CHAPTER II:

My Several Worlds

Autobiography of Pearl S. Buck
Pearl S. Buck published *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* in 1954, when her literary reputation had reached a plateau. This book revived interest in her work and earned exceptional sales and uniformly glowing reviews.

Like all 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 S. 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 Pearl S. 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. Philippe 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 himself or herself 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, Pearl S. Buck says on the first page of *My Several Worlds*: "This book is not a complete autobiography. My private life has been uneventfully happy, except for a few incidents whose disaster I was able to accept, and a human being could not, I believe, have less than I to complain of against fate.
A happy 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, Pearl S. 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herself from "le pacte autobiographique" and uses the Autobiography less as a document of the Self and more as a social/historical document.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, Pearl S. 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, Pearl S. Buck instead takes the reader on a journey that spans the whole of China, Europe, U.S. 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 Pearl S. 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 Pearl S. 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. Pearl S. Buck's Self therefore, is well hidden in My Several Worlds.

However, she leaves several markers in the book that this Self can be found, for those who are 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). "My life has been too crowded with travels and many people for me to put it all within the covers of one book, however, and indeed all my books have not been enough to tell the things I would like to tell. Years after I left India I wrote Come, My Beloved against its background". (305). "Years later, this woman became the material in the very rough for my novel The Mother". (221). "I did once make another little monument of a sort, too, to the Japanese people. It was carved from a day in Kobe, a day which threatened to be lonely and sad because I
was then lonely and sad, and which instead was an experience which I
have placed among the most treasured of my life. I put it into a small
book for children, entitled One Bright Day, which was exactly what it
was". (228). "The story of The Good Earth had long been clear in my
mind. Indeed, it had shaped itself firmly and swiftly from the events
of my life, and its energy was the anger I felt for the sake of the
peasants and the common folk of China, whom I loved and admired
and still do. For the scene of my book I chose the North Country, and
the rich Southern City, Nanking. My material was therefore close at
hand, and the people I knew as I knew myself. In all my books I have
made such mixture. Years later, for example, I put into Kinfolk bits of
the same Northern Country". (250). "I have told the story of my eldest
need arose, after still more years, I thought of my mother and how she
would have wanted to help and, as though she had said so, I
remembered her portrait and dedicated it to the cause and it was
published as a book under the title The Exile". (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". 3
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 Pearl S. 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, Pearl S. 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".4

It was during the course of her first loveless marriage that Pearl S. Buck submerged herself in her writing and sought ways to gain control over her splintered life. Like most women in her generation who became discontented with the gendered status quo, she did not yet have a vocabulary in which to describe an alternative. Nonetheless she had decided that she would only survive by recreating herself as an independent person. What is more apparent in My Several Worlds
is Pearl S. 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 genderless role of the 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 "Resisting the Gaze of Embodiment": "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".  

Perhaps it is this subconscious fear of being submerged within this cultural encoding of "woman" that prompts Pearl S. 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, community member are more apparent in My Several Worlds.
Pearl S. 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 looking at the text closely, one discovers that it is not only the private life of Pearl S. 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 of the world where the public career of the autobiographer is highlighted. 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. This denial of private identity raises doubts again about the connection between Autobiography and Self.

My Several Worlds therefore, defies the standard definition of the Autobiography as a confessional mode. In fact, critics of Autobiography like Estelle Jelinek question the very ideal of autobiography as a confessional mode. Jelinek in the Introduction of the book, Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism opines that life-studies of public figures often lack confidentiality. She also thinks that writers have produced some of the best autobiographies without conforming to the confessional ideal.
By moving the focus away from the Self towards history, Pearl S. Buck indicates her reluctance to use the autobiography as a confessional medium. In juxtaposition to 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. She says somewhere in the middle of her book: "There were personal reasons too why I should return to my own country. It is not necessary to recount them, for in the huge events that were changing my world, the personal was all but negligible", (291)

What Patricia Meyer Spacks says about the autobiographies of Golda Meir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Day, Emma Goldman and Emmeline Pankhurst holds true of Pearl S. 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. Spack says: "In writing of themselves these women of public accomplishment implicitly stress the uncertainties of the personal, denying rather than glorifying ambition, evading rather than enlarging private selves. They use autobiography paradoxically as a mode of self-denial. Although they have functioned successfully
in spheres rarely open to women, their accounts of this activity emphasise its hidden costs more than its rewards and draw back - as women have traditionally done- from making large claims of importance."

Pearl S. 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 institutionalising her retarded child, Carol, Pearl S. 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 Pearl S. 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 Pearl S. Buck had to face a lot of adverse criticism from her parents' missionary contacts and from the media. *Talking about the six weeks of isolation in Reno, Nevada, where she divorced her first husband and married her second husband, she says in My Several Worlds: "Last week I read in the back pages of a great New York daily a small paragraph stating in dignified terms that a certain well-known man, a high official in the government, had been granted divorce from his wife. What*
progress!... Twenty years ago we Americans were not so advanced
and my dread was not of the six weeks of isolation. No, larger almost
than happiness was the day of abhorrent publicity which I knew that I
could not avoid". (319)

Here too Pearl S. 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.
She shrank from such a hostile reaction and sought to deflect attention
away from her private life towards her more public affairs. She saw
herself as a spokesperson for Asian and Eastern affairs and constantly
tried to raise American awareness about Asian cultures.

To most Americans in the 1930s, difference was still the sign of
deviance. Western customs and practices, no matter how arbitrary,
were taken to be the human norm. My Several Worlds was an attempt
by Pearl S. Buck to bridge the yawning chasm that lay between the
cultures of the East and West. In this respect she was much ahead of
her time. It is only now that the American people have begun to
realise that their future is entangled with Asia. Nevertheless, amid
pious invocations of multiculturalism, a shrinking world, and the
imminent arrival of the Pacific Centre, the peoples of Asia and the
West continue to view each other through veils of cliché and
misunderstanding. As Fatmagul Berktay says: "Cultural difference is not absolute, and similarities between cultures is as important as differences. Recognising ethnocentrism instead of establishing absolute differences should help to break down the barriers to cultural understanding. Learning about other groups can indeed be a way to unlearn racism, orientalism and ethnocentrism. The alien 'other' may prove to be not so other after all!"

But at the time that Pearl S. Buck wrote *My Several Worlds*, Orientalism was present with a vengeance in almost all walks of life, even in the rarefied atmosphere of the Academy of Arts and Letters. She narrates tongue-in-cheek this episode at the Academy that exemplified in her mind the self-centred attitude of America:

"Although the learned men discuss so beautifully the symbolism of Mallarme, do they know the symbolism of the famous essayists, or the hidden novelists of China? They are never discussed. And for another example, among the Hundred Books, those classics which Western scholars have chosen to represent the sources of human civilisations, there was not one Asian book, although in Asia great civilisations flourished long before our day and still exist in revitalised strength. 'Why', I asked an American scholar, 'are there no books from Asia in the Great One Hundred?'"
'Because', he said quite honestly but without the least sign of guilt, 'nobody knows anything about them!'

Nobody! Only millions of people! Ah, well-" (388).

Pearl S. Buck was thus one of those rare Westerners who had an intimate knowledge of an Eastern culture. Her ability to be both "inside" and "outside" two cultures makes her an excellent social commentator. In My Several Worlds, she gives her version of history and makes the important point, so much in fashion in today's world of political correctness, that each person is entitled to make his or her version of truth and that all truths are legitimate: "I was old enough now to read history for myself and I perceived that Chinese historians and English ones gave entirely different versions not only of the same events but of each other, and that each despised the other as a lesser breed, although neither knew what the other was."(51). She continues in the same fashion: "I became mentally bifocal, and so I learned early to understand that there is no such condition in human affairs as absolute truth. There is only truth as people see it, and truth, even in fact, may be kaleidoscopic in its variety." (52)

While this liberal attitude towards truth made Pearl S. Buck richer in experience, it also served to alienate her from both Eastern and Western cultures. She was an "outsider" wherever she went. She admits to the uncomfortable position a person who is too well-aware
is constantly put in: "The damage such perception did to me I have felt ever since, although damage may be too dark a word, for it meant that I could never belong entirely to one side of any question." (52)

She was simultaneously an outsider and an insider in two different societies. Her divided situation rather resembled the "twoness" of American blacks. Her early years as a member of a minority community in China did much to shape her later commitment to racial equality and cultural pluralism. Her life and writing helped to redefine the idea of a woman's place in modern society. She was a major public figure, independent and often pugnacious, who was also the mother of eight children, all but one adopted and including several of mixed race. Beginning in poverty, she earned millions of dollars and spent lavishly on herself, her family, her friends, and her causes. She lobbied successfully to change American attitudes and policies in the areas of immigration, adoption, minority rights and mental health.

Yet, in spite of her public works and the good sale of her books, her literary reputation in the U.S shrank to the vanishing point after World War II. Although outside the U.S., especially in countries like China and India, Pearl S. Buck continues to remain a respected and popular writer, in her own country she stood on the wrong side of virtually every line drawn by those who constructed the lists of required reading in the 1950s and 60s. Her principal subjects were
women and China, both of which were regarded as peripheral and even frivolous in the early post-war years. She was also the victim of political hostility, attacked by the Right for her active civil rights efforts, distrusted by the Left because of her vocal anti-communism. Beyond that, she undoubtedly suffered because of her gender.

Pearl S. Buck, by her very success in the literary world, had challenged the male hegemony. In addition, she was not even considered a "proper" American. She wrote novels about an alien culture and had an Eastern sensibility. These two factors contributed to her remaining an "outsider" in the literary world of America. Her defensiveness, which is apparent in *My Several Worlds*, prevented her from writing an open, frank autobiography with an assertive, strong "I" at the centre. In *My Several Worlds* she does not highlight her identity as a "woman", because she recognised that in the Eurocentric, male-dominated American coterie it was precisely this that was marginalising her: "If I had doubts about myself, they were all doubled and tripled by my fellow writers who were men. The gist of such criticisms, and there were more than a few, was that no woman, except possibly the veteran writer Willa Cather, deserved the Nobel Prize, and that of all women I deserved it the least because I was too young, had written too few books of note, and was scarcely even to be considered an American, since I wrote about the Chinese and had
lived only in their remote outlandish part of the world. With my background and literary education, I was only too ready to agree with all this, and yet I did not know how to refuse the award without seeming even more presumptuous." (77)

Pearl S. Buck's defensiveness regarding her success arose from the fact that she was in a minority in her role as a successful woman. Her survival in the literary world therefore depended not on emphasising her difference but in subduing it. And like a born winner, she learnt this fact early on in life. She had nothing to gain and much to lose in emphasising her identity as a "woman". As a writer whose books sold well, she was the object of much envy and was conscious of being someone outside the American coterie, not only on account of her "Asian-ness" but also on account of her gender. Her biographer, Theodore F.Harris has this to say: "Pearl S. Buck was not prepared, she has told me, for the criticism of men against women which she found in America. She had heard it said many times that 'she is just a woman. She will never do anything really great.' " 8

Especially after the Nobel Prize, Pearl S. Buck reached dizzying heights of fame and fortune. It was more prudent to subdue her female-ness. And Pearl S. Buck has demonstrated these skills of the survivor throughout her life. It is best illustrated by the following episode. Describing her undisputed success in College in a
consciously modest way, she makes telling observations that reveal also the secret of her later success:

"[In College] I could not complain of lack of notice. Rather the opposite. Girls came in groups to stare at me, and I soon began to understand the detachment of the only Chinese girl in the student body, who came and went with friendly indifference to her fellow students. While she accepted their good intentions, she never yielded herself. I was not satisfied with her position. I wanted to belong to my own kind and to belong, as I soon saw, meant that I must separate my two worlds again. I must learn to talk of the things that American girls talked about, boys and dances and sororities and so on, and I must look like them, and above all I must conceal the fact that inside me was a difference that I could not escape, even if I would.

After reflection I decided to live as fully as possible in my College world, to achieve as far as I could its modest awards, and above all to enjoy everything. The first necessity was to buy myself some American-made clothes, and so I put away my fine Chinese linen and silk dresses with which my mother had outfitted me...I bought a few American dresses and I put up my hair and instead of the handmade leather shoes made by our Chinese cobbler, I bought American ones. Externally I became an American. I learned the proper slang and exclamations, and by the end of my freshman year, I was indistinguishable from any other girl of my age and class. And so I joined my world". (92-93)

The evident success of this camouflage is apparent when she tells us a few paragraphs later: "By my junior year I was sufficiently American to be selected President of my class". (94)

In a similar fashion, Pearl S. Buck was to find herself a curiosity in later life. The eminence that she 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, Pearl S. Buck too became an "honorary man". Towards the end of the book she writes: "Today's business is the Academy of Arts and Letters of which I am now a member. Each honour that has been given me has come with the shock of surprise and pleasure, for each has been unexpected, and none more so than the invitation to join the Academy. I accepted for my own enjoyment, though I feel stricken with a familiar shyness, for surely I am accustomed by now to being anywhere and with anyone. Perhaps it is only the slight sense of strangeness with which I enter any group of my countrymen. In this case the gender is correct, for I am the only woman who attends the meetings. I am pleased too that the chair assigned me was occupied before me by Sinclair Lewis. His name is the last on the plaque and when I take my seat I reflect that after his name will one day come my own". (387)

Indeed, Pearl S. 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. Pearl S. Buck empathised 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 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 Pearl S. 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 Pearl S. Buck did not lead the life of the average 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 this 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". 9
Pearl S. 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. Her biographer, Theodore F. Harris has this to say: "Pearl S. Buck once told me, 'I married two men in my lifetime who were unable to support me. Not that I would have wanted them to do so, but they would not have been able to, anyway. I have always supported myself and my family, and its been a large family.' Pearl S. Buck has made millions in her lifetime and she has spent it all. Not on herself... For even today she lives and works for others."

This control over her finances gave Pearl S. 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. Pearl S. 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. Pearl S. Buck compensated for this by adopting a girl. A few years later, after coming to America and soon after her second marriage she and her second husband very rapidly adopted three boys and a girl. So she 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'"11

In fact 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."12

This revealing fact is of course omitted from the autobiography where typically Pearl S. 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.

In fact, Pearl S. Buck's main fear throughout her life was being fettered by one man's love and possessiveness or by the demands of her children. She craved for freedom: freedom from artificial national boundaries, freedom from gender-specific roles, even freedom from the rootedness of a house. She says in her autobiography: "There is something to be said for losing one's possessions, after nothing can be done about it. I had loved my Nanking home, the lovely garden I had made, my life with friends and students. Well, that was over. I had nothing at all except the old clothes I stood in. I should have felt sad, and I was quite shocked to realise that I did not feel sad at all. On the contrary, I had a lively sense of adventure merely at being alive and free, even of possessions". (218)

Pearl S. Buck had once told Harris: "My husband and I had the understanding before we were married that I must have the freedom I needed to live and create". Commenting on her home-making skills her biographer says: "The need for a home has always been and is today one of the strongest motivating forces of her life. And a home has a definite place in this busy life of hers, but, master of her being that she is, she keeps it in place. Her home, wherever or whatever it
has been, is not the focal point of her existence, and yet it is that place
to which she always returns. It is a centre of life, many lives, and not
only hers. It is important to her husband and it is important to her
children, but it has never absorbed her. She must know it is there, a
haven, but her life itself centres about her, wherever she may be, and
no single building, or for that matter no single country, is large
enough to hold her whole interest alone or forever". ^'*

At the same time, while distancing herself from the typical
mould of "woman", Pearl S. Buck is at pains to prove that her writing
work was carried out in her spare time, and only after her household
duties as wife and mother were completed. Her fame, she reiterates
frequently was not at the cost of her womanly duties: "I am an
inveterate homemaker. It is at once my pleasure, my recreation and
my handicap. Were I a man, my books would have been written in
leisure, protected by a wife and a secretary and various household
officials. As it is, being a woman, my work has had to be done
between bouts of homemaking". (239)

In the context of these proclamations about being a homemaker,
it was the unfortunate fate of Pearl S. Buck to remain rootless and
figuratively speaking "homeless" throughout her life. In China,
although she integrated very well into the culture, she remained, on
account of her white skin, blue eyes and blonde hair a "foreigner". In
America, due to her innate "Asian-ness" and Chinese values, she remained a pseudo-immigrant. She tried to counter this rootlessness by buying a big farmhouse in the heart of America and the accompanying acres around it. She cultivated these acres and planted scores of trees. In this way she tried to literally strike roots in her country. Yet, inspite of these attempts she found herself marginalised by the American literary world, which persisted in seeing her as an "outsider".

Her restlessness and rootlessness is expressed textually through the various diary-like entries at the top of every new section. Inspite of Pearl S. Buck's attempts to have a stable family life, which she tried to bring about by buying a huge farmhouse and filling it with her adopted children, the book betrays a kind of homelessness that haunted its author to the end. The diary like notations on the top right hand corner of each section records the place and date where it was written. The places span the length and breadth of America and with the dates and the immediate description of the Present, which gradually slips into the Past, Pearl S. Buck fractures the narrative chronologically and geographically.

In fact a bulk of the book comprises of descriptions of the various travels that Pearl S. Buck undertook in the course of her busy and hectic life. This restless energy that fuelled Pearl S. Buck's life is
evident in the back-and-forth narrative structure of *My Several Worlds*. The book is divided into four sections. Each section has subsections with the aforementioned diary-like notations on the top right-hand corner. These subsections are actually little essays which can be read as independent pieces. Estelle Jelinek has commented on this peculiarity in women's autobiographies: "Irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive, but disconnected, fragmentary, or organised into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well".15

Pearl S. Buck is aware of the common obstacles that a writer of 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. The form that she adopts for her autobiography is initially confusing but ultimately effective. 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 Pearl S. Buck. This unorthodox use of literary devices in the autobiographical genre serves however to distance the narrator from the reader. Pearl S. Buck makes it clear on the first page itself that the narration of *My Several Worlds* will not follow the conventional pattern of an autobiography: "The reader is warned, however, that the story is incomplete, and, worse still, that it is told upon different levels and about different places and peoples, the whole held together merely by time". (3)

Pearl S. Buck's deliberate blending of the past with the present, her fracturing of the chronological order, and her juxtaposition of sense perceptions in the Present with those of the Past are all done to reinforce her belief in the uniqueness and at the same time the essential unity of all cultures and human feelings: "Today, by the happy coincidence which seems the law of life, I looked at sunrise upon a scene so Chinese that did I not know I live on the other side of the globe, I might have believed it was from my childhood. A mist lay over the big pond under the weeping willows, a frail cloud, through which the water shone a silver grey, and against this background stood a great white heron, profiled upon one stalk of leg. Centuries of Chinese artists have painted that scene, and here it was before my eyes, upon my land, as American a piece of earth as can be imagined, being now mine, but owned by generations of Americans, and first of
all by Richard Penn, the brother of William Penn, who founded our
state of Pennsylvania". (3)

In one deft paragraph Pearl S. Buck emphasises her American
roots and at the same time points to her emotional bonds with China,
her childhood world. These two worlds are brought together in Pearl
S. Buck herself, who is both American as well as Chinese. Pearl S.
Buck was aware that like history, which can never have one absolute
truth but is merely an interpretation of an event, a person too is not a
single entity but is in fact the sum total of various realities. She
acknowledges the dichotomy of public and private within herself:
"There is yet another diversity and it is within myself: I am a creature
instinctively domestic, but the age in which I am born, combined with
whatever talents have made me a writer, have compelled me to live
deeply, not only in home and family, but also in the lives of many
peoples". (3)

Pearl S. 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 the place in America where she happens to be staying at that
time. The scene outside (in the present), a smell, a sound, the touch of
some fabric is enough for her to relate it to the smells, sights and
sounds of the past. In this way she builds a bridge spatially and temporally.

By using the diary form for her autobiography Pearl S. 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 in an intimate genre, the content (i.e. the small essays of socio-historical relevance) subverts the confessional mode.

Till the end Pearl S. Buck was unable to resolve the conflict within her. She was Chinese inside and American outside. And however much she attempted to become a complete American, the American media and the tightly knit American literary world never welcomed her with open arms. Her Nobel Prize served only to isolate her further from her country people. She remained marginalised by the Establishment. And though internationally she was canonised, in her home country she continued on the periphery.

Therefore, literally as well as figuratively "homeless", she speaks from a position that is off-centre. Indeed, she stands on the speaking position of the "determinationalised". From her position on the margins, however, she can "see" both inside and outside the Chinese and American cultures, inside and outside "true womanhood" and its supporting ideology. She can "see" the reality of both margin and centre more vividly.
NOTES


2. Pearl S. Buck, My Several Worlds: A Personal Record (New York: John Day, 1954) 3-4. All quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in the body of the text.


8. Theodore F. Harris, Pearl S. Buck: A Biography, 209.


11 Ibid. 186.

12 Ibid. 188.

13 Ibid. 188.

14 Ibid. 163.