

REPRESENTING PLACE AND GEOGRAPHY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF GAO XINGJIAN'S *SOUL MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT

Glotfelty defines the term ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). The term “ecocriticism” was coined by William Rueckert in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, in 1978 but its antecedents stretch back much further. Geography has always been involved in the analysis of place and this provides the first core concept. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* is an autobiographical novel in its depiction of the story of a wandering man who takes a journey in search of the self and its relation to the collective. The paper seeks to examine the physical environment –the geographical place and the cultural landscapes in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and argue how literature can provoke environmental reflection by expanding preconceived understandings of the human and non-human environment as a dimension of personal and communal sense of place. Environmental literature constructs place in a particular way not just by naming objects but by dramatizing in the process how they matter. Place attachment thus becomes a resource in the “articulation of environmental unconscious” (Buell 21).

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Gao Xingjian, Geography, Place, Topophilia

INTRODUCTION

The term “ecocriticism” was coined by William Rueckert in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, in 1978 but its antecedents stretch back much further. By ecocriticism Rueckert meant “the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature” (Glotfelty xviii). The environmental turn in literary studies or green studies which debates ‘Nature’ in order to defend nature has been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven. The term means either the study of nature writing by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem oblivious of the nonhuman world. Early contributions to ecocriticism may be seen, in retrospect, in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), both seminal contributions to the criticism of pastoral literature in America and the United Kingdom, respectively. Scott Slovic in his essay “Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practicing Doctrine” states that Walt Whitman's understanding of the universe- “I am large, I contain multitudes”(Slovic160) echoes ecocriticism's large domain which contains multitudes. “There is no single, dominant worldview guiding ecocritical practice; no single strategy at work”(Slovic 160), rather it is “the study of explicitly environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relations in any literary text (Slovic 160).

Gao Xingjian, Chinese Nobel Laureate in his novel *Soul Mountain* (2000), presents an introspective journey in the early 80s into the remote mountains and ancient forests of Sichuan in southwest China. *Soul Mountain* is a fictionalised autobiography superimposed upon a documentation of two traumatic and interrelated events in Gao Xingjian's life: his being targeted for criticism during the Cultural Revolution when the self of the individual is threatened under the pressure

of living in a totalitarian regime, and his being wrongly diagnosed as having lung cancer. On his long journey as a political refugee from Beijing, Gao Xingjian employs the strategy of storytelling to disperse his loneliness, and at the same time reconstructs his personal past as well the impact of the Cultural Revolution on both the human and physical ecology of China.

Critical interest in place based literature is not new, though this topic of “ancient lineage” (Lutwack vii) has become an object of critical concern. The word place is often used in everyday language to simply refer to location. There have been texts that celebrate a particular locale or evoke a sense of place, especially through landscape or ecology. Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xix) which helps us to approach place with renewed interest. Ecocriticism actually launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today’s environmental crisis. From the time of Thoreau there have been writings about texts that celebrate particular locale and place, through landscape ecology and geography.

Place entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort. But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter xii). Places are “centers of felt value” (Tuan 4), “discrete if ‘elastic’ areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify” (Agnew 263). The paper seeks to examine the physical environment –the geographical place and the cultural landscapes in Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain* and argue how literature can provoke environmental reflection by expanding preconceived understandings of the human and non-human environment as a dimension of personal and communal sense of place. It further examines how environmental imagination registers, judges, and seeks to affect this process whereby the significance of ‘environmentality’ (Buell 3) is defined by the self-conscious sense of an inevitable but uncertain and shifting relation between being, topological space and physical context. Every place is particular; it has its own unique pattern or weave of elements. Places are characterized by their physical and human properties. Their characteristics include climate, landforms, soils, hydrology, vegetation, and animal life.

Soul Mountain traces a five month journey of the protagonist from Beijing to Sichuan province and from there followed the Yangtze River to the coast. The description of the trip is supposed to be based on the author’s journey along the catchment areas of the Yangtze River in 1983. There is a total of eighty-one chapters, each one a self-contained episode. Each chapter is about the individual’s experience, material or psychological, in one place or at one time. Gao Xingjian in “Literature and Metaphysics: About Soul Mountain” makes the following observation:

In order to write it, I made three trips to the Yangtze River during 1983 and 1984, the longest of which was a journey of fifteen thousand kilometres. I have wandered along the Yangtze, from the giant panda reserve that is the home of the Qiang people right down to where it meets the China Sea, and from folk customs and practices I have returned to urban life. (103).

For a better understanding of the intertwining aspects of place, terrain, topography, biosphere, landscape, memory and geography in *Soul Mountain*, it can be divided into three segments based on the upper, middle and lower courses of the Yangtze River. The Yangtze River is the longest river in both China and Asia. Its basin, “extending for some 3,200 km from west to east and for more than 1,000 km from north to south” (Pletcher 63). From its source on the Plateau of Tibet to its mouth on the East China Sea, the river traverses or serves as the border between ten provinces or regions. The upper course of the Yangtze flows across the Plateau of Tibet and descends through deep valleys in the mountains east of the

plateau, emerging onto the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. The plains in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River is composed of the Jiangnan Plain in Hubei Province, the Dongting Lake Plain in Hunan Province and the Boyang Lake Plain in Jiangxi Province; and the plains in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River is made up of the Chao Lake Plain in Anhui Province and the Yangtze River Delta in Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and Shanghai City.

Soul Mountain traces the protagonist's voyage too into the mountains in the south west China along the Yangtze River in search of a place called *Lingshan*. The journey mostly takes place in rural or mountain areas and places mainly inhabited by Chinese national minorities. Along the way, he regards many wonderful sights and customs; living much of the time on nature reserves and amongst minority nationalities. The novel uses pronouns instead of characters, psychological perceptions instead of plot, and changing emotions to modulate the style. The telling of stories is unintended, and they are told at random. It is a novel similar to a travel diary, and also resembles a soliloquy. The novel recounts two journeys that are woven together by alternating uses of a 'you' and 'I'. The splitting of the character makes it possible for him to differentiate his journey across the vast regions of China, from the Tibetan plateau to the east coast via the middle valley of the Yangtze River. The 'you' is looking for the unlikely place named 'Soul Mountain', which is always being pushed further away, towards the 'other shore'. This essentially internal journey parallels the geographical crossing carried out by 'I'. Chapter 1 of *Soul Mountain* begins with "The old bus is a city reject. After shaking in it for twelve hours on the pot holed highway since early morning, you arrive in this mountain county town in the south" (*Soul Mountain* 1). This is the beginning of a journey in search of a place named *Lingshan*. *Ling* meaning spirit or soul and *shan* meaning mountain in Chinese, which is located at the source of the You River. *Soul Mountain* developed as a response to the environmental, spiritual and cultural consequences caused by the Cultural Revolution, and aimed at developing a strong Chinese identity and authentic cultural memories.

A number of worldwide environmental problems, such as land degradation, biodiversity loss, and global climate change occupy the trend of their destructive power of anthropogenic activities that accelerates the ecological alterations of landscapes in the novel. In Chapter 8 a botanist discovers a giant metasequoia, a living fern fossil more than forty metres high. The botanist has come to collect specimens of cold arrow bamboo, the food of the giant panda. He says it takes a full sixty years for the cold arrow bamboo to go through the cycle of flowering, seeding, dying and for the seeds to sprout, grow and flower. The large scale destruction of these bamboos is responsible for the loss of habitat of the giant pandas. He is pointing to the fact that the indiscriminate wiping of the species is going to create ecological imbalance which indirectly is going to lead to the catastrophe of the biosphere. The botanist mentions clear cutting of forests, siltation of rivers, and the environment threat posed by the planned Three Gorges dam, and offers an explicit warning. *Soul Mountain* delineates the degraded natural environment caused by ignorance, greed and politics and describes conservation efforts by scientists. According to Gao Xingjian *Soul Mountain* deals with a world that, was much destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and also by the Three Gorges Dam in the Yangtze. Also revealing in this context is Gao's description of the few remaining pandas wandering through southwest China's ever shrinking forests wearing electronic transmitters.

Destruction of ecosystems and the large scale extinction of wildlife, threats posing by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam are some of the major environmental concerns affecting modern China. The narrator witnesses how rivers are polluted and lakes are silted across the whole range of the Yangtze valley, from Caohai at the upper reach, to Dongting Lake in the middle and to Huangpu River in Shanghai near the sea coast. He also reconstructs conversations with all sorts of characters, on topics ranging from Chinese politics to the mythical Wild Man. He captures all he sees and hears in a mesmerizing manner: sometimes with unambiguous clarity and other times with a dreamlike quality. (Moran 214)

Place is a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is known not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification. To know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another. Yi-Fu Tuan is often credited with introducing humanistic notions of place to the study of geography. Using the notions of topophilia and topophobia to refer to the desires and fears that people associate with specific places, his work alerted geographers to the sensual, aesthetic emotional dimensions of space. Tuan in his essay “Place: An Experiential Perspective” states:

Places are constructed out of such elements as distinctive odours, textural and visual qualities in the environment, seasonal changes of temperature and colour, how they look as they are approached from the highway, their location in the school atlas or road map, and additional bits of indirect knowledge like population or number and kinds of industries. (Tuan 152-53)

Gao Xingjian integrated his study of nature and the environment into his fiction and embodied his ecological observations in his characters and settings. By incorporating his theories of holistic thought and the environment into his writings, Xingjian created his own ecofiction- the fiction with an environmental subtext- urban, built in environment as well as natural environment. Scholarship has focused on *Soul Mountain* as an autobiographical novel in its depiction of the story of a wandering man who takes a journey in search of the self and its relation to the collective. The themes of violence, decay and degradation, cruelty in human nature and Nature form the crux of the novel. The novel shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. The non human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. The novels focus on the behavioral and experiential aspects of ecological inter relationships and serve as quasi autobiographical odysseys from the egocentric to the ecocentric.

While the narrator travels mostly in the southern and southwestern hinterland of China, he also carries out a psychological journey within his inner world, seeking the symbolic and elusive goal of reaching the place called Soul Mountain. There is a rich description of the geographical features of that region, the scenery and the topography. The novel presents us with a vision of the habits, customs, occupations and daily manners of the local people. It also leads into an investigation into the religious, moral, social and emotional climates of the society in that area of China. This is the setting that provides the narrator with abundant resources in his search for authentic Chinese folk culture and cultural diversity within Chinese civilization. The novel makes a strong connection between the places visited on the journey and the age-old Chinese cultural heritage behind the landscape.

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell states that place entails spatial location, and “a spatial container of some sort” (Buell 63). But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Buell 63). Throughout the novel *Lingshan* is presented as something which is elusive in nature. By connecting the selves with their own past memories and with each other, the journey leads us to a deep exploration of the rich and complex inner world of human being. There are also numerous historical and legendary stories being told in these chapters, which allow us an extended examination of various forms of human relationships in historical and cultural contexts. It is a journey searching for meaning of life and purpose of living, for truth and ideals, and for love and companionship which are what Soul Mountain represents symbolically. Towards the end of the novel the symbolic meaning and unrealistic nature of the place become more obvious when the narrator asks an old man for the way to *Lingshan* and feels totally lost and uncertain of his own experience, memory and purpose of searching. In Chapter 76 “he” asks the way to the mountain from a wise old man who tells him that Soul Mountain is always on the other side of the river, no matter which shore one is on.

Place in *Soul Mountain* refers both to “geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness” (Buell 83). They are defined by unique locations, landscape and communities as well as by the focusing of experiences and intentions into particular settings. Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. Terrain here is always read like a text with cultural and literary meaning embedded by the narrator in his search for cultural memories. According to Moran, the integration of landscape and humanscape is one of the major characteristics of the Chinese literary heritage. By carrying this literary feature, *Soul Mountain* locates itself solidly within the Chinese literary tradition and connects to a wider Chinese literary discourse. Gao Xingjian commented in his essay ‘Literature and Metaphysics’- “Daoism and Chan Buddhism, in my view, embody the purest spirit of Chinese Culture” (The Case for Literature 93). In this era of environmental crisis Daoism proposes a comprehensive and radical restructuring of the way in which we conceive of our relationship to place, landscape and our “cosmic environment.” This crisis demands a bodily and spiritual resurrection of what Tuan Yi-fu calls a “topophilia”—that is, an aesthetic respect and a practical love for one’s particular life-scape, a love that has general ecological import because of its rootedness in the specific topography of a lived body and the local environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Places and geographical terrain in *Soul Mountain* is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman. The text articulates the symbiotic relationship between land and landscape, text and terrain, and recognizes that man is not separate from the world of nature. The ecosystem thus presented calls us to examine the very nature of the human place in the natural world:

“Man follows earth, earth follows sky, sky follows the way, the way follows nature, he proclaims loudly. Don’t commit actions which go against the basic character of nature, don’t commit acts which should not be committed”. (*Soul Mountain* 48)

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