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## **Reflections on a changing society: The role of memories and recollections in the selected stories of GAO Xingjian's *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*.**

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### ***Abstract***

*The structure of a given society is determined to a great extent by the dominant ideologies prevalent therein. Being a part of the society, individuals are required to adjust themselves with those ideologies which control their lives. In fact, in the face of the authoritative forces of the ruling group, individual lives change their course – sometimes beyond recognition. This idea is powerfully present in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2004), a collection of six short stories written by Gao Xingjian, the Nobel-Prize winning author from China. Set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China, the book upholds how the fate of a whole generation is changed by the waves of certain ideological beliefs. Xingjian portrays in his stories a gallery of characters whose minds serve as reflections on a changing world of the Chinese people during and after the Revolution. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to highlight Xingjian's search for a perspective to view the present in the light of the past, as suggested in three stories of the book – 'The Temple', 'In the Park' and 'Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather'. With an emphasis on the importance of memories and recollections in exploring the complexities of the human mind, the author, in these stories, takes the readers through a journey of China's past – both before and during the Cultural Revolution. While he seems to focus on the contrast between the present and the past, Xingjian also hints at his own stance on the country's fate, thus allowing himself to fit into Michel Foucault's notion of the intellectual who has a much difficult task to accomplish.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Memories, Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, Nature, Countryside.*

**INTRODUCTION:** The foundation of any society is based upon certain ideologies. Any change in the dominant ideology is usually accompanied by a change in the structure of the whole society. The society, in fact, serves to promote that ideology, making every individual within its boundary pay

allegiance to the demands of the dominant beliefs. Since societies do not adhere to one specific set of beliefs for an indefinite period, their organisational facets tend to change from time to time. However, these changes leave a deep impact on the lives of those who comprise the societal structure. In fact, in the face of the

authoritative forces of the ruling group, the lives of individuals change their course – sometimes beyond recognition. This view holds true in the context of the People’s Republic of China as drastic changes occurred in the country’s socio-political set up during the wave of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Since literature acts as the mirror of a society, one can expect the post-Revolution writers from China to reflect their perspectives on this famous event in the Chinese history. One such writer who has implicitly dealt with the impacts of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of the Chinese people is the Nobel-Prize winning author, GAO Xingjian.

GAO Xingjian is a writer from China who has received the Nobel Prize for his novel *Soul Mountain* in 2000. His significance as a writer is undeniable, because, as Mabel Lee observes, “this is the first time the Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to an author on the basis of a body of works written in the Chinese language” (CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture). He is one such writer who has been able to grasp the significance of the Cultural Revolution in the lives of his countrymen. Not only does he have a fine ability of scrutinising history but he is also gifted with a keen sense of the intricacies of the human psyche. In his collection of six short stories, *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2004), Xingjian studies the individual experiences in the light of the wider political landscape and thereby presents the workings of the human mind in the context of a changing world. The Cultural Revolution was based on the Maoist policy of ending the dominance of the bourgeoisie class through an adherence to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Under the auspices of this ideology, anything ancient and related to the distant past was seen as anti-revolutionary in the Maoist mission of transforming the country into a socialist nation. The Red Guards were

organised from all over the country who were engaged in the process of building the future, while standing on the ruins of the past. Any voice contrasting with the Communist ideology was suppressed with strong hands – be it in the sphere of religion, customs, lifestyle or arts and literature. The stories in Xingjian’s book *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*, all written between 1983 and 1990 (Xingjian 124), contain no elaborate descriptions on any of the violent events of the Cultural Revolution. Neither do the stories critically evaluate the aftermath of the Revolution by using the historical sceptre of loss and gain. In fact, what these stories seem to do is to carry the readers to a world beyond the bounds of politics and its impacts. They do so by portraying a wide canvas which is inhabited by characters coming from different sections of the Chinese society – characters who are diverse and who give the impression of living in their own restricted personal lives. But these characters are really bound by one unified memory – the collective memory of the country’s past which runs through the sensibilities of each of them. What they recollect is not just their personal lives, but rather a collection of images existing against the same historical backdrop. As such, Xingjian seeks to explore the changing world of the people of China through the memories and recollections of the characters in the stories of *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*. In the present paper, three stories from the book, namely, ‘The Temple’, ‘In the Park’ and the title story have been selected for the purpose of discussion.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

#### **Cultural Revolution and the young generation:**

*“The intellectual youth must go to the country, and will be educated from living in rural poverty” — Mao Zedong, 1968. (“Sent-down youth”, Wikipedia)*

The Cultural Revolution had an immense impact on the collective population of China, especially the young generation of the late 1960s and 1970s. One of the anti-bourgeois policies of the Mao era was the famous 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Country Movement' under which many young graduates from high schools "were forced out of the cities and effectively exiled to remote areas of China" ("Down to the Countryside Movement", Wikipedia). In a piece entitled "We too have two hands, let us not laze about in the city", published in the *People's Daily* on December 23, 1968, Mao Zedong inspired the educated urban youths of China to leave the cities for the countryside ("Sent-down Youth", Wikipedia). Following his policy, many fresh urban graduates were sent to mountainous areas or farming villages where they could learn and gather practical skill from the rural workers and farmers. Some of the stories in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* definitely hint at this difficult fate of many Chinese youths during the Mao era.

In the story 'The Temple', the narrator recalls how he and his wife were sent to work in the countryside after completing their graduation. Like many other graduates of that time, their fate was also uncertain with the possibilities of returning home being very less.

*Both Fang fang and I had experienced years of hardship, and we had learned what life was all about. During those catastrophic years in this country, our families suffered through many misfortunes, and to some extent we still resented our generation's fate (4).*

The narrator suggests that their lives were unfortunate since they had been forcibly separated from their homes and families. The educated youths like them were expected by the authorities to refine their mindset through a practical experience of the rural life. While going

through the motion of learning about the village life, becoming 'rusticated youths', they came in contact with the local peoples and had the chance of observing them from a close quarter. Now, years after the end of the Movement, the couple again set their feet outside the city, but this time they "felt so different from the time when we were graduates sent to work in the countryside" (7). On this occasion, they are comforted by the thought that "we were just visitors passing through, tourists, and the complicated relationships between the people here had nothing to do with us" (7). This implies their sense of liberation after overcoming the restrictions imposed upon their life by the political events of the past.

While 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Country Movement' exerted a deep impact on the socio-political and national scales, it also affected people's personal lives, creating barriers between individuals and separating them from one another. Close friends, relatives and acquaintances had to leave one another as they were dispersed to the far-off rural areas. This idea of separation is one of the main points of foci in the story 'In the Park'. The two friends who meet after many years of gap reflect on their unsatisfactory lives. They presumably come to realise that their relation could not mature and they could not become lovers and unite owing to the political events of the time. The woman's statement to the man sheds some light on the matter:

*You should realize that it was much worse for the young women sent to the country where they had neither relatives nor friends. The reason I married him was because I had no better option. His parents arranged for my transfer back to the city. (27)*

It is understandable that laboring in the countryside is a tough job from a woman's perspective, especially when she needs security among strangers. In such a condition, marriage for a woman often

becomes a matter of compromise rather than consent. Her statement hints at the fact that she was not happy with her marriage as she presents herself as a victim of circumstances. She further remarks: “Neither of us is to blame. The mistakes of that era are to blame”(31). Xingjian here portrays the helplessness of the woman, making the readers think that had the Cultural Revolution not occurred, the fates of the two separated friends would have differed quite significantly.

### **Nature, the countryside and their relation to China’s past:**

*“We could hear the mountain wind moaning in the ancient pines in front of the temple, and as no one was there to disturb us, we lay down on the grass in the shade of the trees.” (11)*

China is a country rich with the gifts of nature. Forests, hills, mountains, rivers, lakes – the peaceful landscape of the Chinese countryside has been, from the ancient times, the manifestation of the principle of harmonious existence and imparting the lessons of following the ‘Tao’ (the way). Here, nature and calmness blend together and become one supreme entity. The solitude and peace of nature can in direct terms be contrasted with the tumultuous events of the Cultural Revolution. The readers are likely to sense this idea when reading the story, ‘The Temple’. The narrator and his wife find the countryside they visit to be a place where the anxieties and worries of the mind are suspended amidst the beautiful calmness of nature: “a chain of heavily wooded mountains gave this ancient town an exceptional air of tranquility” (5). Coming from a city, it seems here they have discovered a new kind of life – a life which is pure, and unaffected by any disturbance from the outside world. Thus, the narrator says – “we returned for a moment to our youth. We frolicked in the water like mischievous children” (10) acknowledging nature’s power to

transform their present identity and provide them with the possibility of an alternative existence. More importantly, they feel secure in the lap of nature: “In the glorious sunlight, no one could interfere with this secure love of ours. No one would be able to harm us again”(11). The narrator seems to suggest that even though the events of the Cultural Revolution had harmed their lives in the past, they are safe at the present moment in the company of nature which has a healing effect on them.

For Xingjian, the love for nature arises from nostalgia for that past when man and nature existed harmoniously side by side. He shows how the life in the countryside upheld this intrinsic link between man and natural surroundings. In the title story, one of the main foci of the author is on the simplicity and innocence of the lives lived in the lap of nature. The memories of the narrator’s grandfather and grandmother invoke in his mind the images of things like fishing rod, fishing net and sleeping mat – articles which form an integral part of the day to day life of the hard-working villagers. The narrator says about his grandfather:

*His rods were bamboo... He’d find a length of bamboo and straighten it over a fire, cooking the sweat on his hands as he turned the bamboo brown with the smoke. (63)*

The very fact that articles are made from natural products like bamboo clearly suggest how the rural people in the past used to depend on nature for their survival. Xingjian seems to drive home the idea that the lives of human beings are incomplete without nature and nature, therefore, should be loved and respected – a trait he finds missing in the post-Revolution generation.

Forests are the manifestations of nature and for Xingjian a respect for forests signifies a respect for nature. In the story ‘In the Park’, the man, who has now

returned to the city, recollects his days as a woodcutter in the primitive forests for seven years. He finds the artificial beauty of the park to be no match for the natural beauty of forests: “Forests are really awesome” (21). However, the nature he talks about is not always calm and beautiful. In contrast to the peaceful aspect of nature portrayed in “the Temple”, ‘In the Park’ presents nature with all its rage and anger which are often destructive, beyond anybody’s control: “When there’s a forest wildfire... fire spreads swiftly and with a vengeance....It’s really terrifying” (21). This violent aspect of nature can be symbolically paralleled with the violence of the Cultural Revolution. It was during this era that the man left his city to work in the mountains in the countryside. To him, the memories of his life in the countryside only evoke the images of those difficult years of the Revolution – memories which serve as the reminder of his terrible past which he likes to forget. Thus, he says: “there’s not much point in talking about all that now” (22), suggesting how past memories can become a burden for the present.

### **Modernisation of China and the loss of olden days:**

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong’s aim was to build a modern China which is free from the constraints of tradition. His policy of destroying the Four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas, actually paved the way for the gradual modernization and urbanization of China. With the coming of modernity, everything in the Chinese society started changing beyond recognition. For those who witnessed this drastic shift in the country, the difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ is huge, so much so that the only means of getting access to the old elements in the Chinese society is through memories. It is only through memories that one can get transported to the olden days. The role played by

memories and recollections in satisfying the longings for the past is the basis of the title story ‘Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather’.

In the title story, the narrator recalls his childhood days in his village which has now been lost in the waves of modernity. By undertaking a mental journey to his village, the narrator tries to reconnect to his past, only to find his attempt going in vain:

*But the village has changed so much you can’t recognize it. The dirt roads are now asphalt, and there are prefab buildings, all new and exactly the same. On the streets women of all ages are wearing bras, and they wear flimsy shirts to show them off... (69)*

Xingjian emphasizes upon the changing picture of the Chinese countryside. The impacts of modernisation are clearly visible not only through the well-developed village roads but also in the clothes worn by the new generation of the rural areas. What entails modernisation is a growing need for new spaces to be consumed and used by the expanding population. The narrator points out:

*When my grandfather was young, he came upon a tiger... Back then, there were thick forests, but one time I passed my old home in a bus while on a work assignment. There were only bare brown slopes, and even the mountains had been turned into terraced fields. Those fields were once forests. (80-81)*

The author’s intention seems to be to portray the ruin of forests in the face of ever-increasing human demands. Thus, he implicitly mourns over the loss of natural environment in a rapidly modernizing China.

Xingjian’s focus is not limited on the changing countryside and natural landscapes. He also highlights the breaking down of ancient cultural and historical sites owing to the current of

national transformation brought about in the Mao era. In the story ‘The Temple’, the Temple of Perfect Benevolence where the couple visits is mentioned as a “dilapidated ruin” (4) about which most people do not know. Owing to the negligence of the local people, the temple is reduced to a wreck – a place where no longer “people burned incense or prayed” (4):

*The courtyard walls have collapsed. The bricks of the outer wall had been carried off by peasants to build their houses or construct pens for their pigs, and only a circle of unfired bricks remained, overgrown with weeds. (5)*

Though the author does not mention it in the story, the fact remains that during the Cultural Revolution many Taoist and Buddhist temples in China were smashed in the name of destroying the old traditions. The Temple of Perfect Benevolence is one such historical site which carries the memories of the ancient religious tradition of China. As such, it naturally became a target of the Red Guards whose actions have left it in a pitifully bad condition.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

By now, it has become quite clear that Gao Xingjian’s three stories – ‘The Temple’, ‘In the Park’ and the title story of the book *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* appeal to the readers’ sensibilities by drawing upon the role of memories and recollections in portraying the changes taking place in the Chinese

society. He is, thus, a careful observer of his society and an artist who depicts the lives of those people who share the same history with him. Moreover, he is an intellect who gives expression to his observations with the help of his artistic sensibilities. Quite interestingly, his role as a writer lands him in a disconcerting situation often experienced by intellectuals. In this respect, Paul Oliver, analysing the views of Michel Foucault, maintains:

*The intellectual is thus often confronted by an ethical dilemma: whether to speak out and incur the displeasure of the powerful, or to maintain silence and thus align himself or herself with those in authority. (146)*

In Xingjian’s case, this view can be clearly noticed as he finds himself in a topsy-turvy situation living in the Communist China and speaking such things which do not fully support the governmental policies. Though the stories in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* merely serve as the reminder of the Cultural Revolution rather than criticising the event, he is well aware of his stance vis-à-vis the Chinese authorities. This realisation coupled with other factors contributed to his discomfort in the country of his birth and thus, as Mabel Lee observes, “In December 1987, when the opportunity arose, he left China for Europe... where he has lived since.” (Xingjian 123-124).

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