

The Paradox Of Agrarian Stability: Psychological Dynamics In Pearl S. Buck's The House Of Earth Trilogy

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Received: 19 December 2025 Accepted: 11 January 2026 Published: 15 February 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the dual psychological function of the agrarian system in Pearl S. Buck's *The House of Earth* trilogy (*The Good Earth*, *Sons*, *A House Divided*). While Nimmy Nair's dissertation interprets the agrarian order primarily as a source of social stability and collective identity, this study argues that land in the trilogy also becomes a factor of psychological deformation at the stage of capitalization. Using close reading within a socio-psychological realism framework and a polemical comparative approach, the analysis traces how land operates as an ontological anchor for Wang Lung's identity in *The Good Earth*, but as wealth accumulates it transforms into property-driven mentality, legitimizes status needs, and accelerates moral erosion and family fragmentation. In *Sons*, the sacred land-identity bond weakens into utilitarian resource logic, producing intergenerational discontinuity and divergent compensatory strategies (prestige, pragmatism, violence). In *A House Divided*, the agrarian foundation no longer sustains subjectivity; instead, modernization pressures intensify identity splitting and ideological radicalization in Wang Yuan. The findings demonstrate that the agrarian system in Buck's trilogy is not a romantic ideal of stability but a paradoxical mechanism that both stabilizes and destabilizes personality depending on historical-economic transformation.

Keywords: Pearl S. Buck; *The House of Earth* trilogy; agrarian system; land symbolism; socio-psychological realism; identity crisis; capitalization; moral erosion; intergenerational conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Pearl S. Buck's *The House of Earth* trilogy offers a profound literary exploration of the relationship between individual psychology and socio-economic structure in early twentieth-century China. Unlike modernist writers who often isolate psychological introspection from social context, Buck situates character development within agrarian economy, Confucian patriarchy, and political upheaval. Psychological change in the trilogy emerges not as abstract interiority but as a response to economic pressure, social hierarchy, and historical instability. Nimmy Nair (2018) argues that Buck's representation of agrarian life emphasizes structural stability rooted in land ownership and peasant continuity. According to Nair, the peasantry in *The Good Earth* embodies a cohesive social order, where land provides moral grounding and collective

identity (Nair, 2018, pp. 18–19). The agrarian system, in this view, functions as a stabilizing framework within a premodern economic structure (Nair, 2018, p. 116). While this interpretation accurately captures the first stage of the trilogy, it does not fully account for the psychological transformation that occurs once land becomes capital. This study argues that Buck presents a paradoxical agrarian model: land stabilizes identity under subsistence conditions, but once converted into economic power, it destabilizes moral and familial structures. The research question guiding this study is: How does the transformation of land from ontological foundation to economic capital reshape psychological identity across three generations in Buck's trilogy?

MAIN PART

Agrarian Ontology in *The Good Earth*

In *The Good Earth*, land represents existential grounding. Wang Lung's attachment to soil transcends economic logic. During famine, he refuses to sell the land, preserving it as the core of identity (Buck, 1931). The land is equated with flesh and blood, symbolizing ontological unity between man and earth. Under subsistence conditions, agrarian life fosters moral discipline, labor ethics, and psychological resilience. Land functions as sacred foundation. However, wealth accumulation alters this relationship. Once land produces surplus, it becomes economic capital rather than existential anchor. Wang Lung's psychological transformation — pride, status anxiety, moral compromise — begins precisely at this stage. The introduction of Lotus into his household symbolizes the shift from agrarian ethic to materialist desire.

Intergenerational Transformation in *Sons*

In *Sons*, the ontological bond weakens. Wang Lung's sons inherit land but not labor experience. The sacred dimension disappears; land becomes instrument. One son pursues prestige, another commerce, and the third militaristic authority (Buck, 1932). This shift illustrates what Weber (1978) describes as rationalization: traditional value systems yield to instrumental reasoning. Agrarian stability no longer guarantees identity coherence.

Modernization and Identity Crisis in *A House Divided*

In *A House Divided*, Wang Yuan embodies modern identity conflict. Educated abroad, exposed to Western political thought, he rejects purely agrarian identity (Buck, 1935). His divided consciousness reflects modernization's psychological cost. Erikson's (1968) theory of identity crisis explains this fragmentation. Yuan struggles between filial obligation, national responsibility, and ideological aspiration. The agrarian system no longer provides stable narrative identity.

METHODS

This study employs three methodological approaches: Close textual analysis of key episodes in *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, and *A House Divided*. Socio-psychological realism framework, interpreting character psychology as

conditioned by economic and social structures. Comparative polemical analysis, engaging critically with Nair's (2018) interpretation of agrarian stability. Additionally, theoretical insights from Weber (1978), Bourdieu (1986), and Erikson (1968) are incorporated to interpret modernization, capital transformation, and identity crisis.

RESULTS

1. Land as Ontological Anchor in *The Good Earth*

In *The Good Earth*, land functions as an existential anchor for Wang Lung's identity. His attachment to soil is not merely economic but ontological. During famine and displacement, he refuses to sell his land, preserving it as the foundation of selfhood (Buck, 1931). The land secures continuity and moral orientation, supporting Nair's claim that agrarian economy provides structural stability (Nair, 2018, p. 19). Here, agrarian life fosters psychological resilience. Labor produces dignity, and ownership ensures autonomy. Under subsistence conditions, land functions as moral stabilizer.

2. Capitalization and Moral Erosion

However, as Wang Lung accumulates wealth, land shifts from sacred ground to economic capital. This transition generates psychological distortion. Wealth produces pride, possessiveness, and status anxiety. His relationship with Lotus symbolizes the moral transformation that accompanies economic rise (Buck, 1931). This shift corresponds with Weber's (1978) analysis of rationalization, where traditional value systems erode under economic expansion. Land ownership becomes an instrument of social hierarchy rather than communal survival. Through Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, this transformation can be interpreted as the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital. Wang Lung's identity becomes mediated by status rather than labor. The agrarian system, once stabilizing, now destabilizes familial and ethical bonds.

3. Intergenerational Discontinuity in *Sons*

In *Sons*, the ontological bond with land weakens. The sons inherit property but not the experiential ethic of labor (Buck, 1932). Land becomes resource rather than existential anchor. The eldest son seeks prestige, the second pursues commercial pragmatism, and the third

embraces militarism. The agrarian structure no longer guarantees unity. The inheritance of wealth without inherited meaning creates psychological fragmentation. Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity helps explain this rupture: identity requires continuity of experience. In Buck's trilogy, that continuity collapses across generations.

4. Identity Crisis in A House Divided

In *A House Divided*, agrarian foundations fail entirely to sustain identity. Wang Yuan embodies the crisis of modernization. Educated abroad and exposed to Western ideologies, he experiences internal division between familial tradition and political radicalism (Buck, 1935). Erikson's (1968) theory of identity crisis illuminates Yuan's psychological state. Traditional agrarian identity no longer provides coherence, yet modern ideology offers no stable alternative. The "divided house" becomes metaphor for divided self.

DISCUSSION

Nair (2018) convincingly demonstrates that Buck portrays agrarian economy as a stabilizing social structure. However, the trilogy's longitudinal development reveals a dynamic transformation: agrarian stability is historically conditional. Once land becomes capital, it redefines moral orientation. The same system that ensures survival under poverty produces alienation under prosperity. Buck thus critiques not agrarian life itself, but the psychological consequences of economic transformation.

-The trilogy illustrates a paradox:

-Under scarcity, land stabilizes identity.

-Under accumulation, land destabilizes identity.

-Under modernization, land loses symbolic authority altogether.

Therefore, Buck's agrarian model is not nostalgic pastoralism but a socio-psychological chronicle of transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the agrarian system in *The House of Earth* trilogy performs a dual psychological

function. It initially acts as an ontological anchor and moral stabilizer, supporting Nimmy Nair's (2018) interpretation of structural stability. However, as land undergoes capitalization, it becomes a source of moral erosion, intergenerational rupture, and identity crisis.

Buck's trilogy presents agrarian life as historically dynamic rather than timeless. The psychological evolution from Wang Lung to Wang Yuan reflects the transformation of land from existential foundation to unstable economic symbol. Thus, agrarian structure in Buck's fiction emerges as a paradoxical mechanism that both stabilizes and destabilizes personality across socio-economic transition.

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