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# "She" in the Eyes of "You": *The Soul Mountain* of Femininity Complex

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## Abstract

This essay argues that Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* mobilizes its doubled address ("I/you") to stage "she" as an experimental construct through which femininity is performed rather than defined. Bringing Gao's scenes into conversation with Freud's account of "passive" femininity, the essay critiques biologizing foundations of gendered desire; drawing on Irigaray, it emphasizes the limits of language in articulating feminine pleasure; following Foucault and Butler, it situates "she's" choices within regimes of heterosexual normativity and their performative reproduction. A comparative interlude with Joyce's *The Dead* reads Gretta's bifurcation of spiritual love and bodily intimacy alongside "she's" embrace of pleasure as "free love", clarifying how spiritual attachment can be preserved precisely by withholding sex from the beloved while granting it elsewhere. The essay further locates Gao's experiment in the context of Chinese patriarchal scripts, underscoring how the heroine names injury, distrust, and desire while declining the law's demand for coherence. Finally, the recurrent figure of Lingshan (the mountain of soul) refracts the project's meta-claim: like the mountain that is always "on the other side", femininity here remains asymptotic—approached through patterns, gestures, and contradictions rather than captured by theory. By tracing form (second-person address, non-linear doubling) alongside content (sex, love, refusal), the essay contributes a model of criticism that privileges descriptive precision over definitional mastery, illuminating how *Soul Mountain* reimagines femininity as an ongoing practice within and against heteronormative regimes.

## Keywords

*Soul Mountain*, Feminism, Femininity, Marriage, Gender Performativity

## 1. Introduction

*Soul Mountain* (Lingshan) by Gao Xingjian employs non-linear narration that

makes the novel feel like two interwoven stories. One half of the book is narrated by a first-person protagonist, "I", offering an autobiographical account. This paper will mainly focus on the other half, narrated in the second person—"you"—who encounters a mysterious female figure ("she"), and the two travel together in search of the mountain of soul.

The heroine ("she") is never named throughout the novel, and her age shifts as the journey progresses. "She" is not a singular, fixed character but rather an imagined representation of women (or womanhood). In chapter 11, when "you" meets her for the first time, "she" appears as a young girl who is still not fully independent, living with her father and stepmother. She has little experience with love. Having sex with her boyfriend "made her vomit" (Gao, 2000: p. 67), revealing her emotional and physical unreadiness. Later, in Chapter 34, "she" appears as a more mature woman, recalling her first love at sixteen. "She" describes it as "the romance of a young girl" (p. 192), indicating that she is no longer one herself. By chapter 44, she has become an aged woman with "deep wrinkles at the corners of her eyes make-up can't hide" (p. 255). This transformation in appearance symbolizes a progression through stages of life and identity.

The reason "she" can transform across various ages and life experiences is that Gao blends multiple patriarchal stereotypes of women into this one single character. "She" is an imagined construct, and "you", on the other hand, is also an imaginary representation of a man. In From Modernism to Eclecticism, Yang & Yuan (2013) believe that the journey of "you" and "her" is "an imagination created by 'me' based on experiences from 'the outside world'…like memory, imagination, and emotion" (p. 133). The story reads like an experiment in which Gao constructs a narrative setting that allows these two heterosexual figures to meet and interact, while observing and presenting their emotional responses as the plot unfolds. Throughout this experiment, women of various ages encounter "you", each expressing distinct feminine behaviors and sentiments. In this essay, I will examine the "femininity" through the behaviors and emotions displayed by "her" as a young girl, a mature woman, and an aged woman. The concept of femininity was first framed as a patriarchal construct by Freud. It stems from Freud's biased assumption about gender, which I will critique in later paragraphs. I want to clarify that I am borrowing the word "femininity" to temporarily refer to "the feeling of being a woman". When I use "femininity" in quotation marks, I am making this provisional reference. When I use the word without quotation marks, I will be referring specifically to Freud's theory of femininity. I will also explain why it is undefinable.

## 2. An Experimental Reconstruction of Femininity in the Regime of Heterosexuality

The subjectivity of the heroine in *Soul Mountain* implies a masculine assumption or naturalization of femininity. The first confession given by "her" in the identity of a young girl reveals the inner conflict and emotional complexity of "feminin-

ity". First, the heroine displays a natural inclination towards love and intimacy with men: "She couldn't say it was love at first sight, but he was the first man bold enough to seek her love…She was in a daze, her heart was pounding, and she was afraid yet willing. It was so natural, good, beautiful, shy, and pure." (Gao, 2000: p. 67) This stream-of-consciousness passage reflects her first experience of romantic and physical attraction, indicating that the psychological desire for heterosexual love is a part of human nature. However, when this irresponsible man later gets her pregnant, she "felt sick" at men's irresponsibility and "became hysterical and cursed men" (p. 67). Despite her anger, she struggles to resist her emotional and physical attachment to him, as she confesses: "but she loves him, that is once loved him…she loved the smell of sweat in his singlets, even after they had been washed she could smell it." (p. 67) She cannot deny that she once loved him, and her fixation on his scent suggests she still misses him, even while recognizing his lies and irresponsibility. This reveals her internal conflict between reason and sensibility, as shown in her self-persuasion: "But he was not worth loving" and "men are filthy like this" (p. 67). The heroine is a character through whom Gao imagines how women might desire love and intimacy, suffer emotional pain from relationships, and develop hostility towards men. This is largely based on Gao's assumption of how women would feel and think in heterosexual relationships. Feminists may critique it as biased, arguing that men are theoretically incapable of fully understanding women's inner lives. Nevertheless, Gao offers a creative lens through which a modern man interprets "femininity", as including a natural desire for love.

Another example that helps to illuminate Gao's new assumption of "femininity" is the heroine's ambivalent attitude towards the protagonist, "you". She confides her deepest thoughts to "you", a male stranger whose name she doesn't even know. Why does she open up so easily? There are two possible explanations. First, when "you" finds her by the river, she is in a state of despair, confessing that "she really wants to die" (p. 65) and describing how she might do it—"find a sandy bay and walk from the foot of the embankment into the river" (p. 65). His presence and offer of companionship may be the only thing keeping her grounded. Second, as Gao positions "you" as a symbolic representation of men, her attachment to him could be a metaphor for the innate feminine impulse to seek out heterosexual relationships as a means of emotional fulfillment. Gao also implies a deeper longing for masculinity when he writes that she lacks "a masculine father she can depend on" (p. 67). This echoes Freud's theory that young girls are "destined to make room for an attachment to her father" (Freud, 1936: p. 121). However, Gao complicates this idea: while the female protagonist craves emotional security from a masculine figure, she expresses clear discomfort with sexual experience. In this way, Gao rejects Freud's theory of penis envy, but affirms the psychological desire for masculinity in women.

When the heroine appears as a mature woman, her attitude toward sex and intimacy undergoes a drastic transformation. She no longer resists physical intimacy

and even actively seeks it from "you": "…She says do I want her?/Right here in the rain and mud?/Won't it be more exciting?/...You ask how many men she has slept with. She says at least a hundred. 'You' doesn't believe her." (Gao, 2000: pp. 195-196). The heroine now displays both sexual experience and a strong desire for intimacy, which stands in stark contrast to the aversion shown by her younger self. She views sex and intimacy as "a moment's happiness" without any precaution. Although she recalls her first sexual encounter as being "toyed with", she seems to have come to terms with it and now embraces sexual pleasure. However, she does not conflate love with sexual pleasure. In the past, she refused to be intimate with her first lover, stating that: "She can casually sleep with any man but not him." Gao offers no explanation for this logic, and "you" simply remarks that all her words are lies (pp. 194-195). I would like to examine what Gao seeks to convey through this awkward and emotionally layered conversation. I believe "you" responds with no sympathy because Gao is illustrating an ineffable aspect of "femininity"—something that can only be "felt" rather than "said". In other words, Gao shows how "femininity" functions in a visual style.

To summarize the love experience of the heroine as a mature woman: she once loved a man; she now enjoys physical intimacy; yet she still regards her first sexual encounter as a violation. She also refuses to give intimacy to the man she truly loves. In my view, on one hand, she despises men who seek her body merely for pleasure, yet she remains willing to experience libidinal pleasure—perhaps out of the helplessness or self-deprecation following the loss of her virginity. On the other hand, she preserves a space within her spirit, where the concept of love remains pure, while physical intimacy is seen as a form of contamination. Aware that sex is often expected in heterosexual love, she chooses to flee when her true lover confesses his feelings and tries to kiss her (p. 195). She wants her love to stay at a purely spiritual stage, never going any further to physical intimacy.

## 3. The Wifely Gretta's Free Love: A Comparison

This attempt to separate physical intimacy from pure love reminds me of *The Dead* in Dubliner by James Joyce. Gabriel's wife, Gretta, reminisces about her first love, a boy named Furey who died many years earlier, while she is engaged in physical intimacy with Gabriel. Just before recalling Furey, Gretta kisses Gabriel affectionately and compliments him as "a generous person" (Joyce, 2016: p. 209). Although she has been married to Gabriel for many years since Furey's death, she is unable to relinquish her emotional attachment to her first love and allow her husband to fully take his place. On the other hand, the intimacy Gretta shares with Gabriel demonstrates her continued willingness to engage in physical intimacy within a heterosexual relationship. Notably, she had never been physically intimate with Furey, and she expresses no desire to do so, even as she mourns him. This behavior closely parallels that of "her" in *Soul Mountain*: both women maintain physical intimacy with one man while preserving a sense of pure, spiritual love for another.

Both “she”, as a mature woman, and Gretta can be interpreted as practicing a form of “free love”. The original concept of “free love” emerged as an anti-Catholic ideology that challenged the sanctity and authority of marriage as promoted by Catholicism. Wendy Hayden (2013) defines free love as follows:

*The “free” in the definition of “free love” emphasized the right for women and men to choose their sexual partners regardless of institutional sanction…free-love advocates rejected the ideologies behind marriage altogether. They pointed out how institutional marriage did not stop men and women from cheating, nor did it protect women from abuse…free-love advocates made sexuality and defying feature of their feminist calls for reform.* (pp. 2-3)

According to Hayden, free love was a feminist response to the patriarchal constraints of marriage. It is not a justification for cheating and betrayal; rather, the notion of “free” refers to the legitimacy of women choosing their partners based on their own desires, whether in a physical or spiritual form. It also signals a challenge to traditional moral codes imposed by patriarchal authority. In *Soul Mountain*, when “you” asks “her” how many men she has slept with—clearly in a judgmental tone—she is not irritated at all. Instead, she responds with calm confidence, giving a metaphorical answer that reveals her experience in sexual relationships. She is not concerned with how “you” might judge her through the lens of conventional morality. Her sexual experiences are entirely self-chosen, and her physical companionship and intimacy with “you” can be interpreted as an act of “free love”. On the other hand, if we regard the relationship between “she” and “you” as a legitimate one, her continued emotional attachment to her first love—whom she met at the age of sixteen—also qualifies as “free love”. This emotional connection transcends the physical limit of her current relationship and is simultaneously fully out of her own willingness.

“Free love” is an essential component of Gao’s construction of “femininity” in *Soul Mountain*. At this point, we can recognize that the figure of “her” is based on two fundamental assumptions: First, “she” does not trust men’s loyalty, as she has been hurt or betrayed by men in her youth. Both the young girl and mature woman versions of “she” suffer from different men, and their distrust of men’s loyalty can be recognized as logically consistent. As the younger version of “she” states: “But he was not worth loving, he could casually do this with any woman, men are filthy like this!” (Gao, 2000: p. 67) It clearly illustrates how young girls abhor men’s disloyalty. The mature woman version of “she” gives a more resigned disappointment: “You say she’s a slut. She says don’t men like it like that?...When it’s finished, you walk off and that’s it, there’s nothing to worry about and there are no complications.” (p. 196) When the protagonist abuses her as a slut, the heroine frivolously asks the protagonist if he prefers women being in that way, indicating that she views all men—including the protagonist—as irresponsible and driven by libido. At the same time, her invitation to intimacy without obligation reveals her numbness towards men and her refusal to entangle love with physical closeness. She would rather preserve a spiritual space for her first love with no disruption of

physical intimacy than take a risk devoting her true love to a disloyal man. Some readers may interpret "she" as a symbolic or composite representation of women in general, given her shifting identities and varied experiences. However, I argue that "she" is best understood as a single woman depicted at different stages of life. Her sexual desire and her distrust of male disloyalty are two foundational components of her character. For instance, in Chapter 60, "she" reappears as a mature woman. When the protagonist sarcastically remarks, "Don't people exist in order to have some pleasure?" (p. 377), she replies metaphorically: "I also feel happy when I am with you." This response suggests a continued consistency in her character: she chooses "you" for the sake of pleasure, not for emotional attachment. The relationship between "you" and "she" thus illustrates a model of how "free love" operates: as the pursuit of pleasure, separate from emotional commitment and traditional expectation of loyalty.

Such an emphatic focus on "natural desire" diverges somewhat from the original anti-marriage and anti-patriarchal intent of "free love". Joyce's *The Dead*, on the other hand, provides a compelling point of comparison. I have discussed the experience of "free love" in both Joyce's Gretta and Gao's "she", noting their similarities. However, Joyce places particular emphasis on Gretta's role as a wife and then uses the idea of "free love" to challenge that identity. Right before Gretta and her husband Gabriel arrive at the hotel and she reveals her love to Furey, Joyce offers a glimpse into Gabriel's inner thoughts:

*She leaned lightly on his arm, as lightly as when she had danced with him a few hours before. He had felt proud and happy then, happy that she was his, proud of her grace and wifely carriage. But now, after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust.* (Joyce, 2016: p. 207)

Note the deliberate use of the word "wifely". Joyce underscores Gretta's identity as Gabriel's wife, a woman he deeply desires. The intimate gestures—"leaned lightly on his arm", "first touch of her body," and "musical and strange and perfumed sent"—create the illusion that they are about to passionately express their love as soon as they reach their private room at the hotel. This illusion is then shattered by Gretta's confession of her love for Furey, resulting in the collapse of Gabriel's emotional and masculine identity. Through this sharp contrast, Joyce's story becomes a kind of gendered confrontation, where femininity—through the vehicle of "free love"—undermines masculinity and the traditional patriarchal structure. However, the logic behind the plot shift may feel jarring, as the story ends abruptly with Gabriel's despair.

This kind of gendered conflict does not appear in *Soul Mountain*. The attitude of "you" towards "she" remains ambiguous. He accepts her emotional attachment and sexual intimacy, but he also feels reluctant to engage with her on a deeper, personal level. Such reluctance is usually represented as indifference. In Chapter 32, when "she" shares memories of her true love, "you" repeatedly interrupts with unrelated tales about his grandfather and the "red boy" (Gao, 2000: pp. 191-195).

In Chapter 50, when "she" asks him to leave her alone so she can "return to being ordinary and like an ordinary person marry an ordinary man" (p. 302), "you" shows no resistance—he simply leaves and continues his travel to the mountain of soul. In Chapter 60, when "she" tells him that she is already married, he only replies, "congratulations", with "a tinge of bitterness" (p. 378). "You" appears more as an intruder who suddenly enters "she's" life. They share various experiences—sometimes intimate, even across different ages—and exhibit the hallmarks of a romantic pair. Sometimes, "she" adopts a wifely demeanor, such as in Chapter 21 when she says she "wants to hear your voice, that your voice is reassuring…she wants to pillow her head on your arm, this gives her something to lean on…she wants nothing of you at this moment except that you understand her, care about her, love her" (pp. 126-127). In Chapter 46, she "blubbers, crying and saying she loves you. Her outburst is because she loves you, she's frightened that you're leaving" (p. 274). Yet "You" never reciprocates emotionally. He acts as an observer who always holds a neutral position in her life, never judging or commenting on her behaviors, passively accepting all her let-offs, and refusing to devote his own emotions to her. "You" is a male character, but he displays no conventional masculinity.

I would argue that *Soul Mountain* functions as an experimental narrative constructed by Gao to observe and test "femininity" within heterosexual relationships. "You" is the neutral variable designed to test "she." In other words, Gao is not interested in critiquing masculinity or confronting hegemonic power structures as Joyce does. Instead, he offers a literary portrayal of femininity as it is, observed and recorded without confrontation.

## 4. The Linguistic Inarticulation of "She" and "Femininity"

In Freud's famous lecture on the nature of femininity, he defines femininity as "passive" and masculinity as "active", using libido as a framework for contrast:

*The male sex-cell is actively mobile and searches out the female one, and the latter, the ovum, is impossible and waits passively. This behavior of the elementary sexual organisms is indeed a model for the conduct of sexual individuals during intercourse. The male pursues the female for the purpose of sexual union, seizes hold of her and penetrates into her.* (Freud, 1936: p. 302)

Freud attempts to blur the boundary between biology and psychology by referencing biological terms such as "male sex-cells" and "ovum." He borrows the concepts of "passive" and "active" from biological behaviors and then applies them to psychological definitions of "femininity" and "masculinity". Freud is accurate in two aspects: First, sperm—presumably the "male sex-cells" he references—do actively seek out an ovum for fertilization; and second, among most mammalian species, including humans, males do tend to actively seek out females during periods of oestrus. He claims that women are naturally "passive" and men naturally "active", drawing parallels to observed behaviors during sexual intercourse. His theory may sound plausible at first glance because it builds upon truths that are

observable yet not fully explained. By leveraging this gap in understanding, Freud effectively naturalizes this inexplicability and uses it as the foundation for his definition of femininity and masculinity.

However, Freud turns an anatomical analogy into a psychological norm: because sperm are motile while the ovum is inert, masculinity is "active" and femininity "passive", and he scales this from cells to sexual conduct. The move commits a category error (biology → psychology) and a naturalistic slide from description to prescription, smuggling hierarchy in as "nature". Even on its own terms, biology won't sustain it: fertilization relies on coordinated dynamics—oviductal chemo/thermotaxis and uterine flow, plus oocyte-cumulus signaling—rather than "heroic" sperm meeting a passive egg.

The "femininity" implied by Gao, on the other hand, clearly challenges Freud's theory. The biggest fault made by Freud is to rely on physical terms—such as sex and intercourse—as the theoretical foundation for femininity, which is, fundamentally, a psychological concept. As mentioned earlier, "she", the heroine in *Soul Mountain*, demonstrates a clear separation between physical desire and spiritual attachment. A Woman's physical desires can no longer be assumed to define her spiritual patterns. The satisfaction of women's physical or libidinal desire does not necessarily equate to emotional or spiritual fulfillment. For example, in Chapter 40, "she" appears as a middle-class married woman with all her physical needs satisfied: "a husband, a son, what people think is a perfect little family…She isn't sexually frustrated, make no mistake, and she does have orgasm with her husband" (Gao, 2000: pp. 232-233). However, she remains spiritually unfulfilled: "But she isn't happy. She has been married for three years, and the thrill of love and marriage has gone. The son, at times, is a hindrance" (p. 232). This directly undermines Freud's theory of feminine desire. Freud's theory of femininity is based on the supposed "passive nature" of the female biological characteristics and concludes with problematic notions such as "physical vanity", "sexual inferiority", "phallic wishes", and the "masculinity complex" (Freud, 1936: pp. 120-132). These terms reveal that Freud's version of femininity is rooted in a sense of lack or inadequacy—of being "imperfect" or "unsatisfactory"—which drives women to seek compensation through masculinity.

However, in this instance, "she" is not lacking masculine elements in her life at all. She has a husband who can fully satisfy her physical and libidinal needs, and a child, yet she still finds her life deeply unsatisfying. She ultimately has an affair with a new colleague. "You" argue about the reason for cheating with her drastically:

*It's because her husband doesn't care what she wears, it's his attitude of not caring! She says she hadn't wanted to seduce anyone./…/Not wanting to see herself acting irrationally like this?/Yes./Not wanting to see that she was just as wild?/She says she was confused and hadn't thought it would come to this, at the time she knew she didn't love him, in any way at all. Her husband was better than he.* (Gao, 2000: p. 235)

From her confession, it is clear that she does not fully understand why she cheated but only admits to acting irrationally. However, I would argue that being "wild" is not sufficient because there should be a reason for being irrational. The ultimate motivation is her previous frustration with her family life, and her husband's indifference—particularly his lack of interest in how she dresses—serves as the immediate trigger for her infidelity. This act of cheating cannot be classified as an expression of "free love" in this scenario because she does not love the male colleague to whom she confesses the affair. Moreover, the adultery brings her no pleasure at all. It only results in regret and self-loathing. Her physical and libidinal fulfillments have never met her spiritual needs. But what is her true feminine desire then? How can we linguistically capture Gao's vision of femininity?

To explain Gao's implications about "femininity", we must first redefine the term in a way that operates purely on a spiritual plane. Irigaray provides an alternative approach to the concept of femininity. In Speculum of the Other Woman (Irigaray, 1985a), Irigaray critiques Freud's formulation:

*Libido would be the name—or password borrowed from the "genital" stage—given to the sexual instincts of the pregenital stages, and would more specifically…to the sadistic-anal stage, which would have…the most irresistible, the most imperious, the most tyrannical force…is it not rather a symptom that tells us that woman's pleasure and the representation that can made of it and that she can have of it, are…too suppressed, repressed, obscured, or denied for her to be anything but "frigid"…Thus "femininity" is caught in a vicious circle; because she doesn't have "it," she must wish to have "it" since "it" is the guarantor of sexual exchange, but she doesn't have "it" so as to drive up, through her envy, "its" market rating as "general equivalent."* (pp. 93-114)

First, Irigaray points out that libido is a forceful power. Freud's theory regards libido as a natural drive that compels females and males toward mating and reproduction. Consequently, the definition of "femininity" and "masculinity"—along with the categories "passive" and "active"—are derived from how females and males will behave to respond to libidinal force. Irigaray questions the validity of such a "natural" force by revealing how it structurally oppresses women. According to Freud, women are sexually inferior because they lack the genital organ that supposedly enables an "active" role in reproduction. They therefore can only perform the "frigidity" or "passivity", traits that come to define Freud's femininity. This logic compels women to seek masculine elements (the "it" that Irigaray abbreviates) to compensate for their assumed biological inferiority. Yet, the more women pursue this compensation, the more inferior they appear within Freud's framework. Thus, Irigaray implies that Freud's femininity is logically flawed. It serves primarily as a tool to uphold male-centered interests of reproduction, offering no space for women's own independent desire. But what is that desire? Irigaray gives her answer in another book, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Irigaray, 1985b):

*Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own lan-*

*guage…Women are in a position of exclusion...Female sexualization is thus the effect of a logical requirement, of the existence of a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies…That woman does not exist owing to the fact that language—a language—rules as master…So there is, for women, no possible law for their pleasure. No more than there is any possible discourse.* (pp. 77-95)

First, Irigaray points out that terms such as female, feminine, femininity are not objective truth but merely linguistic constructs—products of a symbol system to transmit information. Language functions as a vehicle for communication, shaping the way that individuals interact with reality. For instance, in order to describe those metal boxes with four wheels that transport people from place to place, we create the word car. When children learn language in primary school, they are not only acquiring vocabulary; they are internalizing a symbolic reality constructed by language. When they hear the word car, they will have an imaginary pattern in their minds showing them those metal boxes with four wheels instead of the three letters c-a-r. In this way, language forms the conceptual reality that we are familiar with. Second, Irigaray implies that concepts like "femininity"—and even "female" or "woman"—should not be defined solely through language. "Women" as a linguistic term is a symbol that represents all women as a unification. However, gender is performative and ought not to be universally symbolized. Thus, she claims that women are in an "exclusion" of language, which means that feminine identity, which is as performative as gender, should get rid of the universality given by language. Foucault also provides a possible explanation in *The History of Sexuality* (1976):

*Sexuality was carefully confined…The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy…The rest had only to remain vague, proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech…Sex was not something only simply judged; it was a thing one administered.* (pp. 3-24)

Foucault claims that the concept of "sexuality" is rigorously regulated by repressive power, and that the limitations of language serve as one of the representations. He identifies the concept of "couple" as the only "legitimized" identity to speak about sexuality, illustrating how the repressive power of sexuality is embedded within linguistic structures. All other forms of sexual activity—such as premarital sex, adultery, and even "free love", which is often regarded as a form of spiritual adultery—are categorized as "abnormal" or "illegitimate".

Foucault emphasizes that sex is an "administered" concept. This administration operates on both physical and conceptual levels. On the one hand, governments enforce censorship that prohibits open discussion of sexual content; on the other hand, and more importantly, a moral authority deeply rooted in people's minds from Christianity and perpetuated over time. The sanctity of marriage has been praised for centuries, as marriage has played the central role in legitimizing "sex" from the era of Christianity and feudalism to the modern day. Throughout this

process of sexual repression, language functions as a vehicle of control. This is why Irigaray seeks to go beyond language and find an alternative way to express "femininity".

Gao's *Soul Mountain* offers a new concept of "femininity", one that is free from repressive forces such as moral legitimacy and linguistic definition. This represents an eclectic response to the dilemma of defining "femininity" raised by avant-garde feminists. On the one hand, Gao refrains from invoking any moral principles throughout the novel. Numerous actions depicted in the book, such as the premarital sex of the young-girl version of "she" in Chapter 11, and the adultery confessed by the married-woman version of "she" in Chapter 40, could be deemed morally transgressive. Gao is not afraid to confront morality or represent women's sexual desires directly. He offers a clear logic pattern of how and why women desire intimacy and masculinity. Adopting the role of an observer – through the narrative voice of "you"—passively accepts all "her" words and attachments with a vague attitude. Zhao Dong comments on Gao's depiction of sexual desire: "The straight descriptions of sexual desire are to show the nihility of desire, which is not only simply a kind of physical desire but a graceful natural desire" (Zhao, 2019: p. 54). In other words, all of "her" behaviors, including but not limited to free love, premarital sex, adultery, and emotional attachment to "you", etc., are shown in a "natural" way. Moral codes function only as standards for judgment, yet women's natural desires persist regardless of such judgment. Gao suggests that no such judgment is necessary. On the other hand, Gao resists defining "femininity" because he recognizes that "femininity", as Irigaray argues, lies beyond the reach of language. *Soul Mountain* presents a series of consequences from women's desires. For instance, "her" attachment to "you" can be seen as an expression of a feminine yearning for masculinity, which aligns with the young girl's complaint about her father's lack of masculinity; the adultery conducted by the married version of "she" is because of her feminine desire for adoration that her husband fails to offer. All those stories form a pattern that reveals how "femininity" operates, yet Gao stops at the stage of "pattern" and resists offering a linguistic definition of "femininity" because, as Foucault argues, language functions as a mechanism of control. "Femininity", as a performative feminine feature, is abstract and amorphous; once captured in rigid linguistic terms through laws and definitions, it loses its fluidity.

Gao depicts both the protagonist and the heroine in a masculinist way to satirize the patriarchal tradition of China. Farida Chishti notes that all male characters in *Soul Mountain* express sexual desire in accordance with patriarchal traditions, while all female characters focus on love, intimacy, and marriage. (Chishti, 2021: p. 111) The interactions between the protagonist and the heroine show how men and women are trapped within patriarchal ideology. Moreover, the definition of gender in China is strictly limited to "men" or "women", with heterosexuality being the only acknowledged form of relationship. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler argues that "law produces and then conceals the notion of 'a subject before the

law'" (Butler, 1999: p. 5), implying that the identity of "female" is conceptually problematic, which corresponds with Foucault's view of law as a form of restrictive power. In *Soul Mountain*, although "she", as the protagonist, presents a thorough pattern of feminine features with variable identities, she ultimately fails to transcend the conventional identity of "woman". Most of her desires and behaviors are framed within the context of heterosexual relationships, while same sexual relationship and other sexual preferences are excluded. Only one instance of a same-sex relationship between women preference appears in Chapter 73, when a female character invites "me", which is usually considered as the autobiographical character of Gao himself, to write a story about her same-sex relationship, which ends tragically. The narrator's response shows a clear resistance to same sexual relationship. (Gao, 2000: pp. 456-463) Chishti comments that both the protagonist and the heroine are "products of their socio-cultural environment" (Chishti, 2021: p. 111). In this sense, the problematic expectation of women in *Soul Mountain* reflects Gao's revolt against the stereotypical and hegemonic ideology of gender in China.

Moreover, the "femininity" implied by the heroine does transcend the constraints of both language and moral principles. This "femininity" does not originate in Freud's biologically determined theory, nor does it correspond with the conceptually restricted subject of "female" discussed by Butler. Rather, it gestures towards the linguistically unreachable essence of the pre-law subject existing before the very first definition of "female" ever emerged. A fitting metaphor from the mountain of soul itself. In Chapter 76, a man asks an old man where Lingshan (the mountain of soul that the protagonist keeps seeking throughout the novel) is, and the old man repeatedly answers, "the other side of the river" (Gao, 2000: pp. 478-479). Lingshan symbolizes Gao's quest for the meaning of life—a quest for something abstract, unreachable, yet real, not physically but psychologically. The protagonist is always on the way to seeking Lingshan but can never reach it. The river serves as a metaphorical boundary between reality and "unreachable truth" – a truth that might answer not only "Who am I?", "Why am I here?", and "Where will I go?" but also "What is 'femininity'?"

Gao is aware of and even metaphorically emphasizes the incomprehensibility of "femininity." For example, in Chapter 32, the male protagonist's rumbling interruptions during the heroine's confession of her true love indicate his reluctance to engage with her feminine logic (Gao, 2000: pp. 191-195). Zhao Yiheng writes that Gao is facing a river without "the other side," and that both Gao and the women in the novel can only exist on "this side" (Zhao, 2003: p. 118). No matter how theorists attempt to liberate the concepts of "femininity" and "female" from the constraints of language and the body, human beings ultimately need to live within physical reality. The trace of "femininity," like the trace of Lingshan, remains an unreachable destination in a lifelong spiritual pursuit.

But Gao successfully encapsulates how "femininity" operates within the limits of language through feminine performances. In Chapter 39, he describes how

Hmong girls attract their lovers:

*Young women in groups of five or six come to the river-bank, some standing in a circle and others holding hands, and begin calling their lovers…The correct word is perhaps not "sing", for the clear shrill sounds come from deep within so that body and heart respond…It is totally instinctive, uncontrived, unrestrained and unembellished, and certainly devoid of what might be called embarrassment. Each woman exerts herself, body and heart, to draw her young man to her.* (Gao, 2000: p. 228)

The Hmong girls' ritual of calling lovers is quite primitive. Young men simply follow their singing to choose their lovers. Notably, Gao does not comment on Hmong girls' singing skills but carefully chooses words such as "instinctive" and "unembellished" to reinforce the naturalness of their desire for love. In this Hmong village, far away from modern institutions of mortality and hierarchy, the only motivating force behind the girls' courtship ritual is the feminine desire for love. Marian Galik, quoting Norma Diamond, describes the girls' singing as a representation of "sexual freedom" (Gálik, 2003: p. 619). Gao reinforces the naturalness of the Hmong girls' desire to suggest an alternative to Irigaray's theory of untouchable "femininity." He does not attempt to define what "femininity" is; instead, he allows readers to witness its operation through the Hmong girls' performances. In the Hmong village, laws and power structures vanish. Primitiveness becomes naturalness, which in turn becomes freedom.

Irigaray claims that the feminine desire is theoretically indescribable because "theory" itself is a form of power—a regulatory force. Human nature, by contrast, should never be theoretically defined, as humans deserve the freedom to shape their own nature. In other words, when theory is applied to human nature, it risks becoming an oppressive force that restricts freedom. Since "femininity" is part of human nature, it should never be rigidly defined. In *Soul Mountain*, Gao does not apply any theoretical analysis to "femininity." Instead, he allows the reader to see how it operates as a pattern—allowing his narrative to approach the otherwise unreachable discourse of "femininity."

## 5. Conclusion

To be conclusive, *Soul Mountain* shows how "femininity" exists in a performative way from the variation of the heroine's identities. Across the girl, the lover, the wife, and the elder, "her" desires and feminine features are inconsistent and unpredictable. It breaks the patriarchal assumption of the universality of feminine identity and desire, which is represented by Freud's theory, and it also implies Irigaray's theory that feminine identity and desire should remain in a discourse. "You" functions less as a living character than as an observer projected by Gao's ego. He helps to plug in the patriarchal ideology into the novel to make a comparison against the performative "femininity" represented by "she". The travel to the mountain of soul (Lingshan) is a metaphor of Gao's prolonged contemplation about female identity and his spiritual contest against Chinese patriarchal ideol-

ogy. Gao's satire of Chinese patriarchy acknowledges how deeply gender scripts bind both sexes, yet his richest insights arise where those scripts loosen: the Hmong girls who call lovers with unembellished voices; the wife who names her lack without appealing to biology; the traveler who learns that mountain of soul always lies "on the other side." By tracing patterns instead of fixing a meaning, the novel models criticism that resists mastery. "Femininity" here stands not as a definition but as a practice—visible in gestures, contradictions, and choices; irreducible to anatomy or law; and, like Lingshan, perpetually approached yet kept just out of reach.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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