The Desert (as) Femme: An Ecofeminist Analysis of *Sand Rites*

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In his novella *Sand Rites* (featured in his collection *The Desert Wolf*), Guo Xuebo weaves a fascinating tale centered around the lives of two former shamans residing in Black Sand Village, a fictional village located in the Horqin region of China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). Amidst anecdotes conveying the binary nature of the male and female shamans' relationships throughout the 1940s to the 1987 present of the novella, Guo paints a haunting image of the Inner Mongolian desert as a woman, exposing the way in which women and the land suffer under patriarchal domination. With this metaphor as the basis, Guo's novella provides a foundation for an exploration of gender and ecology as they relate to Indigenous peoples of Inner Mongolia. Taking Guo's portrayal of the desert into account, this paper examines both the novella and its gender politics in the context of ecofeminism, arguing that Guo ultimately reinforces ecofeminist perspectives in his depiction of the male shaman, the female shaman, and their connection to the natural environment.

While the term "ecofeminism" is relatively new, it provides a fascinating framework for understanding the relationship between nature and women in contemporary societies – a framework that must be understood before questioning how it interacts with *Sand Rites*. From a political and philosophical perspective, the term (which is a portmanteau of "ecological" and "feminism") is rooted in anxiety over the implications of neoliberalism and globalization on the

environment and women. Hence, for the ecofeminist, the resulting "rape of the Earth and rape of women" are inextricably intertwined and stems from the modern age's manufacturing of men who are wholly ignorant to the concept of a "loving relationship to real women and real nature".[1] Consequently, in advocating for a liberation of nature, ecofeminists see a path for the liberation of women and vice versa. Based on these characteristics and common themes in other ecofeminist works, the typical "ecofeminist perspective" in a work of literature can be defined as a critical emphasis on power dynamics in cultures and their influence on the environment and women, as well as the deliberate construction of connections between the degradation of women and the environment.[2]

Throughout the novella, Guo explicitly connects violence towards the land with violence towards women through his portrayal of the male shaman (known as *böge* in Mongolian) Lao Shuangyang, and his relationship with the desert. After experiencing the power of the sandlands in his youth, Lao Shuangyang becomes thoroughly vexed by the "mysterious quality" the enigmatic desert possesses. Subsequently, he fosters a desire to "subjugate the sandland" and realize his "dream of controlling and mastering that mysterious quality" – a fantasy he harbors his entire life.[3] In this obsession with domesticating the seductively mystifying desert, distorted echoes of man's belligerent compulsion to tame the archetypal femme fatale can be heard. Interestingly, although Lao Shuangyang's fixation on subjugating the land remains when he returns to the desert in his older age, his characterization of the sandlands becomes far more

[1] Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unc/detail.action?docID=1644031, xvi, xxv.
[2] Nicole Anae, "Cultural Studies and Ecofeminist Literature," *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* (New York: Routledge 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195610-29, 295.
[3] Guo Xuebo, "Sand Rites," in *The Desert Wolf*, (Chinese Literature Press, 1996), 142.

perverse. Most notably, he perceives the desert as a "violent, cunning woman," plotting to "step upon her broad bosom, grab her by the neck, rip open her back with his sharp iron ploughshare, and scatter his red broom corn millet seeds into her body".[4] This unsettling metaphor unambiguously relates the land to a violated woman, where piles of sand form her bosom and scattered corn millet seeds allude to insemination. By creating this vision of the land as a seductive yet violated woman, such barbarous and carnal expressions evoke imagery of the aforementioned rape of the Earth and women that defines ecofeminist philosophy.

Moreover, Lao Shuangyang's aggressive attitude towards the land and women stems from his lifelong struggle to form healthy relationships with them, just as ecofeminist ideology suggests. For instance, following Lao Shuangyang's attempt to confront the desert in his youth, the *böge* mentor who rescued him explained to the headstrong adolescent that any harm the spirits of the land inflict is purely in response to man's disrespect.[5] This understanding of the land as an entity imbued with incorporeal power and autonomy reflects typical Mongolian spiritual beliefs, under which nature exists as an uncontrollable and unyielding force that cannot be swayed by boorish acts of violence. Accordingly, human beings cannot "subjugate" the land. Rather, they may only attempt to "influence the spirit 'owners'" within the environment through rituals such as the Andai dance.[6] Nonetheless, Lao Shuangyang spurns this core tenant of Mongolian spirituality and the respect it affords to the land. This behavior reflects what Liu argues is a common theme throughout Guo's works: human short-sightedness drives ecological

[4] Guo, 137-138.
[5] Guo, "Sand Rites," 144.
[6] Huang Hao, "Afterthoughts: Nature, Culture, and Shamanism in Inner Mongolia, PRC," *EnviroLab Asia* 3, no. 3 (2019): 4, https://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol3/iss3/2.

destruction.[7] Indeed, the attentive guidance from Lao Shuangyang's *böge* mentor falls upon deaf ears, resulting in his misguided desire to brutally dominate the desert. Hence, Lao Shuangyang's preference towards an androcentric view of nature can be attributed to his myopic perception of nature and his consequent misconception of man's relationship to land.

Likewise, Lao Shuangyang's lack of healthy experiences involving women further manifests in his fantasies of subjugating a *feminized* land. As a child, the death of his grandmother – his most precious and doting familial connection – early in his life signaled the loss of "kindness, warmth and love" in his formative years, forcing him to face the full potency of the "chill he felt from his fellow man" alone.[8] As a result, Lao Shuangyang, lacking the positive influence of a female figure, came of age vulnerable to both the frigidity of other Mongolians and the patriarchal values of the Mao Era Han Chinese.[9] Later in life, although the woman remained the target of his desires since he was a teenager, Lao Shuangyang was fiercely barred from forming a significant relationship with the *udugan* (the word for a female shaman in Mongolian), Aunt Heye, due to Mongolian tradition. Thus, his later interactions with women consisted of punishment for his lust for Aunt Heye, as well as a pitiably brief marriage to a deceased wife who is mentioned only in passing.[10] Evidently, Lao Shuangyang's experiences with women throughout his life are unhealthy, marred by grief, guilt, and toxicity. Coupled with his graphic metaphors of violence toward women, such anecdotes from Lao Shuangyang's early life uphold the ecofeminist belief that a lack of healthy relationships with women results in subsequent abuse against them. Therefore, by serving as a prime example of ignorant and violent

[7] Liu Hu, "Study on the Ecological Thought in Guo Xuebo's Novels," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 57 (2020): 3, DOI: 10.1088/1755-1315/576/1/012027.
[8] Guo, "Sand Rites," 145.
[9] Guo, 145.
[10] Guo, 114, 178.

androcentrism, Guo's characterization of Lao Shuangyang supports ecofeminist perspectives on the relationship between the land, women, and man's chauvinistic disregard for nature and femininity.

Where Lao Shuangyang embodies the reprobate male in the ecofeminist narrative, the female shaman, Aunt Heye, represents the victimized female in her relationship with other characters and the desert. In fact, many of the expressions and descriptors Lao Shuangyang applies to the sandlands are very direct rephrasings of sentiments concerning Aunt Heye. For example, although Lao Shuangyang criticizes the desert as an armed "*femme fatale*" with the power to "char the skin and smelt the eyes," he also refers to it as a "fascinating woman who unrelentingly lured men in pursuit of her".[11] Likewise, Aunt Heye is characterized as a seductress such that even the villagers' perceptions of her as a malevolent "jinx" to men failed to dissuade "any man who set eyes on her from drooling".[12] Here, Aunt Heye and the desert are interchangeable in these descriptions and in their degradation: both are perceived negatively, yet both are simultaneously desired by the men who wish to exploit them. Moreover, Lao Shuangyang continues to describe how the desert "punished…him and all the other planters in the village," ultimately refusing "to yield up a single grain" for harvest.[13] Much like the desert, Aunt Heye (widowed after the death of her husband) refuses to submit to even the most persistent suitor.[14] Both deny the men of Black Sand Village nourishment – Aunt Heye in the form of romantic and sexual satisfaction and the desert in the form of agrarian sustenance. While the specific context naturally differs, these descriptions remain disturbingly similar in the

[11] Guo, "Sand Rites," 138, 141.
[12] Guo, 129.
[13] Guo, 139.
[14] Guo, 129.

sentiments they convey, exemplifying the way in which Aunt Heye becomes synonymous with the sandlands in the novella.

Furthermore, throughout the story, the villagers disparage Aunt Heye for her previous years as an *udugan*, just as they criticize the desert for its innate characteristics. In fact, even Tiezhu, an aged bachelor whom Aunt Heye believed was a loving companion to her, revels in how he toyed with her. Notably, he flagrantly states that the former *udugan* is akin to one of the "good-time-gals shacked up in brothels"[15]. Despite the years he spent with Aunt Heye and the affection she showed him, Tiezhu demeans her by treating her like a prostitute, even going so far to declare that a marital relationship with her would be worthless. This opinion of Aunt Heye, which is implied to be a unanimous belief amongst the villagers, mirrors the residents of Black Sand Village's view of the sandlands. Indeed, the village head, Meng Ke, exhibits a similarly palpable disdain towards the desert that Aunt Heye experiences from the villagers. He mocks Lao Shuangyang for attempting to farm in the sandlands, telling the latter that he will "be lucky to get grass" much less millet from his efforts.[16] Reverberating Tiezhu's contempt for Aunt Heye, Meng Ke's disdain for the sandlands appears equally harsh considering that Black Sand Village historically "depended…on extensive cultivation of the sandland" for survival.[17] Evidently, both Aunt Heye and the land, despite their former generosity and abundance, are treated as toxic wastelands. The perceived barrenness and danger forced upon them by men reinforces their shared debasement, making them interchangeable symbols of exploitation. Through these

[15] Guo, 154.
[16] Guo, "Sand Rites," 125.
[17] Guo, 118.

descriptions, Guo establishes a one-to-one connection between Aunt Heye and the sandlands, thereby reflecting ecofeminist understandings of women and nature as intimately intertwined.

In and of itself, Guo's portrayal of the two shamans, Lao Shuangyang and Aunt Heye, resonates with ecofeminist understandings of the relationship between the environment, men, and women. However, Guo also challenges such toxic relationships by juxtaposing them with beliefs from Inner Mongolian culture and spirituality. For example, throughout the novella, Guo subverts roles of subjugation through his depiction of Mongolian spirituality and shamanistic practices. In the context of the Andai dance, a ritual that aims to appeal to the spirits in times of need, Guo indicates that the male and female shaman possess "identical spiritual functions" and are equals in their "Shamanistic supremacy"[18]. By portraying the shamans as spiritually identical, Guo presents a stark contrast to patriarchal spiritual roles found in other cultures, emphasizing a relative equality between men and women in Inner Mongolian culture.

Aside from dismantling normative gender roles by affording women spiritual power, the function of the Andai itself further coincides with ecofeminist pushes for the liberation and protection of nature and women. As previously mentioned, one major purpose of the Andai and other Mongolian rituals is to influence the spirits of the land. This function is depicted in the beginning of the novella when Lao Shuangyang and Aunt Heye's *böge* and *udugan* predecessors perform the Andai together "in [a] last-ditch appeal for spiritual intercession" against a "mind-muddling" drought.[19] These ritualistic practices are rooted in a belief in animism – the concept that "nature is alive with spirits, which must be recognized and respected" and therefore "is not

[18] Guo, "Sand Rites," 111-112.
[19] Guo, 112.

simply a resource to be exploited"[20]. According to Huang, this deference for nature, implied by the prominence of the Andai throughout the novella, is a major tenant of Inner Mongolian tradition that defines Guo's *Sand Rites*.[21] Admittedly, the Andai is also described as a "denunciation of Nature" and the spirits due to its ability to interfere with the land's "evil"[22]. Nonetheless, even these descriptors afford the environment an autonomy and character that allows it to be scrutinized as an antagonist in the first place. Thus, it is evident that the desert as illustrated in Guo's novella is not compliantly inorganic. Rather, it is a sentient being that demands reverence – a characterization that aligns with ecofeminist concern for the environment.

Moreover, aside from reflecting ecofeminist respect for nature, the origin of the Andai also communicates concern for the wellbeing of women, contrasting the ridicule Aunt Heye faces in Black Sand Village. Indeed, as Sha describes, the dance originated from various "Andai" tales that involve an ill or possessed women who is cured through song and dance by compassionate members of her community. Consequently, its primary cultural role in Inner Mongolia lies in the treatment of both psychological and physical ailments of women.[23] This purpose is reflected in the novella when the teenage Aunt Heye, afflicted by an inexplicable illness that "left her as thin and weak as an attenuated blade of grass," was cured by an *udugan*'s Andai dance. It is later referenced once more when an older Aunt Heye dances the Andai at the behest of Meng Ke to cure the unshakeable psychosis of a woman who was scorned by her lover.[24] Hence, the Andai ritual is rooted in an emphasis on the care and protection of women by liberating them from

[20] Huang, "Afterthoughts," 10.
[21] Huang, 1.
[22] Guo, "Sand Rites," 190.
[23] Sha Rina, "An exploration of the Andai dance form (from the Horqin area of Inner Mongolia) from a dance/movement therapy perspective," *Creative Arts Education Therapy* 3, no. 1 (2017): 2-13, https://caet.inspirees.com/caetojsjournals/index.php/caet/article/view/37/70.
[24] Guo, "Sand Rites," 134, 187.

earthly disease and distress. Therefore, through his portrayal of gender equality among shamans and the attentiveness to women exposed by the Andai dance, Guo – whether intentionally or not – reinforces ecofeminist concerns by undermining patriarchal and authoritative positions of men over women and nature.

Furthermore, although Lao Shuangyang is portrayed as an enforcer of abuse against the land and women through his derogatory descriptions of both, a closer examination of his actual actions conflicts with this initial characterization. For instance, when Lao Shuangyang and Aunt Heye reunite later in life as adults, they are physically intimate with one another for one night. Unexpectedly, the former appears rather submissive during this sole sexual encounter with Aunt Heye. Frozen with anticipation, he laid stiffly as Aunt Heye "loosened his clothes for him," blood "[rushing] up to his throat and onwards to his cheeks and straight to his forehead"[25]. Here, Lao Shuangyang is characterized as nervous and meek, blushing while the woman he has longed for since youth takes initiative and control. Considering this complete subversion of typical male sexual dominance, Lao Shuangyang's blustery remarks about "subjugating" the desert as a woman appear flimsy and disingenuous, suggesting he is more complex than the stereotypical male hostility that initially overwhelms his character.

In fact, greater consideration of Lao Shuangyang's relationships with Aunt Heye and the land exposes the compassion towards both that his hostile facade nearly overshadows. For example, when he hears that Aunt Heye is on her deathbed, Lao Shuangyang feverishly abandons his farming endeavors – his obsession throughout the novella – and rushes to her side, comforting her in her last hours and dancing the Andai (which he had previously refused to do)

[25] Guo, "Sand Rites," 182.

for her sake.[26] By expressing a sincerity that should be foreign to a truly aggressive man, this genuine devotion presents a stark contrast to the violent masculinity Lao Shuangyang purports. Further, while Lao Shuangyang's description of his farm labor is graphic, Liu states that the former shaman, much like other characters in Guo's works, is conscientious of "the laws of nature and the life of animals" as he seeks "balance between humans and [the] environment".[27] Indeed, his work as a solitary farmer providing for himself and his adoptive son out of necessity does not coincide with the commercialized overcultivation and destruction of land that ecofeminists criticize. In this way, Guo exposes the false, exaggerated nature of Lao Shuangyang's remarks about the land and women, inverting typical roles of male dominance and further positioning nature and women as powerful and respected.

Likewise, although Aunt Heye is degraded and exploited in *Sand Rites*, Guo ultimately affords her respect and empowerment, criticizing this subjugated view of Aunt Heye. In particular, he does so through Yushi, a Han Chinese researcher seeking to study the Andai. Although he initially intends to exploit Aunt Heye to record footage of the Andai dance to further his own research and position as a scholar, Yushi quickly proves himself to be genuinely considerate towards Aunt Heye in his endeavors. From the beginning, he does not uphold the same prejudice against Aunt Heye that other characters do. Indeed, Yushi accepts her hospitality and stays with her despite Meng Ke's warnings about her "not exactly saintly" lifestyle and the "questionable" happenings around her tent.[28] In his dismissal of the other villagers' prejudice, Yushi empowers Aunt Heye by looking past the lecherous seductress caricature that has been forced upon her, revealing her larger identity and worth as an individual. Soon after, Yushi even

[26] Guo, 210-211, 215.
[27] Liu, "Study on the Ecological Thought," 6.
[28] Guo, "Sand Rites," 151.

admonishes the villagers for their cruelty towards Aunt Heye. When Tiezhu mocks Aunt Heye, Yushi snaps at him, threatening to "cut off the treasure in [Tiezhu's] crotch" and "feed it to the dog" if he were in Aunt Heye's position.[29] This advocacy for Aunt Heye emphasizes Yushi's compassion for her, an attitude that suggests that the demeaned former *udugan* should be viewed as an equal deserving respect.

Furthermore, the novella's ending cements Aunt Heye's position of esteem and undermines the disparaging depiction of Aunt Heye the villagers promote. For instance, when Aunt Heye finally performs the Andai, Yushi – and even other villagers observing the ritual – are "shaken to the roots of their soul," finding respect for the Andai and "talented folk artists like Aunt Heye"[30]. This performance is the ultimate display of vulnerability by Aunt Heye – she performs her beloved Andai dance before the villagers who vehemently scorned her and her traditions. Nonetheless, in this vulnerable moment, Aunt Heye is extraordinarily empowered, reconstructing her own legacy in Black Sand Village with each step of the dance. Moreover, Aunt Heye is, in a way, liberated by her eventual death. After Aunt Heye falls ill after her performance, Yushi prioritizes her well-being over his cherished research and acclaim, prolonging his stay in Black Sand Village to care for her instead of compiling his study.[31] When Yushi must leave, Lao Shuangyang rushes to tend to her in his stead. With the care and attention afforded to her, Aunt Heye's ending is not lonely, violent, or painful, as would be expected considering her treatment in the village. Instead, Aunt Heye finds peace and spiritual satisfaction through her final participation in the Andai ritual, and she discovers the "soul of Andai" in the

[29] Guo, 154-155.
[30] Guo, 190-191.
[31] Guo, "Sand Rites," 205.

red broom corn millet Lao Shuangyang at long last coaxed out of the sandlands.[32] Thus, the euthanasic nature of Aunt Heye's death reinstates her humanity and emancipates her, paralleling ecofeminists' urging for the enfranchisement of women and the environment. Ultimately, the adamant defense of Aunt Heye and the kindness afforded to her in death indicate that the degradation of women (and nature, analogously) depicted throughout the novella should not be exalted, thereby reinforcing ecofeminist perspectives on such abuse.

Therefore, through his construction of an intimate connection between the land and women and subversion of androcentric narratives of their subjugation in *Sand Rites*, Guo echoes and supports ecofeminist perspectives. Of course, ecofeminism itself is a more modern and less widely known term and field of study, so it is uncertain whether Guo is acutely aware of the term. Still, regardless of whether support for ecofeminism was his conscious intention, his construction of the desert femme, Aunt Heye, and his portrayal of the desert *as* femme in its suffering ultimately crafts a powerful ecofeminist allegory. Consequently, this novella poses a fascinating, unique level of complexity to ecological understandings of literature and human relationships with nature by imbuing the traditional anthropocentric ecological position with an androcentric one.

[32] Guo, 213.

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