarian contributions. These stories are from her 1933 collection *The First Wife and Other Stories*. She had firsthand experience of this flood, as she was involved in relief campaigns for flood victims. She wrote these short stories to get charitable donations from American audiences for relief measures. Thus, her writings function both as narrative art and humanitarian advocacy.

When it comes to writing, there are two types of truth: journalistic truth and fictional truth. The essence of journalistic truth lies in faithfully presenting the facts without any partiality. However, emotional understanding may be limited in this context, as it pertains solely to factual information. On the other hand, fictional truth offers a more comprehensive representation of humanity, encompassing both emotional and material aspects. In discussing humanitarian issues, the truth found in fiction is often more impactful than the truth presented in journalism, as the former conveys emotional depth and shared human experiences, while the latter mainly focuses on numerical data. All the works of Pearl S. Buck have a fictional truth for two reasons. First, she infuses her firsthand insights into her works. Second, she explores universal human experiences in her works. In "Barren Spring," Buck's familiarity with the Chinese landscape is evident in her discussion of seasonal changes and their impact on the land. The story reveals, "There was no wheat on it, for the flood had covered it long after wheat should have been planted, and it lay there cracked and like clay but newly dried" (225). This demonstrates the author's empirical knowledge of agrarian society and the land.

Verisimilitude is one of the essential elements for establishing fictional truth, and it is one of the defining features of Buck's writings. It can be defined as the quality of a work that makes a story appear realistic and believable. Verisimilitude works on readers as it suspends their disbelief. There is a subtle difference between "realism" and "verisimilitude." Realism can be defined as the practice of presenting subject matter accurately without exaggeration. Meanwhile, verisimilitude is the quality of being

believable and logically coherent. A literary work can combine realism and verisimilitude because they are complementary. Buck combines realism and verisimilitude in her works to achieve accuracy and narrative validity. Without verisimilitude, a literary work risks becoming melodrama or propaganda. Buck employs verisimilitude in her works through observational realism, drawing on her familiarity with rural Chinese life. The familiarity with the Chinese landscape and culture she gained from living there for decades helped her lend verisimilitude to her works.

Buck combines realism with verisimilitude through detailed agrarian imagery in both short stories. In "Barren Spring," Buck presents the terrible days of agrarian life, where the land is cracked, dry, and lifeless. Through this image, she creates a visual void that allows readers to experience the sensory effects of famine. In "The Refugees," she uses the urban landscape to symbolize the loss of agrarian identity. The old man's determination to spend the silver coin on seeds, despite his hunger, signifies that the identity of the agrarian community is closely connected to the land. Without the quality of verisimilitude, the stoic endurance exhibited by Liu and the old man would be conveyed to the reader as exaggeration.

When a humanitarian crisis occurs, political agendas and propaganda come into play. The most troubling aspect arises when political motives interfere, resulting in actions that serve the interests of political parties rather than addressing the needs of the victims. Using the 1931 Chinese Flood as a case study, one can clearly observe political propaganda surrounding the event. The Communist Party of China (CPC) capitalized on this event to blame the Nationalist government (Kuomintang), which was headed by Chiang Kai-shek. Meanwhile, the Nationalist government, by establishing the National Flood Relief Commission (NFRC), attempted to gain the goodwill of the people. In several places, Communist forces attacked relief workers and disrupted flood relief measures. They even portrayed the relief camps as death traps to undermine the trust of the affected agrarian society in the Nationalist government. Hugo Slim, in *Humanitarian Ethics*, argues that the overall goal of humanitarian action can be expressed in two key terms: humanity and impartiality. Political propaganda can affect both of these ideas, as no political propaganda has universal appeal. While dealing with humanitarianism, incorporating universal appeal is highly important. The most remarkable aspect of Pearl S. Buck's writing is that she resisted the political propaganda of her era and focused solely on

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the prevailing issues and circumstances. Instead of blaming either side, she focuses on universal human suffering to evoke empathy, which in turn may lead to humanitarian aid for the victims. Neither "Barren Spring" nor "The Refugees" supports communism or nationalism. The deaths in both stories were presented as a harsh reality of survival, not as a result of the government's failure. Moreover, no mention of revolution or praise of the government can be found in either short story, which makes them more apolitical.

Upholding human dignity is a crucial consideration when addressing humanitarian topics. This statement raises an important question: Why is it crucial to uphold human dignity in literary works, particularly those addressing humanitarian issues? The purpose of works addressing humanitarian issues is primarily to elicit empathy from the audience. Empathy arises when readers perceive that the main characters in a literary piece possess a sense of dignity. Without a sense of dignity, a character may seem insignificant, and readers might overlook that character. As an investigator of humanitarian issues, Pearl S. Buck artfully maintained the dignity of individuals through her characters. In the short story "Barren Spring," Liu's refusal to leave his land illustrates a strong sense of dignity. At the same time, Liu's neighbours left their land behind and migrated to the cities to beg, which inevitably diminishes their significance as they traded their human dignity for the sake of survival. Liu also demonstrated a sense of human dignity by honouring his deceased mother, even amidst difficult circumstances. His wife intended to bury his mother without any clothes in order to keep the rags for their children. Even with his wife's insistence, Liu felt uncomfortable with the notion of burying his mother without clothes, as he thought that performing such an act would be disrespectful to human dignity. In "The Refugees," the dignity of the refugees is preserved, as the author states: "These were no common men and women, no riff-raff from some community, always poor and easily starving in a flood time. No, these were men and women of which any nation might have been proud" (230). The old man in the story loses everything and is forced into starvation. Yet he is unwilling to give up his dignity and beg in order to relieve his hunger. It is evident, as the old man states:

Sir, I did not beg of you. Sir, we have good land and we have never been starving like this before, having such good land. But this year the river rose and men starve even on good land, at such times; Sir, we have no seed left, even. We have eaten our seed. I told them, we

cannot eat the seed. But they were young; and hungry and they ate it. (232)

Although he receives a silver coin and a copper penny, he saves the silver coin for seeds and spends only the copper penny to feed his grandchild, the only remaining member of his family. His choice to endure starvation for his grandchild and a better future makes him a symbol of self-sacrifice, ultimately leading readers to idealise the character rather than feel pity for him.

The primary aim of humanitarian literature is not merely to evoke human emotions but to produce moral reflection in the reader. Buck closes the gap between readers and the characters by portraying them with dignity, which is reflected in their resilience even in the face of severe hardships. Humanitarianism in literature begins with seeing the world through another person's eyes, as Harper Lee states in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it" (33). Buck's writings are largely consistent with these words.

To sum up, the humanitarian contributions of Pearl S. Buck through her writing prove that a humanitarian perspective of a writer is very much needed for the creation of a better society. The research proves that the true power of literature does not lie in adding aesthetic value to a work but in acting as a moral compass during times of crisis. The research also proves that, with the effective use of verisimilitude, a writer can be a significant humanitarian contributor and create a greater impact during a humanitarian crisis than a journalist. Buck's use of fictional truth helped the global audience look deeper into the 1931 China floods by adding a sensory dimension to the event. She also tried to close the gap between distant observers and suffering victims by focusing on shared human experiences. Her impartial presentation, without any political agenda, makes her work an authentic representation of the humanitarian voice. While discussing real human issues, readers move from being passive observers to active participants in social change. Buck's narratives show that a humanitarian vision enables writing to be used as an effective tool for activism. Narratives like this educate readers and ultimately motivate them to take necessary actions to create a better world.

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