

Environmental Crisis: An Eco critical study on Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*

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Abstract

A healthy ecosystem should be active, energetic with the capacity to reinstate itself. Xingjian examines the crisis faced by aquatic ecosystem of rivers and terrestrial ecosystem of forests in the work *Soul Mountain*. The nature lovers construct the protected areas to save the ecosystem, but it becomes a back drop idea when new opportunities are introduced. Mining, oil exploration and infrastructural developments affect the protection of the reserved areas. Xingjian depicts that in lack of sufficient resources and help from local communities the reserves are only protected in paper. The illegal trades in the reserve results in the extinction of flagship species like tiger, rhino, elephant and other rare plant and animal species. Conservation through exclusion is not possible, therefore the committee mixed the local community members whose help and service are perfectly rendered to protect the natural resources. Xingjian during his journey explores the protected areas in Shennongjia, China and records them in *Soul Mountain*.

Key words : Ecosystem, Conservation, flagship, Protected, Species

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An eco critic reads literature and environment side by side with one eye set upon the work of art and other scanning the photographs of nature around him. Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher coined the term 'Deep Ecology' in an article "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Rage Ecology Movement: A Summary" (1973). Naess through the concept of 'Deep Ecology' brings the co-existence of all living forms in nature and compares both anthropocentric and androcentric view on nature. Today, Eco criticism has gained a lot of attention due to the increase in technological developments and environmental destructions.

Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (2000) traces the ecological imbalance in China after the Cultural Revolution and specifies the major environmental crisis such as deforestation, hunting, species extinction and climate change. The novel *Soul Mountain* is an effulgent interplay of material and social practices. He opposed the anthropological design in constructing the ecology. Xingjian has made a five month walking journey from Beijing to Sichuan province followed by Yangtze River to the coast. He travels by revealing his identity as a writer "Folk songs are what

interest me most, that's the sort of material I am collecting" (261). Chinese folksongs relates human, non-human and physical environment.

The Chinese in mountain act as smugglers and invade into the forest, cut trees and sold for timber. Xingjian experimented that, "White oak: the charcoal burns with a silver flame and it produces a metallic ring when you strike it. If you produce it, a basket of this metallic charcoal will fetch double the price" (169). The annual timber export before the land reform period was less than hundred and fifty cubic meters. Until 1960, the forests has not been damaged. The situation changed after the coming of highways in Shennongjia, China. Today, an estimate of around fifty thousand cubic meters of timber is cut annually. Xingjian exhibits that the useful timber dies prematurely by the axe and only useless timber enjoys good fortune. The mountains in Caohai, China before the revolution are covered with thick forests. Ten years ago, the thick black forests came to the shores of the lake and often people encountered tigers. At present, the bald hills have been stripped bare and there is no firewood for cooking.

Xingjian's quest for spirituality and relation with nature can be interpreted with reference to "biosemiotics" (Rangarajan 41). Through his travel, he specifies the interconnectedness of both human and non-human life and points out that humans utilise water, plants, animals and soil considering them as their own property and exploits them. Xingjian portrays a nature to nature comparison confronted by beauty and evil. For instance, on Huanggang Mountain, the main mountain of Wuyi Range in China stands a deciduous pine. Its trunk divides into almost horizontal branches, which resemble a giant falcon flapping its wings. He portrays an antithetical view of a huge decaying torreyia whose core is hollow and it resembles a python's nest. Xingjian exhibits that, "Nature creates, in this mystical way, not only powerful vitality such as this but also exquisite, ever-changing feminine beauty. It also creates evil" (413). The falcon flapping its wings represents the beauty of nature, whereas the decaying torreyia represents the evil side of nature.

According to Chinese Daoism, culture and mythology, a pine tree symbolises longevity, self-discipline and fortitude. Xingjian excellently depicts the belief of Chinese towards trees. They believed that trees have feelings like humans. For instance, "If you poked something into the hole of the trunk, the tree would shake all over laughing, just like when you trickled her under the arms and she immediately pulled away and laughed until she was out of breath" (103). The Taoistic ritual belief of trees narrated by Xingjian resembles Peter Wohlleben's book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) which gives the readers a spellbinding perception into how trees connect to each other, the soil and other plant life by sharing large fields of information through channels ranging from electrical impulses to the senses of taste and touch.

. The ecology of Caohai, China faces a serious threat during the Cultural Revolution. The country's new revolutionary committee implemented an initiative by draining off water and converting it into fields, which reduced the lake to one third of what it used to be. The anthropogenic use of explosives for material pleasure to catch fish acts as a serious threat to aquatic ecosystem. Xingjian reviews that, "One hundred species of the river's freshwater fish were on the verge of extinction" (472) in Shanghai. Christopher D. Stone in his book, *Should Trees*

Have Standing? Law, Morality, and the Environment (1974), examines how far the natural resources are exploited by mankind. Stone stresses the illegal human actions such as pollution, which have destroyed the ecological balance of the river ecosystem. He implements a set of rules in his book *Should Trees Have Standing? Law, Morality, and Environment* to preserve the resources making them legally safe and secure. Stone narrates his point by disclosing the punishment for an ecological offence should include reinstating the polluted river as how it used to be, deoxygenating the river body, replenishing it with fishes and an amount should be paid by the polluter for his illegal act against nature. Xingjian notices that the birds such as red-headed black cranes and grey cranes that are commonly seen in the reeds and in the fields during winter are today on the verge of extinction. The researchers experimented that "It's only the red headed crane that haven't starting coming back" (110). In the southern parts of China, tigers are already extinct. "Tigers have been extinct for more than ten years" (366). Pollution, climate change and hunting are the reasons causing the varieties of flora and fauna to become unstable in their natural environment. It results in migration, falling in to the red list of endangered species and finally extinction.

Animal Species require comfortable climatic conditions for their survival such as temperature and precipitation. The changes in any of them lead the species to no longer exist in that community. When plants are compared to animals and insects, the plants are restricted to migrate by the distance that seed or pollen can travel. The infrastructural developments made by man such as farms, land, fences, and urban area blocks the plant migration. These results in ecological imbalance and the extinction of plant species will lead to the extinction of certain animal species who consume specific plants in their ecosystem. Xingjian experiments that, "For the past ten years, spring and winter have become intensely cold. Frost comes early in Spring and there are severe droughts" (108).

In *Soul Mountain*, Xingjian comes across a two thousand five hundred meter giant panda observation compound. He reveals the painful situation of the pandas that are hunted and killed for materials like fur. The officials have made tracking signals to save them from the illegal poachers. Xingjian experiments that, "These are signals transmitted from giant pandas which have been captured, tagged with wireless neckbands and then returned to the forest" (37). The neckbands are attached to the panda signals them under the surveillance of the officials and protect them from the sight of the smugglers. Xingjian in the panda reserve come across three baby pandas, "Beibei" (38), "Hanhan" (39), and "Lili" (40), it is said that a healthy panda can wrestle a leopard. Xingjian portrays people's greed and seems cruel that they even tore off the genitals of pandas. Xingjian criticises the situation by pointing that, "This world belongs to wild animals but human beings persist in interfering with it" (38). The Cold Arrow Bamboo, the food of the giant panda takes a full sixty years to go through the cycle of flowering, seeding, dying and for the seeds to sprout, grow and flower. According to Daoism and Buddhism, it takes one 'kalpa'. Xingjian as a researcher experimented that there isn't a single live bamboo plant to be found. The disappearance of the Cold Arrow Bamboo results in food scarcity and it affects the

ecological balance of pandas. Xingjian warns the poachers, "Don't commit actions that go against the basic character of nature; don't commit acts which should not be committed" (48).

Xingjian portrays the Min and Yangtze river problem in China. The banks of Min River before the revolution are covered with thick forest, the impact of the revolution turns it bald and changes the river into a black muddy texture. The silt accumulates and the riverbed gets higher each year. Xingjian interrogates, "When this ridiculous dam is built even this ancient Han Dynasty wall will be submerged so what meaning would there be in collecting the memories of people of remote antiquity?"(308). The condition of Yangtze is much worse than Min. The Yangtze has become a brown river bringing down mud and silt, and yet a big dam is built on the Three Gorges. Xingjian conveys a warning message to the greedy that "nature like this nature inevitably takes revenge" (48).

Xingjian reviews his eye witness account on the pathetic situations in Shanghai. It is a huge metropolis where people never interests with another. The Wusong River in Shanghai after the Cultural Revolution is renamed into 'black Wusong River'and it passes through the city. The fishes and turtles on the river were already extinct due to the human population. The tap water smells of chlorine and appears to be brackish being unfit for human consumption. Xingjian discloses that, "People are hardier than fish and prawns" (471). The Wusong River reaches the mouth of Yangtze and day by day the level of silt gets higher. The silt in the water keeps building up and Xingjian foretells the reality that one day the whole of East China Sea will turn into sandbars.

Xingjian contrasts the past and present situations of the Yangtze river. To accomplish this step, he explains the changes that happened to Yangtze through the eyes of the narrative "I". During the childhood days of "I", the river appears to be clean, sacred and healthy even in the rainy days. From dawn, till dusk there were people of all ages, fish stalls and vendors on the embankments of the river. "I"used to stand on the wharf of the Yangtze watching people on the pontoons casting their fishing reels. It gives pleasure to his eyes and heart when fish comes out the river, it becomes a real contest between fish and man. Today these sights seem very rare and even the size of the fishes are reduced by inches. An estimate of around ten thousand people is working out methodologies to clean up the river. The health of the fish population reflects the health of the river's ecosystem, saving the species is like an act of saving the self. Before the coming of the Cultural Revolution in China, everything was normal and peaceful. After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese ecology is affected to its peak. The impact of the Cultural Revolution affects the ph. of the river water with poisonous oxygen. The revolution made the people to drown in the rivers by spraying machine gun fire. The chemicals released contaminate the water and the fish inhale the poison mixed oxygen and the dead bodies of fishes float over the river body.

Xingjian's autobiographical fiction *Soul Mountain* gives the readers a deep and beautiful description of the Chinese ecology. The novel focuses mainly on the impact of the Cultural Revolution that affects both the human and physical ecology of China. Xingjian's attitude

resembles a scientist, who does experimental analysis and he as a writer does experimental analysis and portrays the voyage of China from tradition to modernity. He explores how far the ecology is disturbed as a result of materialistic humans, who experiment nature as their own property resulting in modern environmental crisis. Xingjian focuses the reasons that exploit the health of the ecosystem which results in its imbalance. He as a writer openly criticises or objects people's attitudes towards nature. Xingjian used the narrative technique of flashback and he jumps back and forth through the eyes of his nameless narratives by comparing and contrasting his childhood days with present. He initiated the back and forth technique to record the changes that happened to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem.

According to Daoism, ritual is considered a cultural tool that connects human with the non-human world. Getting deep into the ecology promotes the connection to a place, a sacred ecology that can be analysed through the earth rituals. Xingjian follows this cultural tool of exploring and his ritual include travelling through the mountains of China for a period of ten months meeting people and non-human beings like trees, rivers and mountains and engaged in various functions comprising dancing, chanting and collecting folksongs. This chapter justifies Xingjian's ritual journey as a wakeup call to the world before denouement. Xingjian is going back behind something that is already diminishing from the earth. On the protected areas of the country, people are hunting plant and animal species, killing animals and the illicit cutting of trees increments twice the estimate than it was before the revolution. The stone monuments, which denote history are being crushed out for infrastructural needs which are never accomplished. Xingjian as a writer conveys to his readers that he wants back what is lost. Travelling offers joy and pleasure and it often records with life changing experiences. Xingjian through his ritual journey promotes the same to his readers, which would help them in building a sense of universal eco-friendly bond and promotes eco centric ethics.

Xingjian in *Soul Mountain* tries to bring a unity between human, non-human and physical environment. His spiritual and physical journey is an attempt to search for unity between self and nature. Xingjian's journey in search of Lingshan is his physical journey and personal quest for meaning in life. His journey leaving the urban metropolis depicts his unwillingness and silent revolt against modern civilization and his search for tranquillity in life. Xingjian decides to take refuge in his own way of sequencing logic, karma and securing actions to have a peace of mind. He has chosen 'Lingshan' as his destiny to enjoy eternity being a refuge to God.

The novel *Soul Mountain* is Xingjian's spiritual journey to a place, which is ended in mystery. Xingjian portrays his own journey from Daoism to Existentialism. He through the portrayal of Chinese ecology paints the merits and demerits of the Cultural Revolution. The ancient Chinese believed in Daoism considered nature as sacred and worshipped it as God. The impact of the Cultural Revolution during the epic voyage from Daoism to Existentialism devalued nature with disrespect. Through the portrayal of ecology, Xingjian is longing for his childhood days devoting nature. The inception of existentialism satisfies with freedom to make

changes as per their will and wish. Hence, this chapter justifies Xingjian's longing for spirituality and his spiritual journey to the mountains is to seek peace, freedom, and serenity in the midst of natural sights and sounds. Moreover, Xingjian's journey leaving the urban metropolis reveals his opposition to existentialism.

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