Gender Politics: 'Becoming-woman of a Man' in *Soul Mountain* by Gao Xingjian

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Abstract

With the key objective to contest the generally held view about the Chinese self-exile fictionist Gao Xingjian (b.1940) as a misogynist, this study contends that he is a gender neutral author who presents both men and women as products of their socio-cultural environment. Drawing on the Deleuzian concept of nomadism as de-terrorialisation, the paper works on Gao's first novel Soul Mountain as its primary source material, and demonstrates through textual analysis how the 'majoritarian' subject in exile learns to deterritorialise from his self-centric power base as a man, and move towards 'becoming-woman' of a 'minoritarian'. Contesting classical dualism, he is able to surmount his propensity to exert power which was a carry forward of his native culture, and empathises with the gender 'other'. Sensitive to the plight of oppressed women, he leaves feminist territory and prepares for other 'becomings' like a true Deleuzian nomad. It is in this sense that he remains in a sustainable process of qualitative transformations in his subjectivity, moving continuously away from 'being' majoritarian to 'becoming' minoritarian.

Keywords: Misogyny, Deterritorialisation, Nomadism, Gender-inclusivity

1. Introduction

Prompted by the fact that Gao Xingjian, the Chinese born Nobel laureate based in France, is almost universally labeled as a sexist and a misogynist writer, this paper takes up the study of his fiction from an alternative perspective. It contends that far from being anti-feminist or chauvinist, Gao is actually a deeply sensitive gender-neutral author. In its announcement of the award on 12 October 2000, the Nobel Committeealso acknowledged feminist consciousness in his oeuvre. Both his novels are autobiographical and, no doubt, present things from the male narrators' perspective. However, autobiography just like history is a fictive re-rendering of life and as such calls for a fresh reading of the texts

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to dispel convenient assumptions based on confusing the points of view of characters with those of the author. To this end, this study works under the theoretical cover of de-territorialisation of a nomadic subject as enunciated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their joint venture *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). The theory centres round the concept of diaspora as a process or a non-stop movement at the level of subjectivity. It entails the rhizomatic growth of a subject from 'being' to 'becoming', from being 'majoritarian' to 'becoming-minoritarian'. In the light of above, I contend that in their dispersion from home, Gao's male subjects deterritorialise from the patriarchal territory of their home culture and re-territorialise in the open spaces of minority consciousness and gender inclusivity.

2. Review of Literature

Even a cursory look at the criticism available on Gao's fictive representation of the socio-cultural scene in China generates the impression of his gender bias and sexual exclusivity. Kam Louis (2001), for example, accuses both Gao and his narrators of having "misogynist fantasies", making women appear as only "a subsidiary part of the male order" (146). The female voice, in *Soul Mountain* (hence *SM*), according to the critic, is "usually a frightened and beleaguered one" and plays the role of a listener, pleading again and again to "tell me a story" (146). Focusing on Gao'sbinarised construction of self, Gary Gang Xu (2002) also presents a thesis on gendered subjectivity in his fiction. The same year, gender and feminism came to form the base of another probe by Carlos Rojas, who draws on psychoanalytical/Oedipal framework to explore the issues of 'maternity, femininity and ideology' informing *One Man's Bible* (hence *OMB*). Rojas terms Gao's 'no-ism' as without-[femin]ism, contending that the narrator in diaspora negotiates with a maternalised landscape to come to terms with his own sexual identity. Jessica Yeung (2008), too, has reservations about Gao's masculinist views, holding that the male author being a misogynist denies subjective agency to women. This generates the need for a counter-discourse to resolve the controversy through a gender-neutral or third perspective.

3. Theoretical Template

The present study addresses this need to investigate the political issues of gender and feminism under the theoretical template of diaspora as 'nomadism' in Deleuze and Guattari. Here, the physical movement across borders becomes symptomatic of an intellectual mobility, a dislocation or

de-territorialisation of the subject from the fixity of constrictive territories like home and its various identity constructs such as gender, race, nation or culture. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari worked it out in their seminal text *A Thousand Plateaus*, where reaching one plateau after another refers to a continuously intensive process of qualitative transformations at the level of subjectivity. Also drawing on Rosi Braidotti, one of the key exponents of Deleuziannomadology in the twenty-first century, I argue that the trajectory of Gao's diaspora is a passage from 'being' to 'becoming': from 'being' a majority to 'becoming-minoritarian' in his gender re-orientation.

Nomad in simple dictionary sense is someone or something which lives by wandering from place to place, defying roots or attachment to a single place. In abandoning home, diaspora defies family roots or attachment to the native soil. His journeys thus replicate an internal movement which in turn defies subjective fixity or stability. In contrast to home, the nomadic territory in Deleuze is an open, linear space teeming with the possibility for 'rhizomatic' growth in the subject. Rhizome is an underground stem of a plant which unlike a tree grows horizontally without any central root system. It sends out multiple roots and off-shoots from its nodes. Gao's subject in diaspora, likewise, tends to grow non-hierarchically in multiple directions as against the static, vertical, neatly organized, tree-like growth of the humanist self.

The Deleuzian nomadism involves the subject in an on-going process of 'becoming- minoritarian', i.e., moving continuously away from the dominant or majoritarian to the dominated or minoritarian side of the dualist binary. In other words, the self moves away from its position of power towards the disempowered 'others', thus becoming molecular or minoritarian. This I relate to Gao's own concept of flight which he theorises is as much an exile's escape from political oppression at home as "the enticements of self" (128). In the forthcoming textual analysis, I shall deploy this scale of qualitative growth to measure the distance Gao's diaspora traverses from home and its patriarchal culture towards gender inclusivity and equilibrium.

The rhizomatic scale of a nomadic subject is reflected both in the narrative form and the art of characterization particularly in Gao's first novel *Soul Mountain* (1987). Here the textual narrative tends to spill in every direction and disperses into a multiplicity of narratorial voices. Though

each operates in its own parallel, non-hierarchal fashion, together as well as apart, they create the impression of a non-unitary multidimensional subject in process without any central root, or point of origin, culmination or termination like a rhizome. Subject formation in Gaoremains a midway passage from being a majoritarian to becoming minoritarian. Here the terms majority and minority refer more to one's position in the scale of power than numerical strength. Now exile is a state of remaining unsettled, hence an exile is a minority at home as well as abroad. When the experience of being a minority gives him an opportunity to reach out to other minor, disempowered groups, Gao's male subject becomes 'minoritarian'. 'Becoming-minoritarian' is not a fixed, monolithic category of subjectivity. The adjectival gerund 'ing' refers to the continuous process of growth or quality enhancement in the subject during his interactions with 'others', be it in a man-man, man-woman, man-nature, man-God relation. Each encounter leaves the subject richer in human resources, hence ready for another take off.

Rationale

Becoming-woman is the first step of becoming-minoritarian in Deleuze. This is what becomes especially relevant to my discussion now. Gender is an important concern in Gao's fiction. I shall discuss the case of a male subject's movement from being Majoritarian in his gender orientation which is a carry-forward of his home culture, towards becoming minoritarian in his gender-inclusivity which he acquires during his diasporic reorientations. Why I choose to focus on 'becoming-woman of a man' in Gao's fiction is important to underline here. Apart from the imperative of working within the theoretical framework, my rationale is two-pronged: first, to address the issue of widespread gender oppression in almost all Asian societies whether in the near, south or south-east. The Arab, sub-continental, Chinese, all societies present a poor human rights record regarding their treatment of women. My second objective is to contest the convenient assumption so often floated in critical debates that Gao is a misogynist. As stated earlier, I contend that far from being a misogynist, he shows sensitivity to what it means to be a woman in a gendered society. The Swedish Academy also acknowledged this when it stated that "he is one of the few male writers who gives the same weight to the truth of woman as to his own" (2000). The assumption about Gao's misogyny lies in mistaking the subjects for the author. That the author denies the females a first person presence in the narrative is also misconstrued. I agree with the view of Gao's translator Mabel Lee in this

regard: "By relegating each of the women he portrays to the position of third person, he effectively dissociates himself from speaking on behalf of the woman. Instead, based on his own objective observations, she is made to speak for herself" (30).

4. Discussion

True, patriarchal imagination and masculinist descriptions of female body abound in both the novels. Men in both have a centric position in narration, and tend to hegemonise woman as an object of their erotic gaze. Women on their side appear having a restricted vision; their stories mostly centre round love and sex alone; their mood swings often verge on neurosis, and they end up desiring marriage as the ultimate solution to all their problems. I still argue that Gao is neither a misogynist nor a masculinist. In an ideologically monologic socio-cultural and political context that refuses to take into account the presence of 'others' in its master-narratives, a sensitive person alive to the need of a dialogue with himself as well as others becomes an exile. Gao often transmits this dialogic urge through a sexual interaction between the two genders. Multiple languages interwoven in the text affirm as well as contest the binaries built in the patriarchal structure of home and society. His presentation of the two genders is laced with an understanding for both as products of their socio-cultural environment. In a patriarchal society which imposes heterosexuality as the only norm in life, both men and women are trapped to think and behave in a stereotypical way. So pervasive is the male domination that mothers having no control over their menfolk must teach their daughters to repress their natural self as a self-protective mechanism: "… when she grew up her mother warned her not to laugh stupidly in front of men. But she just couldn't help laughing aloud. When she laughed like this people always stared at her and it was only afterwards that she learnt when she laughed like this it was inviting, and men of wicked intent thought she was flirting" (*SM* 172). I shall return to the above premises in detail during upcoming textual analysis. It suffices at present to say that as a heterosexual male pressurised by the hegemonic socio-cultural forces at home, Gao's protagonist, no doubt, carries the same germs of power to hegemonise the gender other. However, that does not make the author gender-biased, or anti-feminist. Had he been so, he would not have let his male subjects reach the Deleuzian 'plateau' of 'becoming-woman' which is the research premise here. Dispersing from the territorially bound construct of self imbibed from their home culture, Gao's subjects in diaspora display potential for what Deleuze terms a

"rhizomatic" (42) and Braidotti a dynamic "non-unitary, multi-layered" (14) subjectivity in transformation.

One major example of this is the author's practice of breaking up a single character into multiple other entities in *SM*, my primary source in this study. Simultaneously internal as well as external, this self-splitting de-mythicises the grand narrative of a consistent, coherent, homogenous self on the one hand, and liquidates the gender boundaries on the other. Diaspora thus locates the subject in a self-expansive apolitical domain where as a "subject-in-becoming" (Deleuze 42) he is able to transcend the narrow family ties, and engage in a dialogue as much with silent, hitherto invisible others without as contradictory impulses lying within. For example, if we interiorise the action of the novel, we find that after undergoing a 'centrifugal dispersion' from his singular base of power as a man, the protagonist in *SM* discovers and comes to terms with other marginalised dimensions of his self, such as anima. In Jungian psychology, anima is the female principle of a man's psyche which is extremely resistant to male consciousness. Once activated, it becomes a source of dialogic tension, helping the subject to negotiate with both his multiple self and the complex and heterogeneous world outside. The individuation process in Jung requires the self to come to terms with all aspects of its personality: the persona has to confront the shadow; the male ego has to own anima. Until it happens, we find Gao's 'you' in *SM* lost in the mountain mists. By reaching out to external others, on the other hand, the subject is able to attain an intensive state of becoming-minoritarian, manifested in his becoming-woman, becoming-animal/insect and even becoming-imperceptible in terms of having a momentary communion with God at the end. This enables him to make the whole world his home and its inmates his kin. This is one possible meaning of ascending atop the proverbial 'soul mountain'; the goal is attainable only when one learns to surmount the ego-barriers erected by the majority within and without, and venture out to minorities. It, however, precludes the possibility of any permanent residence in a particular territory or a long term emotional investment both of which engender molar compounds. One comes into contact with others, enters in a dialogue with them and then moves on, carrying along a rich residue of understanding, and sensitivity towards the human as well as the non-human others. The constriction of space, however, requires the discussion of just one category of 'becoming' here. Becoming-minoritarian is a constant process of de-territorialisation. Transcending all ideological fixations, such a subject is able to relate to a

variety of disempowered hence invisible groups without needing a permanent alliance with any. He thus remains in a perennial state of flux, constantly moving in and out of constrictive borders—home or host country, male or female territory, us or other divide.

This study places Gao's narrators first in the gendered location of their molarity and then their gradual relocation in a fluid, heterogeneous molecular space. "Becoming-woman" of a man is only the "first quantum, or molecular segment" in Deleuze (279), i.e., the symbolic first step of a man towards a general process of transformation (Braidotti 37). However, the final impression is that gender/sexuality as just one dimension of life needs to be transcended in the transformative process of a multiplex subjectivity Deleuze envisages in the 'process' and Braidotti endorses.

Before moving on, a word of caution here: in view of Gao's use of pronouns for characters, I shall use each within single commas as nouns, but a uniform third person singular pronominal construction for 'I' or 'you' or even 'he'.

4.1 Shifting Politics of Location: The subject-in-becoming

Gao started writing *SM* in 1982, at the ripe age of 42. The novel is autobiographical. However, he has externalized his personal self onto his protagonists, named 'I', 'you', 'he' and 'she' whom he draws after his own image. So the first scene captures 'you' as a middle-aged bachelor in the middle of a journey without any pre-determined goal or destination (*SM* 9). A solitary survivor in a short lived family, he seems to be living in sort of an ancestral vacuum. In fleeing marriage, he evades social and sociological necessity of putting down roots, parenting children or continuing the family line; he, indeed, is a non-participant in the 'arborescent' order of society in Deleuze which rests on the solidity of institutions. At his age, life becomes predictably simple and rotatory, following what the critic calls 'rigid segementarity' (Deleuze 229). This impression, however, is negated through the very act of flight from home. During his wanderings, the narrator soon indulges in a romantic escapade with a female, 'she'. What matters here is not whether this romance is real or imaginary, but that it recharges all his latent creative abilities, transforming him, in spite of his age, from a potentially 'arborescent' self to a 'rhizomatic' subject. In Deleuzian context, "the middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it's where things pick up speed" (25). In fact *SM* comes very close, both in its structure and characterisation, to

Deleuze's description of a rhizome. The theory in a nutshell runs like this: Trees have roots, rhizomes, multiple offshoots on a single stem which may not necessarily be of same nature. A rhizome connects any point to any other point; it is neither one nor multiple but a set of linear, non-unitary multiplicities with *n* dimensions. It is anti-genealogy and operates by variation, expansion and offshoots. An a-centered, non-hierarchal, non-signifying system without any organizing memory, rhizome has no point of origin, culmination or termination but always a middle from which it grows and which it overspills (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21). These are some of the features of both the novel and the subject inhabiting its narrative space. *SM* starts in the middle of a journey. Apparently plot-less, it has neither a starting nor a finishing point but always a middle where things pick up momentum. The title painting by Gao re-enforces this; its visual image of someone (?) being in the middle, neither at the foot nor top of the mountain suggests the in-between-ness of an itinerant for whom 'soul mountain' could be a non-localisable internal space of multiple possibilities. The novel has no single thread of meaning. Its structure is a variation of different narratives. As for characterisation, various unnamed characters, male and female, appear offshoots of a single person, though each in Brechtian sense seems carrying multiple contradictory impulses. Their personal history remains little known: there is no clear indication as to who they are, where they are coming from or what they are heading for, all irrelevant concerns in Deleuze's nomadism. Always on the move, each is pursuing its own 'soul mountain' which being the connective among them all points towards a linear, non-hierarchal structure of a subject who keeps on growing and expanding in *n* dimensions without any predictable end to the process.

If 'becoming-woman' is the first step of an active process of subjectivity, where to locate Gao's protagonist in gender relations prior to this? Born and placed in the conventional binary-based Chinese society, with its majoritarian, male-centred, exclusionary norms, both 'I' and 'you' in *SM* and 'he' and 'you' in *OMB* are germ-carriers of male power and domination. Their Confucian upbringing at home has directed their gaze to a set norm so each looks at himself as the centre and woman as the periphery. Weak and vulnerable, she must depend on male protection (*SM* 35). This initial impression leads some critics like Kam Louie (2001) to tag Gao's narrator in *SM* as a chauvinistic misogynist, and Carlos Rojas (2002) to treat the diasporist in *OMB* as a no-[femin]ist. Jessica Yeung also holds similar views. I base my contention on the fact that once de-

centred from home, Gao's males are able to broaden their perspective and restrain to a large extent their propensity to generate and exert power over others including females. It is their own position as minority which helps them to escape from their internal majoritarian/patriarchal enclave and to sensitise to the plight of gender, sexual and other minorities. This movement from the politics of location to its de-politicisation is amply visible in *SM*.

We get a clear picture of the binary-based, gendered and sexually segregationist location of the subject in *SM* as elsewhere in Gao's fiction. All his stories in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* and both novels are predominantly male narratives; 'his-stories'. It is man who enjoys the first person narrative voice and centricity, a privilege obviously denied to women. In identifying his characters as pronouns, Gao keeps the gender identity of his male leads neutral—either 'I' or 'you'. Not so in case of 'she' who is immediately identified in terms of her gender. Then what super-imposes her presence and visibility is her body. Notice how the beautiful face, delicate features and slim body of a village woman are the first things to strike 'you' in the street scene (*SM* 2). In such a constrictive frame, man can see woman principally as an object for gratifying his sexual/biological urge and bearing him "sons and daughters" to continue his line (32). Notice the 'normal' order of the gendered nouns. The voyeuristic gaze of a heterosexual leaves no room for any departure from this frame of normativity. The sight of a flat-figured, masculine woman repels him. 'I''s response to his lesbian host in Chapter 73 (456-463) is a case in point: the way she talks and "how she wheels out the bicycle and gets on is devoid of feminine grace" (457), he remarks. Subjected to what Adrienne Rich calls the "simultaneity of oppression" (7), she at first is doubly marginalised for being a woman and a lesbian. Then her choice of maintaining a single, motherless status adds to her alienation. Since she has rejected motherhood which is 'the crux of womanhood' in conventional societies, she is termed "a mean woman" (*SM* 462). That she is an accountant working in a factory further disqualifies her in the narrator's eyes. She threatens the stable notion of gender roles and positions in his mind besides posing a threat of economic displacement for fellow men. This "is not a basic trait of women" (457), he concludes in his reductive vision, and rejects her completely: "I detest this ugly woman and have no sympathy for her" (461). The "standardized mainstream" or the "Majority Subject" in Deleuze (Braidotti 28) has a zero tolerance for any deviation from the norm. No wonder, 'I' refuses all

polite gestures from her to drop him back home, and when he actually gets back, "I have an attack of vomiting and diarrhea. I imagine the seafood wasn't fresh" (*SM* 463).

The position of a sexually 'normative' woman at home and how men see her is clearly discernable in a scene when 'I' is on a visit to a friend's: "Bring out some liquor, no; bring some watermelons, it's too hot," he calls out to his wife, a solid sturdy woman who seems to be a local. She smiles but says very little" (*SM* 386). Man is in authority to issue commands, the woman a serving maid to obey and satisfy his needs and whims. Notice the coloniser's gaze that characterizes the narration: the female body being weighed and surveyed like the material potentials of the colonised land. However, in spite of her bulk and size, she like the colonized carries no weight. She is just a mute, shadowy figure who bears no identity of her own except being 'his' wife, known only through his reference. When she musters up courage to participate in conversation, she is snubbed back to silence: "'Stick to listening,' he says to his wife" (386). Thus even inside home which is the proverbial female domain, a woman is to be seen, not heard. The outer social space is an equally constrictive and confined territory for woman to move about, that is, if she is allowed to move at all. There are agencies on guard to monitor her closely. A young student envies 'I' the male wanderer for the freedom and variety of choice and movement that he enjoys: "She also wants to wander everywhere but her parents won't let her, they'll only let her visit her aunt" (398).

At the level of inter-personal relations, the 'you-she' drama in *SM* best exemplifies the gender power politics shaping Gao's subject in a man-woman relationship. It is when 'you' the imaginative self of the protagonist invents a 'she' to indulge his romantic fancy during his solitary wanderings in rural China that he gets an opportunity for becoming-minoritarian or 'becoming-woman of a man'. It is worth-remembering that becoming-woman does not mean imitating or even transforming oneself into a woman (Braidotti 37). Instead, it is a 'topological' position that entails a minority consciousness; an intensive, emotional stretch-ability to reach out to and include the other. The social situation of exile being a minority may lead one to empathize with another minor group. In *SM*, the tension between the two genders creates ample room for a Bakhtinian dialogue during which we find a reversal of roles between them both. At the end of the day, we notice a transformation in

'you'; he has moved from his conventional outlook of women to a more sympathetic and accommodative attitude towards them.

In the beginning, no doubt, 'you' is logo-centric; the dominant, thinking and speaking subject, representing the majority as per the norms in his indigenous culture. He is what Braidotti calls "the dead heart of the system" (36). He casts himself conveniently in the lead role and 'she' the following. It is his narrative, which smacks of his arrogance of thinking himself in the center; he is the reporting subject, having agency to represent her as he likes. Notice his wishful thinking to subject her to an object position: he would like to assume that "[s]he *seems* to be yourecho" (*SM* 33, my emphasis). He actually takes the authority to devise the subject-object positions: "You lead her round a corner into a small lane" (34); and, "You escort her to the main street" (35). Also notice his attempt to pin her down to a position of vulnerability, and the resistance that she offers. He is surprised to see

> … a young woman coming to a place like this on her own.
> Aren't you also on your own?
> This is a habit of mine, I like wandering around on my own, it lets me think about lots of things. But a young woman like you …
> Come on, it's not just you men who think.
> I'm not saying that you don't think.
> Actually some men don't think at all. (52)

He still has the audacity to presume that she must be in some trouble, in need of *his* help which he offers unasked:

> I'd like to help.
> Wait until I need it.
> Don't you need it now?
> Thanks, no. I just need to be alone. (52)

Though an imaginary character that 'you' originally conceived after his male ego as a pretty young woman with an aura of feminine charm and mystery, 'she' soon steps out of the prescribed frame and acquires a life of her own. No doubt she soon zooms out of the plot, but not before she has launched a feminist discourse to counter his masculinist assumptions about gender, sex and femininity. The roles reverse quickly enough. At first he is the speaker, the clever inventor and teller of tales which she "listens intently. … She nods and listens childlike, so beautifully childlike" (55). At another place: "You feel wonderful talking to her like

that. She's holding your hand, docile and compliant" (87). The two epithets particularly remind us of Foucault's concept of the way those in power reduce an individual to docility and compliance. Soon, however, the tables are turned. From her witty one-liners to running paragraphs, each of which starts with "She says" (65-66), she dislodges him from his secure position of power, reducing him to a silent listener. For once she starts speaking, "it is as if flood gates have opened and she can't stop talking" (128). 'You' in turn can only dream about himself telling her "a children's tale" which she could hear "like the good little girl of a family… sitting on your knee and snuggled in your arms" (192). She is an adult human being, she asserts, and others must treat her as such. Notice her emphatic denial at his attempt to reduce her to a minority:

> You say she is a spoilt child.
> I'm not! (68)

This is one of the rare occasions that Gao has allowed his female a first person pronoun to mark her authority in word and deed. She has silenced and displaced 'you' completely. In her counter-discourse, she challenges the patriarchal construct of woman as kind and caring, always nursing the needs of others. In the hospital where significantly enough she works as a nurse (a stereotypically conventional and economically subordinate working position), she is sick of white bed sheets, white gloves, white robes, white mosquito nets, white masks (66) etc., white being the culturally imposed colour for female chastity. She punctures the bloated image of a 'virtuous' woman by giving voice to her dark sleeping self—her repressed memories, sexual desires, instincts, emotions, fears, Electra complex—all that is socially reprehensible yet all that makes her just as human as her male counterpart. She too has a right to sexual gratification, she insists (127). She shocks her male audience by openly talking about sex and private parts and natural processes of the body, and by owning that she is equally promiscuous: "It's not only men who lust. … Why can't women do what men can? It's natural to all human beings" (174). She explodes the myth of woman as essentially motherly and resents husbands for enforcing motherhood against wife's will: "A woman isn't the slave of her husband and child. ... She shouldn't have had a child so soon but *he* wanted it …" (232-233, my emphasis). Far from playing "the role of listener, pleading again and again for him to "tell me a story" as Kam Louis would have us believe (148), she is bold and articulate and has her own stories to narrate, however restrictive in range or subject. Nor does she have a "frightened and beleaguered" (148) voice as the above critic

claims. On the contrary, she is a powerful woman who challenges, outwits, corners and puts 'you' on the defensive at every step. In the end, the transference of a phallic sign—the knife—from a male to a female completes the reversal of gender roles and positions. This transposition of characteristics from one gender to the other may suggest a crossing of the boundaries, an act of liberation from imprisoning roles, a confounding of the fixed phallocentric dualistic constructions of male/female, majority/minority, molar/molecular.

Gao's women as individual human beings sound shocking to the conventional ears. Their confessions of sexual escapades, real or feigned, in both *SM* and *OMB* invite a response of shock and incredulity from their philandering lovers. 'You' in the first novel calls 'she' a wanton woman, a whore and "a slut" (*SM* 196) in the same way as 'you' in the other dubs Margarethe a prostitute (*OMB* 83). However, the fact remains that for all their conventional grooming, both males learn to dissolve their centric position on their way to becoming-minoritarian. Both men show flexibility rather than rigidity attached to the majority. They are willing to share the rostrum with their female counterparts. For example, 'she' in *SM* starts speaking because 'you' has invited her to do so, letting her have agency: "You say you've finished telling stories. … You may as well listen to some women's stories or rather stories women tell men" (180). Notice how he readjusts her position in his speech from an object to a subject. Not only that; in her turn to speak, he keeps on prompting her: "You ask her to go on talking" (*SM* 128; 174). When she says that it is impossible for him to understand her innate desire to suckle her baby, he says he is trying to understand (154). Though she doubts, his attempt to understand a woman is a positive move. Similarly, 'you' in *OMB* has a genuine wish to share Margarethe's trauma of rape: "Margarethe, if you want mutual understanding, not just a sexual relationship … we should be able to talk about anything" (117). It is for these men and their willing audience that both the women are able to move from a mute and marginalized position to where they can share the center stage. Far from implying an "erasure of feminism" that Rojas (167) argues in his study, Gao's attitude towards both the genders is neutral if not biased in favour of women. He reveals the strengths and weaknesses in both, leaning completely to neither this nor that side. The fact, however, remains that he treats women sensitively. His insight into their psyche is deep: he can understand the vulnerability patriarchal societies impose on women. In a society that allows men to marry another woman right before the first wife, 'she' is afraid of growing

old, of losing her feminine charm, and becoming sexually useless. Since marriage to a man is the ultimate standard of normality, social respectability and security, failure to marry may drive her to neurosis. Woman, to quote Mabel Lee,is "twice removed from the male author Gao Xingjian who shares with the audience his observation of the women's psychology by coldly and clinically reporting on what the woman purportedly says" (31). The message is clear enough: women are human, and must be treated and understood as such.

Gao's protagonists let their female companions speak. Tolerance of the other's view generates understanding and sympathy. However, lovers part ways in both the novels. Men refuse to commit themselves to a sustainable relationship. This break-up acquires another dimension when seen in the present critical context. We already know the nomadic tendency of Gao's subjects. Free floating individuals, they flee home to escape the territorial demands of a deep-rooted patriarchal culture and political rule. Home has got its own tyranny to exert. In Deleuze, conjugality or a long term emotional investment means getting re-territorialized to home and its land-locked ideology. Secondly, the tendency to tyrannize is human, not gender-specific. This becomes apparent when 'she' begins to oppress 'you' by jealously guarding all routes of escape for him. The theme of man as a victim of tyranny emerges as early as in a dream sequence in Chapter 23 of the novel where 'you' feels oppressed by a powerful black tide which seems to devour him. The theme of oppression also emerges subsequently in a tale 'you' relates about an oppressive emperor and his reluctant employee in Chapter 25. Power concentrated in the hands of anybody male or female, at any scale great or small is undesirable. It now tends to repeat the same molar/majoritarian pattern of tyranny that Deleuze had objected to in the feminist movement: "[I]t perpetuates flat repetitions of dominant values or identities, which it claims to have repossessed dialectically" (Braidotti 39). Moreover, as stated earlier, becoming-woman does not mean a simple reversal of gender roles or positions. As a result, 'you' starts disengaging from his pro-feminist, sympathetic stance: "You break away from the woman, clinging tightly to you…" (*SM* 221). The relationship becomes more and more tyrannical and demanding on her side and difficult to sustain on his: "[S]he locks her arms around you tightly weeping. You try to break free but her arms lock around you even more tightly, pulling you to her breast" (273). Against his wish for freedom, a strong urge to settle down forces her back to a Braidottian "majority/sedentary/molar" (38) role, incapable of 'becoming'.

She promises him freedom but her grant of freedom is conditional: "She says she will give you freedom as long as you love her, and don't leave her, as long as you stay with her…. She wraps herself round you… [you are] unable to free yourself" (*SM* 274). In spite of her earlier unconventional stance on sex and body, she is willing to re-subscribe to the social prescriptions of marriage, home, motherhood and family. So she tries to hold 'you' at knife point in Chapter 46. "Starting from the position of empirical minorities", warns Braidotti, "the pull towards assimilation or integration into the majority is strong" (43). Now 'she' regrets having left home (*SM* 196); she wants to go back and have a normal life, which to her now means becoming a wife and mothering children (256). 'You' says: "Perhaps I will never truly love a woman. Love is too burdensome. I need to live my life unburdened" (400). This is his resistance to the societal pressure to reduce him to a molar compound. It could also be a refusal to the patriarchal norm of subjectivity. We have seen how 'you-she' relationship shows an ironic reversal in their center-margin positions; as the lovers swap their roles, the female acquires a dominant position. Braidotti's trope of "the phallic woman" (43) is concretized in the knife-wielding 'she' who intimidates (*SM* 218) and terrifies (272) 'you' to submit to her will. Time and again she emotionally blackmails him not to leave her. The power she exerts over him renders him completely helpless. This is a reversal to the old order of gender oppression. Braidotti reminds us that "there is no uncontaminated location free of power" (20). That's why 'centre' is not the only one to deterritorialise itself but 'margin' also requires qualitative changes in the structure of its subjectivity. Unless 'she' does so, she would keep on repeating and consolidating the power structures of the patriarchal order.

Dislocating from a patriarchal culture at home, 'you' found himself landing in an equally narrow feminist territory. Re-territorialisation implies attachment to a new center which leads to stagnation. The Deleuzian subject-in-process is in a state of constant de-territorialisation. Feminism as a socio-cultural movement encapsulates a female-centered, molar ideology. Forcing on him an ideological mooring, it threatens to disrupt the molecular fluidity of Gao's protagonist. According to Braidotti:

> What matters here is to keep open the process of becoming-minoritarian and not to stop at the dialectical role reversal that usually sees the former slaves in the position of new masters or the former mistress in the position of dominatrix. The point is to go beyond the logic of reversibility. (43)

So where the nomadic theory empowers 'becoming-woman' as a pre-requisite for all other becomings, there it also calls for its transcendence (Braidotti 37). After his separation from 'she', 'you' wonders "But where can I find this Lingshan" (*SM* 304)? To me this implies that he wants to resume his quest for 'becoming' beyond becoming-woman. He transcends the domain of gender politics to enter other minoritarian realms of consciousness that the mountain signifies. The following statement implies his detachment from the constrictive space of a fixed political territory inhabited by 'she', now the Majoritarian gender Minority: "You say you can't yield to a woman's will, can't live under this sort of shadow. She is suffocating you, you can't be anyone's slave, you won't submit to a woman, to be a woman's slave" (274). Repetitions and short pauses in the speech reveal how the speaker struggles to breathe in this de-oxygenating environment. In a later scene, 'I' exhibits the same revulsion against ideological enslavement when he is "locked like a prisoner" along the "serpentine corridor" inside a Buddhist temple: "I refuse to be locked up" (439), he declares, and resolutely gropes his way out of the seminary. No amount of emotional blackmailing on the part of 'she' can enchain the independent spirit in 'you'. He has fled Beijing for its politically suffocating environment; now he flees the gender territory after having had an exposure to its power politics. Traversing this region was a part of his training to "live properly" (73) as the doctor had advised him. Contrary to the renunciatory traditions of Chinese religions, the road to 'soul mountain' realized in the ultimate living standard in Gao's novels passes through the human world. One has to be trained and sensitized to different human situations including inter-gender relations as a precondition for qualitative growth in subjectivity.

5. Research Findings

The relationship between 'you' and 'she' breaks down; however, it brings about a positive change in 'you'. This is evident in Chapter 66 when at the bank of the "River of Forgetting" (419) 'you' descends into what he now calls "the River of Death" (420). Reference to the Styx in the Greek underworld immediately lifts the scene above its narrow Chinese location. The grandeur of scale is indicative of the spiritual gain. If we relate the different threads of ruminations in the chapter, we find textual evidence of an alignment with the nomadic life style in Deleuze. At one place, 'you' recounts his exhilarating "experience of a never before experienced freedom" (419) along the flowing river. In the textual excerpt given below, he sums up the process of his location first as a molar subject

rooted to a majoritarian culture which in turn is grounded in a hegemonic, traditionally fixed, binary-based society, then his dislocation therefrom, and finally his relocation in some fluid and undefined, non-territorial territory:

> Running and yelling, roars of joy emerge from deep in your lungs and bowels like a wild animal. To start with, you came fearlessly shouting and yelling into the world, then you were stifled by all sorts of customs, instructions, rituals and teachings. Now finally you have regained the joy of shouting with total freedom. Strangely, however, you can't hear your own voice. (419-420)

Lily Li (2014) in her exploration of the exilic mind in *SM* relates the mute shouting of the protagonist with the problem of the lost voice which implies the discontinuity of a writer's writing life in exile (212). I read the fact that the shouting is soundless as an indication of the action being interiorised; it is a mind in process of transformation. The syntax suggests how born free, the subject is changed into an object before finally regaining his subjective agency. The "non-unitary vision of the subject defined by motion" (3) in Braidotti appears in the following description of the protagonist now mentally uprooted and homeless, freely inhabiting a no-man's land: "You seem to glide into the air, disintegrate, disperse, lose physical form, then serenely drift into the deep gloomy valley, like a thread of drifting gossamer. This thread of gossamer is you, in an unmanned space" (420).*Un-manned*, 'you' feels relaxed and weightless because he is not carrying any ideological baggage now. He has been able to regain freedom as at the time of birth. In a way he is born again after the death of a majoritarian self he was trudging along so far. Like the author, a solitary, "homeless, doctrine-less world wanderer" (Liu Zaifu 242), having no clearly defined, fixed domicile or destination, he is a minority unto himself. The 'unmanned space' is an internal space free of the constituted consciousness of male power or prestige. Now is he in a position to become-minoritarian/woman. As he hears the sobbing of the drowned women in the Stygian river in the "nether world" (419-420), he is able not only to extend himself to all wronged and wretched victims of male aggression, but also to own the collective guilt of men, which includes confronting his own complicity in gender exploitation: "There is not a great deal of difference between you and wolves… " (420), he reminds himself. The journey into the underworld thus becomes the proverbial journey into the heart of darkness:

> Afterwards you hear heavy sighing. You think it is the river but gradually you make out that it is not one but several women who have drowned in the river. They are wretched, groaning, and their hair is bedraggled, and one by one they go past, their faces waxen and devoid of color. There is a girl who killed herself by jumping into the river. … (420)

Drifting in "this sea of suffering" (420), he feels at one with all these weak and vulnerable creatures, doubly victimized for being kept mute, invisible and unrepresented in all major narratives of micro or macro history. He owes this sense of unity and affiliation with the wronged to his personal experience of being a minority. He is a fellow sufferer: "You have suffered many disasters and you were bitten to death by other wolves. … There is no greater equality than in the River of Forgetfulness" (420). This is the 'affective transformation' the nomadologists envision through 'becoming-woman of a man', and not "a bio-engineered change of sex" (Keller 8) or becoming transvestite. However, in the course of becoming-minoritarian, the acquired sensitivity towards women and their cause does not force him into the position of a feminist activist marching ahead with an ambitious personal political agenda. That would have amounted to reverting to the politics of the molar/molecular binary: "The drowned, sighing women drift by but you do not think to rescue them, do not even think to rescue yourself" (*SM* 420). He ends up having his subjectivity redefined: appearing as a detached third person now, 'he' is all alone (478), neither a leader nor a following but only a drifter still on his way to learn the fine art of 'living properly'.

6. Conclusion

Thus, the discussion through textual analysis affirms the process of qualitative transformation leading to 'becoming-woman of a man' in Gao. Though the male subject does not claim having a changed mindset, the change is visible in the narrative. As the novel draws to its close, we find the two genders converging in a show of gender balance and neutrality. Both 'he' and 'she' are brought together by a common spiritual experience on the mountain (465-465). To the protagonist, however, the mountain as the ultimate end of the journey must remain elusive and out of reach. What he can in the meantime do is to try to liquefy himself and flow across the 'other' side of the river.Sensitive hence minoritised through a shift in his geo-physical and cultural location, he is akin and sympathetically alive to the predicament of other minorities like him.

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