



## RESEARCH PAPER

### A Nugatory Struggle for Being: An Exploration of Existentialistic Rudiments in Soul Mountain (Ling Shan)

Nur Ul Ain<sup>1</sup> Mughees Khan<sup>\*2</sup>

1. Lecturer (Visiting), Department of English, University of Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan

2. Lecturer, Department of English, Govt. Graduate College Adhiwal, Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author** | [mughees.naser@gmail.com](mailto:mughees.naser@gmail.com)

#### ABSTRACT

The study investigates nugatory struggle of the individuals in the fiction Soul Mountain by Gao Xingjian. The novel is an elaboration of what the real life has to offer in this world. A man is the being with the ability to make a choice and he freely decides about his life. The irony of this freedom is that no other one can be blamed for the actions, committed by an individual. The burden of being free and responsible for the decisions leads towards the condition, we call existential crises. Existentialistic philosophers sum this up as; the man is condemned to be free. With the declaration of his freedom, the protagonist rejects the patterned and the governed systems by the different institutions either the sociocultural or the political one and he lives the life according to his own drawn structure. In his entire life, the protagonist struggles to attain a significant meaning of life. This dissertation explores the existential angst, estrangement and strife in Soul Mountain that leads the narrator to an absurdist realm, meaninglessness and chaos. The inability to comprehend life and its meaning both produce anxiety and the craving for the meaning remains a thirst. The research tracks down the struggling phenomenon of the protagonist in the fiction Soul Mountain in the light of existentialistic interpretation of the term.

**KEYWORDS** Absurdity, Existentialism, Freedom, Meaninglessness, Struggle

#### Introduction

Gao Xingjian is a prominent author who was born in Ganzhou City in 1940. He is a painter, poet, critic, novelist, dramatist, and writer of poetry. In 2000, he received the Noble Prize for Literature. His first major triumph as an author, Soul Mountain, came out in 1989, and his second major success, One Man's Bible, made him a success not just in China but also in Europe. He lived through China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which promoted Confucianism and jeopardized his career as a writer. The experience turned out to be the worst of his life. Many of his short stories and other works of art were outlawed by the authorities. Gao had to escape the nation in order to live.

The author's personal experiences and contacts that he had to deal with during his voyage form the basis of the semi-autobiographical novel Soul Mountain. He was incorrectly diagnosed with lung cancer, an ailment that claimed his father's life just two years prior. The combination of this concern and the political and social pressure prompted him to leave the state, even if the truth was ultimately revealed.

The story is not just about a man's physical and spiritual development but existentialistic notions are deeply embedded in it. This study aims to view the fiction with the canon of existentialistic philosophy: the struggle of one's being. The narrator is on a journey that represents life on a wider level. The journey becomes a metaphor for man's anxieties, worries and obstacles. Gao's portrays the man's battle with life and his existential quest for clarity in life, yet he encounters an absurd and meaningless cosmos. Camus views

it as absurdity in his essay *Myth of Sisyphus* (1955). The desire for attaining the reason and happiness instigate man to act freely but his entire struggle results in irrationality. Man is a seeker of order but finds chaos in life. This present study aims to investigate the existentialistic struggle that inculcates freedom, anxiety and absurdity in the course of one's journey of life.

## Literature Review

The scope of the topic demands explorations through two vital areas of relevant literature. The first includes the critics allied to existentialism and the other one comprises of the critical approaches to Gao Xingjian's works. These construct a foreground of the study.

Despite having its academic roots in the latter part of the nineteenth century, existentialism is more accurately considered a twentieth-century philosophy because it reflects many of the most salient features of the social, cultural, and political context that determined the fate of people who had to endure the wounds, instability, and difficulties of the two world wars. In *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre* (1975), Charlesworth compares post-World War I Europe to a wasteland and views Existentialism as a product of this environment. He effectively defines it as follows:

"It was, one could say, more an intellectual mood or atmosphere than a coherent creed or body of doctrine; more an outlook or "mind-set" than a philosophical "partyline"; more a method or approach than a school of thought." (p. 92).

In his dissertation *Aspects of Western Philosophy* (2013), Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappilly summarizes the debate over existentialism in a single paragraph by opining that, unlike Rationalism and Empiricism, Existentialism is not a philosophical school in the same way. It is challenging to identify the common themes within the works of the numerous existential researchers who contribute to the varied viewpoints. There are some common topics and issues that can be distinguished, though. The overwhelming majority of existentialist thinkers emphasize the importance of an individual continuing with his own unique life rather than merely being a member of the collective.

Chinese belief systems, hypotheses, and writing began to appreciate a restoration and a gradual blossoming beginning in the 1980s with the appearance of China's transition and opening-up to the outside world. In his 2007 paper, *Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-era Chinese Literature*, Wu Gefei investigates the synthesis of many philosophies in literature, art, and politics. He traces the arrival of Western Philosophy on the Chinese literary scene. The 1980s dictatorship marked the emergence of contemporary Western ideas in Chinese ideologies. With the rise and blending of contemporary western philosophies with the conventional logics of China, existentialism and particularly Sartrean perspectives had a significant impact in many sectors.

According to Maya Jaggi's article *Living Without "Isms"* (2008), which was electronically published in the renowned international newspaper *The Guardian*, Gao is one of the key writers of the Post-Mao period who ingested advances in western writing and theory and combined them with Chinese established conventions to create another kind of dramatization and fiction. The major purpose of Chinese Occidentalism, according to Xiaomei Chen's *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (1995), is to highlight the internal political situation in China. She calls it both the discourse of

subjugation discourse of freedom. The Chinese intelligentsia raises its voice against the authority.

In *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1971), Jean Paul Sartre discusses human freedom and existential phenomena in a remarkably well-explained manner. Existentialism's central tenet, Existence Precedes Essence, is his most well-known claim. Sartre views man as the result of what he, himself, has chosen in life as the free person while discussing freedom and individuality. All of the outcomes of decisions are the product of the subjective approach. In actuality, it is believed that the identified self alone is to blame for the consequences. The main focus of Sartre's dissertation is his rejection of the notion that a man is fully conscious of his goals, or what he refers to as his essence, and that life is a structured one.

Martin Heidegger discusses the being of man in his book *Being and Time* (1996). He labels man as "Dasein" by which he means the "Being-there". His fundamental concern is the issue of Being that means the comprehension ability to make a sense of the things. He views man as a being thrown in the world devoid of any pre-established essence.

René Descartes coins his famous expression "cogito ergo sum" in his dissertation *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (1998). His thoughts regarding the nugatory being of human in the world are identical with Sartre. He stresses upon the individuality and subjective approach in life. The life is without any prior model and essence and the man has to create his own meanings. The personal experiences take the central place in his conception of existence.

The fundamental theme of the book is still the pursuit of existence's essence after life in the world. Without considering the repercussions as In his piece "In Search of the Chinese Soul in the Mountains of the South" (2001), Kam Louie draws attention to this search for the soul and refers to it as a spiritual quest, stating, "The journey for Soul Mountain is not successful, but the narrator does receive a set of understandings." (p. 148). As she attempts to make a relationship between religious search and freedom, Liu Jianmei in *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (2015) expands on this discussion of spiritual journey. Freedom is the prime right of every human being and she observes Gao Xingjian and his creation Soul Mountain, both as the manifestation of such freedom.

The existentialist themes in this epic tale were acknowledged by Mabel Lee (2000) as she translated it. She interpreted the book so as to preserve its fundamental meaning and the theme of the existential crisis that the protagonist had to deal with during the course of the voyage. In the first chapter of *Soul Mountain*, Lee herself talks about these existential experiences. According to her, A scholarly answer to the destruction of the self, caused by the primal human need for the warmth and security of an other, or others, as a result of interwoven life, is Soul Mountain.

## Material and Methods

### Theoretical Framework

The applied methodology used throughout the current study is both expository and descriptive, and it is qualitative in character. In this study, the text is examined using an existentialist and absurdist theoretical framework. The prominent theorists of the aforementioned school of thought who contribute to understanding and refining the analytical position include Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sren Kierkegaard, Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre.

## Results and Discussion

An avant-garde writer in Post-Mao China and Chinese-French artist, Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000. His great success *Soul Mountain* comprises of 81 chapters and it represents a man's journey on a wider level. The fiction is a semi-autobiographical piece of literature as Gao portrays his journey of self-exile after the so-called Cultural Revolution in China that proclaimed Confucianism. In an atmosphere of fear and confiscation, the protagonist declares his freedom but it comes with the burden of responsibility. That burden of being responsible for the taken choices produces anxiety in him. The powerlessness to understand life and its significance creates angst and the desire for meaning remains unsatisfied.

Although its foundation was laid in the later 19th century, existentialist thought is generally considered a 20th century trend. Between the nineteenth and twentieth century, the world underwent immense change. At that time, focusing on people's continued presence in the world was the preferred course of action for speculating. It was decided to give weight to the subjective and unique encounters. The destruction and instability that the world has experienced have led to a decline in religious convictions and a decline in the tendency to turn to God. The phrase "God is dead" from Nietzsche's novel *Existentialism* (1974) perfectly explains the downfall of high moral and religious values. Gao exhibits the existentialist behavior of an atheist who even questions the existence of God. He throws doubt on the existence of supernatural forces when he says, "I don't know if God and the Devil in fact exist" (Xingjian, 2000, p. 314). Such an attitude of disapproving the religious values reflects atheist existentialism.

### Existence Precedes Essence

Jean Paul Sartre epitomizes the entire dialogue of existentialism in his essay *Existentialism Is Humanism* (1946) and coined his celebrated expression *Existence Precedes Essence*. According to Sartre, a man exists here with no prior essence and also there is not any general or universal standard because every man has a unique perspective on life that differs somewhat from that of the general populace. Only by focusing on a person's life's folios can one comprehend that person's life. Existentialism is, to put it more crudely, a philosophy that emphasizes individualism. The phrase by Sartre is self-explanatory as it clarifies the idea that there is no prior nature or essence of man, which determines man's destinations, but rather that a man lives first and then forms his essence via his experiences in life. Gao affirms in the second chapter that a person is the original reality, suggesting that a man's existence and the interactions he must face along the way are the only things that matter in life. Man has been given existence, which he is forced to live out. There is lack of predetermined model or schema sort of thing, which may serve as a rule: "You have no idea where the mountain road beneath your feet leads but in any case you don't actually have a destination" (p. 245).

Martin Heidegger's (1996) claim that the man is thrown into the world has deep ties with Sartre's *Existence Precedes Essence*. The man is thrown with the absence of values in his life and according to Gao, the "ultimate traveler" (p. 02) i.e., man, battles with such sort of living to trace the true meanings of his existence. A person is not born with a certain goal or reason; instead, the goal or reason must be discovered through personal struggle.

The existential problems that he must face in this course actually govern a man's journey through life. Even the first chapter of *Soul Mountain* highlights the problem with existence. While portraying natives, Gao brings up that the native residents of this land exist in a way just because their life has transformed them like this. Their condition of being

like this in life lacks the essence and value. The protagonist at each level appears to exhibit the desire to trace the very essence of his existence. His portrayal of physical voyage is symbolically a travelogue of existential crises and subsequently of failure. While portraying his account of voyage to a Daoist Priest who asks the narrator about the motivation behind his continuous journey, he answers, "I don't have a specific goal but I still can't abandon it" (p. 278).

Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) considers existential crises as a result of diversion from the inherited and traditional views. According to Existentialistic viewpoint, a man enquires the crucial questions of life without having any predestined and undetermined essence. I came here, why? What brought me here in the first place? It raises doubts about humanity. The central existential query is raised at the point where our hero "You" meets the companion and learns more about the falsetto vocalists' songs. His partner tells a Record of Darkness song:

"Whence do you come singer? Whence do you come?

What province what prefecture? What brings you here" (p. 358).

In fact, the phrase "Record of Darkness" itself describes how life is a record of such events, with the aspects of nothingness and murkiness serving as the primary existential crises that a man must confront. The entirety of existence is questioned, and during one's lifetime, one strives to learn the satisfying solutions to those questions. "You've learnt through experience everything you need to know. What else are you looking for? When a man gets to middle age shouldn't he look for a peaceful and stable existence" (p. 9).

With the gradual progression in life the questions become more critical. Is there any other purpose to life? Gao constantly challenges accepted ideas, rules, and beliefs about existence and life because he thinks that the only authentic identity of living is the understanding of such questions. Gao asserts that "To exist and yet not to be perceived is the same as not to exist," just as he does in chapter 77 of the text. (p. 481). These inquiries arise in people's brains throughout their lives as a result of the existential search. The journey of life has no prescribed examples of norms, and because each person is fully accountable for all they do, the weight of duty is greater. One needs to think more deeply inside and outside of themselves before making any decisions or choosing anything. Is the life path chosen the right one or a mistake waiting to happen? What effect does a person's choice have on their life? Gao has echoed these existential issues. Before beginning his journey, the traveler indulges himself in the analytical approach and this attitude is not concerned just with the selection of the route but also highlights the internal predicament of the traveler. He is in confused state by comparing the luck and sincerity and wonders what is more important to meet the goal of life i.e. *Lingshan*. What the protagonist has to search? What is more important? Will this journey be a fruitful one or the whole struggle will end up in nothingness? The emergence of these questions is purely an existentialistic one, challenging and pondering over what is coined earlier by the established authorities. In Chapter 15, the narrator asks himself the crucial questions, "If I don't say that, what should I say? If I don't say that, is it because I shouldn't say it or because I can't say it? That is entirely up to you" (p. 93).

Different stages of these crises are shown in the text, along with their explanations, perhaps only to highlight how important these circumstances are in life. The protagonist screams in chapter 63 because he lacks a precise location. This suggests that no decision has been made regarding how to start this life's journey, and even the aim itself is illogical and ambiguous. The existential crises get increasingly severe and catastrophic at the very

end of the story, and even the problem of determining the meaning of life is transformed into the split self. The protagonist of the story also makes the crucial decision to end his current unfortunate circumstances at another point in the story. Man must now make accommodations for himself by waging a constant war to discover the true significance of existence before being given the freedom to pursue his own objectives in it.

René Descartes (1998) adds further while discussing about existence. He considers all the prior logics and reasons as a failure as they remain unable to answer the purpose of man's existence. A man can only trust himself. Thus, he frames his famous view "I think, therefore I am" (p. 18). The man has to depend upon his self to trace the essence. This act of searching for the essence compels the narrator in *Soul Mountain* to make a choice, to produce a goal. Although an individual does not possess the specific objective and the target of his presence in the world yet he has to make a choice to find a meaning for the existence. According to Gao, this is a person's true self, or more specifically, this is how a man searches for his own essence in life after experiencing existential crises. In the last few lines, the narrator makes a choice, sets the target and objective reflecting the dependency upon himself.

The goal *Lingshan* to move further in life has been set albeit obscure. The protagonist asks from the companion traveler about the destination and that mystic figure answers the inquisitor with a life-changing journey towards *Lingshan*. The text reads, "You asked him where he was going. "Lingshan." "What?" "Lingshan, ling meaning spirit or soul, and shan meaning mountain" (p. 02). In fact, this entire search for the essence becomes the purpose of existence itself: "The act of searching itself turns into a sort of goal" (p. 342).

The impetus to get the satisfactory answers for the existence incorporates the human encounters and experiences in life. The events and occurrences give the comprehension about the being of an individual. While in an attempt to contemplate the existential phenomena, a man begins his exploration of existence in this world. Gao clarifies that a man cannot get rid of the existential crises because it is his concrete existence which is truth. All the attempts to comprehend life and trace its essence prove futile, "Man cannot cast off this mask, it is projection of his own flesh and spirit. He can no longer remove from his own face this mask" (p. 141). Being here in the world and being nothing, both are explained in these lines. Further at another level in the fiction, the uniformity of the thought stays and the protagonist reveals the existential crises by revealing his inability to get rid of human mind.

The narrator starts the journey with a mission to trace the essence of his existence yet the failure to achieve this exasperates him. The exhaustion of the voyage as he has travelled so far, has produced a component of despondency in him. The directionless travel is turned into a source of dissatisfaction for him. He mourns over these indefinite goals that are ever changing and at the very end of the journey, futility is revealed to him.

"Actually, there has never been a definite goal in your life. All your goals keep changing as time passes and as locations change, and in the end the goals no longer exist" (p. 245).

**Radical freedom.** With Sartre's *Man is condemned to be free* (1946) we experience a question that what precisely is that freedom? Existentialistic philosophy holds the view that a man is the product of all those choices, which he makes "freely" in course of his existence and this radical freedom is due to the nature of his ontological being.

Wartenberg (2008) hunts down the answer and resounds that for the most part we have two sorts of freedom. The first kind of freedom is the social and political one. The emphasis on the individual instead of concentrating on the social and political frameworks is standpoint of this strain in the light of the fact that such administration compels people and makes them a detainee. Then there is another one, metaphysical freedom. To explain the conception of freedom, we have to move back to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

Sartre (1943) believes that human beings are the individuals with the conscious awareness of their existence. They possess the radical freedom as they can begin a chain of incidents and events and their essence is made after their presence or existence. Subjectivity is the central principal in human existence. An individual is the outcome of his own decisions. Being-for-itself is an endeavor by a person to reestablish him to himself. The freedom and personal experiences are the only source of consolation whatever the consequences may be. Sartre clarifies in his composition that having an essence implies that people are not free and on the other side, if they have freedom then there is no essence. Gao quotes in fiction Xu Wei, a revolutionary artist and poet. Xu Wei says in one of his couplets that, "The world is a false illusion created by others, what is original and authentic is what I propose" (p. 448).

Thomas E. Wartenberg (2008) expounds his perspectives about Freedom and its connection with the existential crises in his book *Existentialism*. He asserts that freedom and individuality are the fundamental wants of human life. Gao's claim for individuality and freedom is a continuation of this thought. He asserts the same ideology in *Soul Mountain* when he reveals his philosophy about the various experiences of life. Gao orates that the reality and authenticity survive only through experience, and that experience must be a subjective and personal one. His point is not just to demonstrate the individual decisions about freedom but also to stress upon the reasoning of life, one has. The world appears to an individual what he himself is. The inside musings shape the viewpoint of a person. The subjective and personal view of life becomes the center as every individual observes the world in his or her own ways. Gao's philosophy of individuality and freedom is more concerned with metaphysics when he pens down his views about subjective human experiences and says that when there is an evil in your heart, you just observe the evil presences in the world.

Freedom is not just about following the wants and satisfying the wishes within yet it is more about the individual and his decisions about those wants. Following a desire means that the sentiments will decide the way of a man's existence. Sartre (1946) debates about this point and says that the man is the sole authority to determine his sentiments. The authority to choose or discard any feeling lies with him. Being an existentialist, Gao accepts his individualism and freedom but rejects the social and political system of government. To alert authorities to his presence, he yells. By stating that he is the only one responsible for him, he openly declares his freedom and accepts the consequences of it.

## Conclusion

In the book *Soul Mountain*, existentialist subordinate strategic ideas like as freedom, struggle, and existence are all addressed. By speaking out against communal authority and The Cultural Revolution, Gao emphasises the idea of individualism and independence. As he deals with the same problem in his life, he expresses sharp philosophical thoughts while keeping in mind China's everyday reality. It soon becomes apparent that Existentialism permeates all of Gao's fiction. His use of language and the concepts portrayed in the fiction not only place an emphasis on existentialist philosophy but also serve to highlight various auxiliary concepts. Gao is an existentialist, and his

dissertations exhibit a distinct influence from thinkers like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. Unquestionably, he introduced a philosophical element, and the novel is where the blending of literature and philosophy reaches its pinnacle. When he views literature, philosophy, and history as the bonds, this integrated sublimity may be recognized, and emptiness ultimately prevails in the discussion. To reveal the lack of freedom and the crises that result from this individual independence, he employs a variety of tactics.

Both the outside environment and the Cultural Revolution have a significant impact on Gao and the characters in the story. The end of freedom in practically every area of life was brought about by communism and the governing function of the state. Stereotyping occurs when set rules are used to control everyone's life and subject them to subjugation. The period of red terror is where we may observe this overall desire to dominate the population. A result of such a depressed environment is *Soul Mountain*. It is a cry for freedom and individuality in the politically oppressive system. The novel is a response to Mao Zedong's purported Cultural Revolution and Confucian ideology. Gao opposes both the social regulations that regulate people's behavior as well as the political community structure. In reality, both controlling authorities, the political system and society, exert equal effort and make great efforts to seize freedom and emancipation. The many pronouns that are utilized throughout the story speak out against such oppressive systems and proclaim their own freedom of choice. They exhibit their existence for themselves. The essential focus of existentialist philosophy is individuality, and Gao appears to have been successful in keeping the idea of freedom alive in her literature.



## References

- Camus, Albert. (1955). *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage.
- Charlesworth, M. J. (1975). *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Chen, Xiaomei. (1995). *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Descartes, René. (1998). *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company
- Gefei, Wu. (2007). *Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-era Chinese Literature*. Slovenia: Slovenian Society for Comparative Literature
- Heidegger, Martin. (1996). *Being and Time*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Jaggi, Maya. (2008, August 02). Living Without 'Isms'. *The Guardian*.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. (1849). *The Sickness unto Death*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Liu, Jianmei. (2015). *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Louie, K. (2001). In Search of the Chinese Soul in the Mountains of the South [Review of *Soul Mountain*, by G. Xingjian & M. Lee]. *The China Journal*, 45, 145-149. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182376>
- Nellickappilly, S. (2015, May 1). *Aspects of western philosophy*. Academia.edu. Retrieved March 8, 2023, from [https://www.academia.edu/12185411/Aspects\\_of\\_Western\\_Philosophy](https://www.academia.edu/12185411/Aspects_of_Western_Philosophy)
- Nietzsche, F. W., & Kaufmann, W. A. (1974). *The Gay Science: with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1943). *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1946). *Existentialism is Humanism*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1971). *Existentialism and Human Emotion*. Secaucus: Citadel.
- Wartenberg, Thomas E. (2008). *Existentialism*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Xingjian, Gao. (2000). *Soul Mountain* (Lee, Mabel, Trans.). New York: Harper Collins.