

A Sense of Belongingness in *Matti Manishi* and *The Good Earth*.

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A work of literature that has withstood the test of time qualifies to be called a classic. An outstanding work is one that adheres to the standards of literary writings by constantly lending itself to critical analysis while ever remaining relevant and is acclaimed as an exemplary piece of writing by discerning critics who compare it with classics of the past and contemporary times.

Dr. Vasireddy Sitadevi's *Matti Manishi* remains, for the past two and half decades, a classic in the genre of fiction writing. It has received critical and universal acclaim, both from connoisseurs of literature and common folk and continues to be hailed as work of highest literary standards. *Matti Manishi* remains one of the few works that has simultaneously received admiration from critics and readers. It has not only received numerous literary awards but has also been translated into English and various other widely spoken Indian languages.

A piece of writing can be hailed as a good piece of literature only when it is studied in comparison and contrast with similar works from the same genre. It will then stand out as canonical work because it is profound, different, contemporary and outstanding.

Dr Vasireddy Sitadevi and her work *Matti Manishi* has been compared with, not an unknown work or a relatively obscure entity, but with a Nobel Laureate and a Pulitzer Prize winner Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* a modern English novel that is internationally acclaimed as one of the best works of literature. Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* vividly portrays life in countryside China in the early 1900s. Her life in rural China gave her vast insight into the minds of Chinese peasants. Buck's writing can also be viewed as depicting not just a Chinese farmer, but a "universal farmer," one who knows that his riches and security come from the good earth itself, which recalls the portrayal of rural life by Sitadevi in her novel. Dr. Vasireddy Sitadevi is called the 'Pearl Buck' of Andhra. It is indeed a rare honor for world of Telugu literature

especially in the genre of fictional writing. It is this comparison that evokes great interest in Dr Vasireddy Sitadevi's work.

The primary reason for slotting and studying *Matti Manishi* and *The Good Earth* together is because of the similarities they share. Both these novels share a fairly similar plot. They both explore and express the ways of agrarian society and lives, their urbanization, the consequent problems that arise, centuries old hierarchies, the changes that are adjunct of contemporary times and the reaction to these changes.

These two novels engage the reader with their portrayal of young farmers who are sons of the soil. Social mobility from a miserable state to a comfortable living takes place thanks to relentless hard work on their farmland. The hurdles and setbacks that they face during their course of progress are chronicled in these novels. The works also talk of characters that form the generation that comes to reap the benefits of labor the older generation. The characters of the younger generation who do not have to sweat to eke out their livelihood, lead a reckless and wayward life.

The protagonists of both the novels are farmers- Sambaiah and Wang Lung. Their experiences, relations, anxieties, celebrations, thoughts, emotions, happiness, anguish are all inextricably associated with earth. They are undeniably recognized as sons of the soil. Sambaiah might have said, "This earth is my slate. My plough is my pencil. The fields are my school. I have learnt writing on this earth. Every single day it has taught me a new word. This earth is my mother, deity and teacher". Wang may not have articulated what Sambaiah expressed but strongly believed "Out of the land we came and into it we must go"... "If you sell the land, it is the end." They both share the same feeling.

Sambaiah and Wang Lung encounter fairly similar kinds of obstacles and accumulate experiences, despite belonging to vastly different countries, times, social and religious groups. Life teaches them similar kinds of lessons. The humble farmer may evolve into a landlord. But his descent gets accelerated from the time he starts losing his association from the soil or distancing himself from the same.

Sambaiah and Wang Lung work hard to earn the land from those landlords who become slaves to leading wayward lives and pawn their land, forgetting that they owe their riches to this

same earth. Sambaiah buys agricultural land from a landlord called Balaramaiah. As Balaramaiah falls on hard times due to his decadent lifestyle Sambaiah becomes a prosperous farmer. Sambaiah proved the truth in Vemana's verse:

The essence of soil springs from the earth

All philosophy rises from flesh

All that is born of labor is wealth.

Gurazada Apparao declared that it was only when the roots of the noble tree of the country were watered with the sweat of humans that the harvest of wealth would be reaped. Sambaiah of *Matti Manishi* learnt these teachings of great poets through his own experience "The soil likes sweat. That is why the soil is where the sweat is. This land, this breeze, this sky above are the property of the sweating farmer; not of the one who lords over, sitting in an elevated palanquin" – that indeed was the philosophical thought – life's vision –of Sambaiah.

Wang Lung purchases land from Hwang's family. As Hwang's family degenerate into opium addicts Wang becomes the owner of Hwang's erstwhile home. Life is not kind to Wang. He learns many lessons the hard way. He realizes that the world is an inhospitable place and people are not only forever trying to exploit and yet at other times will not hesitate to spill the blood of fellow beings. He faces a series of hurdles. Despite being subjected to such debilitating experiences, Wang tenaciously holds on his piece of land. Similarly, Sambaiah gave up on his son and daughter-in-law. But he wisely decides to continue his association with his land.

Land remains, both a strength and weakness for Sambaiah and Wang. They both find happiness in sweating out in their fields. It is wisely said human weakness issues out of fame, women and wealth. Both Wang and Sambaiah cannot remain immune to the evils that excessive money carries with itself. Neither do their families succeed in insulating themselves from the vices that come with wealth.

Throughout both the novels, land remains the weakness of both the protagonists. But this weakness does not extend to the wealth their land will bestow on them. Both the characters believe in hard work and their happiness depends solely on the slaving in their fields and watching their hard work pay dividends in the form of lush and bountiful crops. Sambaiah and

Wang are obsessed with gradually increasing their land holdings. This obsession is their vice and weakness.

Unlike Wang, Sambaiah's wife is not alive to share his burden through good and hard times. Sambaiah, a widower, finds solace in his fields and hard work. A lonely Sambaiah is attracted to a woman. But the desire dies down without his succumbing to this temptation. The desire does not surface ever again. On the other hand, Wang does not escape from falling prey to female charms. He gets entangled in an extra-marital affair, even while feeling that he is being cruel to his virtuous wife and mother of his sons- O-lan.

Slowly a desire for acquiring respectability takes root in Sambaiah. He wants to enter into a matrimonial alliance with the family of the landlord under whom his father worked as a farmhand. Decision to get his son married to Varudhini, the daughter of Balaramaiah becomes his nemesis. He pays a heavy price for this step. Varudhini succeeds in creating ill will by bringing in her arrogance of her wealth and creating a rift based on money and material.

Wang Lung falls prey to name and fame and turns into a puppet in the hands of his sons. He gives in to acquiring a special honor and standing for his family and for creating 'personal deities' to adorn his family. In the scramble for false honor, name and fame, he loses his wife O-lan and his neighbor and friend, Ching-both who were instrumental in achieving all that desired.

Sambaiah's wife Durgamma, a silent spectator to the practical nature of her husband, remains ignored and neglected throughout the novel and thus evokes the sympathy of the readers for her wretched and unenviable state. But Sambaiah's daughter-in-law Varudhini, is so influential a character she dictates the entire plot of the novel *Matti Manishi*. She is a person who was born in a rich family. She is married into a nouveau riche family, to a man whose family had worked as farm hands on her family lands. Her husband Venkatapathy is a rough and uncouth person. All these aspects of her marital home, their background and her spouse lead to a strange kind of disenchantment and disillusion in her psyche. Due to this disillusion she is attracted to Ramanatha Babu, a character who is "dignified, mature and emotionally strong". Yet she mentally steels herself and successfully protects Sambaiah's property from falling into wrong hands. She copes with the incompetency of her husband and thwarts the machinations of Ramanatha Babu.

O-lan is slavery personified. Wang feels that he is being a good husband when he works alongside her. She is always practical and never gets agitated by any kind of challenge or distress. Ironically she is not strong and bold enough to confront her husband over his wayward life. She remains a silent spectator and wallows in her sorrow and finally dies.

Lotus, Cuckoo and Pear Blossom- are representative of certain kind of women of Buck's time in China. They are sold and bought as slaves, to be used and abused. Their lives were spent in the service of others. They could not form any identity for themselves living in the shadows of others suffering from internalized trauma. They indulged in petty bickering and misunderstandings since they could not lead meaningful and satisfying lives. Pearl S. Buck lucidly expresses the physical and mental landscape of such women characters in *Good Earth*.

The women characters of *Good Earth* evoke pity among the readers. But unlike the character of Varudhini, these women characters do not evoke a sense of agony. Varudhini is a woman with a strong identity. This sense of individuality is missing in women characters of Bucks's novels. Women characters who have been subjected to social injustice and neglect can be found to populate many works.

Varudhini stands out as a strong woman character because she makes the readers and critics mull over the question whether the novel *Matti Manishi* is possible without her. Varudhini is sketched as a person who knows what she wants from life and creates ways to achieve her goals. But at a certain point in life, she is indecisive and ignorant of what is right for her. She is like a fledgling, caught in a quagmire of extra marital affair and gasping in a prohibited relationship. But she manages to recover and extricate herself from impending doom and work towards her ambition.

The author has so skillfully carved the character of Varudhini that a reader is bound to feel that such a character will react only in the way she does. The expertise of the novelist in creating Varudhini's character can be gauged by the fact that, along with invoking the sympathy of rest of the characters in the novel, she also draws out similar emotion from the readers. Varudhini leaves us with moist-eyes. She forewarns us, so that there will be no one faltering like her.

Sambaiah's lone heir Venkatapathy, is a person lacking in individuality. He is Varudhini's husband. Sambaiah bemoans, "How did I sire such a person? Why should I be saddled with such a son?" But Varudhini's son Ravi takes after his paternal grandfather and displays the same kind of determination and ambition. He infuses fresh life into a morbid Sambaiah. He becomes a pillar of support. Sambaiah's family might become victims of opportunistic politics. But a force will rise to protect the rights and hopes of a generation of people denied their rightful place under the sun. No force on earth can stop the march of such a juggernaut.

Wang's family degenerates into leading lavish lives. One of his son's is hen-pecked. Another son is preoccupied with chasing money and materialistic things. The youngest son joins the army after a spat with his father over his association with a slave. Wang is left with no one to inherit his legacy or passion for the land. His progeny have embarked a journey to destruction. They plan to sell the land embracing China's unstoppable modernization. And finally Wang Lung died holding the soil in his hand in the lap of the mother earth, similarly Sambaiah the protagonist of Vasireddy Sitadevi's novel *Matti Manishi* also dies gripping soil in his fist and with his face and body covered with mud. The holding of soil by both the characters conveys an important message about the essential union of the spirit of man and the earth

A debate that frequently arises is whether work becomes a good piece of literature due to its plot or narration. A plot and a theme form the story of a work, duly chosen by the author. Narration is the way the plot is expressed or is made to unfold. Narrative technique is as important as the plot. A literary work will fail to arrest the attention of the readers even if it has a riveting plot.

A narrative without a plot is not plausible. There has to be proportionate balance in plot and narrative, since both are equally important to convey the message of the text, though the message need not always necessarily be didactic in nature. *Matti Manishi* and *Good Earth* have come to be acknowledged and celebrated as classics because both the novelists have struck the fine balance between plot and narrative in their respective works. Somerset Maugham had remarked that only those novels that express universal humanistic qualities will attract, enthuse and motivate the readers.

These two novels are based on lives of characters hailing from restricted spatial realms of the world. They talk of lives of sons of the soil from India in *Matti Manishi* and China in *Good Earth*. They have proved Maugham right by transcending the geographical boundaries and reaching out to the sensibilities of a universal audience due to their plots that find resonance across continents. Thus they have come to be universally acclaimed.

Matti Manishi and *The Good Earth* owe their success to the fact that they do not preach and are far from being didactic. The characters are not role models to be worshipped or imitated. The novelists have successfully crafted the novels by housing characters who are normal people with their inherent and acquired strengths and weaknesses. Therein lies the popularity of both the works and the authors.

The novelists have demonstrated a rare skill by using the language of the common man to express profound feelings and thoughts. Their talent can be seen in the way they have conveyed inequalities through everyday happenings. Dr. Vasireddy Sitadevi has eloquently conveyed her thoughts in a succinct manner by comparing a drop of sweat of hard labor as being equivalent to a drop of nectar or when she says that the plough parted the earth to find ‘Goddess Sita open her eyes’

The poignant evocation of the rise and fall of the man of the soil Sambaiah of *Matti Manishi* and Wang Lung of *The Good Earth* is a powerful indictment of the lure of the city and ephemeral urban ‘culture,’ undermining human/rural values and reminds one of Thomas Hardy’s presentation of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. As the story of a Chinese farmer in *The Good Earth* conquered the hearts of the entire world let us hope that an English version of *Matti Manishi* will ensconce itself in the hearts of all people who worship Earth. This hope endures because notwithstanding time, form, country or culture, *Matti Manishi* (the son of the soil, the farmer) will be found wherever there is ‘Good Earth’.

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