

Food as a Challenging Factor in *The Refugee* by Pearl S. Buck

P. Kalai Selvi, II M.A. English Literature
Dr. B. J. Geetha, Assistant Professor of English

=====

Food is an important one in everyone's life. It is an essential need for survival and also an energy giving factor. Among the three basic needs such as social, esteem and survival, food and shelter form the survival needs. It not only makes one to be active but also provides nutrients which promote growth and development. It also maintains the health and prevents from various diseases. Because of the scarcity of food and poverty, people suffer from various diseases and malnutrition which leads to physical disability. Every living species needs food for survival.

Refugees means the people who leave their native land and move to another land due to natural calamity or persecution or due to war. To secure their life, they are forced to leave their native land. They struggle their life without food and shelter in an unknown environment. The topics **food** and **refugee** are interrelated. This topic represents poverty, hunger, food scarcity and various things. Food of various regions represents their own tradition and culture. When the refugees move to another land as wanderers, they follow the varied traditional food of other people. Due to this, they were losing their identity, culture and tradition. Even rich people were facing the same critical situation by losing their jobs, lands and everything in order to secure their life from disaster.

Pearl S. Buck speaks about the refugees and their conflicts in life without basic amenities. Pearl S. Buck was an American novelist, short story writer, teacher and a translator. She was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1938.

In her short story "The Refugee", Buck describes the Chinese refugee and depicts that their faces were filled with sign of starvation. They were carrying the iron cauldron and quilt along with them. The city dwellers and shop keepers thought that they have to offer something to them. The story depicts the refugees' life of pity in a new environment.

Pearl S. Buck focuses on one old man. He was very weak such that his steps were infirm. Looking at him a passerby took pity on him and offers him one silver coin and a copper penny. The old man replied "I did not beg of you, we have good land and we have never been starving

like this before” (TFWAOS 232). And their life was filled with conflicts because of flood. Even the seeds he saved for planting, people ate because of hunger. The old man said “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 they ate it.” (TFWAOS 232)

The Old man explains about his situation and refused to accept the offer given by him. But the passerby dropped the coin in his smocked aprons. He bought a small bowl of noodles with copper penny for his grandson and he saved the silver coin to buy seeds in order to secure his grandson’s future. When he gave the noodles to his grandson, Buck described “One would have said the child was dead except that when the old man lifted his head to his mouth could touch the edge of the little bowl he began to swallow feebly ” (TFWAOS 233) . When the noodle vendor asked him to buy some noodles for him with that silver coin, he refused to do so. The old man says that he had saved the silver coin to buy seeds. The noodle vendor replied that if he were poor he would have offered noodles to him but the old man had a silver coin and this confused the noodle vendor. The old man said “But if you had land you would know, it must be put to seed again or there will be starvation yet another year.” (TFWAOS 234) Pearl S Buck represents the importance of food and tradition of agriculture through this story.

This story depicts that due to natural disaster their lives became hard and they lost their identity, culture and tradition. Even they did every work they get as wanderers in another land by getting low wages, because of this the city dwellers were angry with these refugees. Through the old man’s deed, she says that life becomes hard due to this flood and he thinks wisely to secure future. One must understand the reality of life and the old man thinks that by saving this silver coin he can make some changes in the life of his grandson. Pearl S. Buck conveys that life is very hard for the refugees and they are facing many challenges and obstacles in life with courage. This short story depicts the importance of food and difficulties in refugees’ life through various incidents. The refugees were working for low wages in order to meet their needs and their uncontrollable hunger made them eat the seeds that they preserved for planting, and they did any work which they got. The author compares these refugees to dead people as they looked so tired and faint. Due to flood the old man lost his son and daughter in law. Because of flood, refugees’ life was economically unstable. The primary need of the refugee was to fulfill their hunger. In this short story the old man was not sure about the next meal of the day, but he was preserving for the future needs. He could have made use of the silver coin in order to satisfy his hunger. His thought of saving the silver coin shows the futuristic vision and he wants to fulfill the hunger of many people for the upcoming days. Through this he can rebuilt the better future for the refugees.

‘Health is wealth’ shows that the primary wealth of man is health. To maintain health food is necessary and inevitable. Hunger is the universal feel that exists in every one’s life which is irrespective of the region, culture, caste and language. Jean De la Fontaine’s declaration “A hunger stomach cannot hear” can be related to the story. The people were not able to tolerate the hunger and the quest to satisfy it. It has made them blind such that they cannot find the difference between food and seeds. The hunger made them to consume the seeds that were kept for plantation. Thus, hunger makes a person physically and mentally weak.

Thinking about the welfare of the future, he had saved the silver coin to buy seeds for plantation. Being a farmer, he hoped that he could build a healthy future. Only this sector of people understands the significance of food and its requirements. Thus, the story represents selflessness of the old man and his self-reliant nature.

Work Cited

Buck, Pearl S. *The First Wife And Other Stories*. Methuen and Co Ltd. London. 1913.

P. Kalai Selvi, II M.A. English Literature
Periyar University
Salem 636011
kalaipalani497@gmail.com

Dr. B. J. Geetha
Assistant Professor of English
Periyar University
Salem 636011
geetprem05@gmail.com