



## ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN HELENE CIXOUS' *DRUMS ON THE DAM*

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### ABSTRACT

The history of ecological change is still so unripe that we know little about what really happened in earlier times or what the results were. One thing is certain that in the past man had a friendly relationship with his environment. We usually do not know exactly when, where or with what effects man-induced changes came. The problem of the ecological repercussion is increasingly on the rise as we enter in the third decade of the twentieth century. Natural science made efforts to understand the nature of things. It flourished in several eras and among several people. Similarly, technological skills also grew sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly. In many parts of Europe and America the marriage between science and technology paved way for having a commercial approach to our natural environment. Soon, the creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature gained currency. Consequently, the relationship between man and his nature changed to a great extent. In her play *Drums on the Dam* Helene Cixous raises the issue of the deteriorating relationship between man and his nature. This paper attempts to study this crisis and consequences with special focus on the anti-ecological activities and unawareness of man.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Nature, Environment, Deforestation, Countryside

The word 'ecology' first appeared in the English language in 1873. Today the impact of our race upon environment has so increased in force causing a great change to the later. The use of cannons in the wars in early fourteenth century affected ecology. It sent workers to the forests and mountains in search of more potash, sulfur, iron ore, and coal. This mad search for metals and minerals resulted in erosion and deforestation. Many countries had smog problems arising from the burning of soft coal, but the present combustion of fossil fuels poses a greater threat to the environment of the earth. The consequences of such acts of mankind could be only guessed. In this connection Lynn White, JR. rightly says:

With the population explosion, the carcinoma of plan less urbanism, the new geological deposits of sewage and garbage, surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order.

In past agriculture has been the main occupation in almost all societies. Hence, any change in the method of tillage has importance in studying the changing relationship between man and his ecology. Early ploughs were drawn by two oxen, they did not normally turned the sod but merely scratched the bosom of mother earth. It worked well in fairly light soil and semiarid climate. But such a plow was inappropriate to the

wet climate, so a new kind of plough was used for tilling. It was equipped with a vertical knife to cut the line of the furrow and a mould board to turn it over. It attacked the land with great violence ending the earlier relationship of a mother and child between land and man.

The distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth. Man's relationship to soil was profoundly changed. He became ruthless towards earth. Formerly, man had been part of nature, now he was exploiter of nature. In antiquity every tree, every stream, every spring and every hill had its own guarding spirit. No human being thought of harming these things of nature. Exploiting nature for human use was considered a sin. These spirits were assessable to men but were very different to men. Before one cut a tree, minded a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to appease the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it pleased.

The theme of human-nature relation is rooted in Helene Cixous's consciousness and runs through many of her works. Man's advancements in scientific and technological areas have created a wide gap between him and nature. As an author of fiction, a playwright, a professor, a theorist and a critic, Helene Cixous has been a central figure among great intellectuals who have shaped the domain of humanities since the 1960s. She was among the founders of the experimental Université de Paris VIII. *Drums on the Dam* is the most recent work Cixous has written for Theatre du Soleil. It is a unique laboratory of theatrical innovation where she has played a central role for some twenty years.

Cixous believes in the force of auto-immunity which is at work in *Drums on the Dam*. This is a force of self-destruction of which mankind is not seriously conscious. Since times immemorial man has been the sole ruler of this planet. He has lost his sense towards life giving nature. In an attempt to prove himself powerful and superior to the forces of nature man harms environment in more than one way. His great ambitions and greed for power force him to be indifferent towards his relationship with nature. His only wish is to prove himself master of nature. In fact, in doing so, he sets top everything up for his own destruction. Power intoxicated man thinks that he rules, yet he is ruled, and finally he is ruled over by death only because of his ruthlessness towards his nature.

Cixous's concern for ecology is apparent in her play *Drums on the Dam* which is set in an absolutely magnificent kingdom, Quan Ze, where Lord Kang rules for several years. As long as people of the kingdom live in harmony with nature the region remains prosperous but men's selfish attitude invites menace to the land. The soothsayer of the kingdom is visited by a dream which casts a terrifying shadow over the future of the kingdom. He is terrified to death and rushes to the palace of Lord Kang to tell this gloomy news. He reveals that in his dream he sees the void – a time after the end of the world. All have disappeared under grey-colored water of flood. The city, the palace, monasteries and the countryside have covered by a sleeping desert of water. The soothsayer finally announces: "Once space has vanished, only the silt of time will remain."

This gloomy news of great flood disturbs Lord Kang to the core who, in the depth of his heart, wanted to rule peacefully for a long time. It shatters his dream of being favorite and great king. His shortsightedness and inability are reflected when he calls this man-made disaster "the seed of the will of gods." He seems to believe in the superior status of mankind over things of nature. His inflexibility does not allow him to hold men responsible for the oncoming fury of the river. However, his Chancellor explains to him that the real cause of flood is the mud in river and not the spitefulness of gods. He tells that for last twenty years they have been cutting down all the tress over the banks of the river. This led to soil erosion on banks and mud in the river. Lord Kang shows indifference towards nature and keeps his eyes shut to the coming danger.

The chancellor further warns Lord Kang that we are brutishly cutting trees with our eyes closed and this may lead to great destruction. But Lord Kang again closes his eyes to this naked reality and even blames the Chancellor for painting him as an old fool. He stresses on the need of cutting the trees because wood is necessary for cooking food. Moreover, he has agreed to handover the Purple Mountain Forest to his nephew, Lord Hun – the real enemy of nature in the play. Lord Hun blinds his uncle to the consequences of destroying the trees on the banks of the river.

The Chancellor's serious advice to Lord Kang goes useless as he does not wish to act against the cutting of the forest by his nephew Lord Hun. He also overlooks his corruption in the city. He further warns Lord Kang that cutting of forest on the flanks of Purple Mountain is to "lose the grip on the dragon." But Lord Kang argues that forest will grow back. In fact, he is heading toward his own suicide. He does not know that his descendants will not survive his blindness. Like a blind man he is unable to see the coming disaster and like a fool, banishes his true friend the Chancellor. His very presence is unbearable to him, so he declares, "you are dust in my eyes."

The dilemma of Lord Kang remains unresolved even after seeking the advice of the Architect and Chief Intendant. The latter suggests that they must make a sacrifice to save the city, "We should blow up either the North or the South Dam." This indicates that they are again willing to destroy countryside where poor and innocent people live in close affinity with nature. The artificial city appears more important to them than the countryside which is a natural abode of mankind. This tendency of mankind is responsible for environmental crises.

Lord Kang is unable to foil the evil designs of his nephew Lord Hun who has already decided to open a breach in the Dam towards Countryside. Lord Hun tells He Tao: "First I want to try to convince my uncle. I will remind him of the fable of Lord Kiou. If he does not listen to me, well then we will play it out without him."

The fear of the coming flood disturbs the people of court as well as villages. While all are busy in finding solutions to this great problem Duan, the soothsayer's daughter, chooses and decides to act. Like a true defender of mankind and his environment Duan goes to join the drums who are posted on the heights to watch over the mood of the river. She is presented as a character who has authentic concerns for nature. She chooses to fight for the safety of villagers rather than worrying for it.

Most of the people of the country accuse the river for causing flood. This hints towards the ignorance of the illiterate masses to their own ill deeds against the ecosystem in which their past generations have flourished. They consider the river responsible for all their worries and turmoil. The calamity is not actually brought by the river but by the act of mankind. They mercilessly cut the trees and make the banks of the river weak. In fact, the river is as beautiful as ever. The river is personified in the play and appears on the stage as a character to defend itself. It speaks in anger:

There is no respect here. They commit the crime and then they throw the blame in the waters of the river. They treat father and mother like garbage....You are even more blind than the blind. Can you not see the end of the world? You will have the flood of the century, I promise!

Duan emerges as the protector of the countryside and ecology in the play. In scene 1, she takes on herself the responsibility of saving the lives of people living in countryside. She becomes the captain of the lookouts. Camped out on the mountain, Duan and her men have the mission to watch over all the movements of the river. If there is any change, they will spread the news of "sky and the earth". They have drums with them and for every situation there is a rhythm. She tells her men the meaning of the signals of drums. The peasants in the area already know the signals. The sound of the drum warns mankind so that they can save their future generations.

Two opposite forces are constantly at work in the play. One is the force of evil, an anti-nature power, and another is the force of good, a pro-nature energy. The good force is led by Duan. The Chancellor, Madam Li, Wang Po, Tshumi and the Architect are her main followers in her mission to save the countryside. Their aim is to save the life of innocent people. On the other hand, Lord Hun leads the evil force. With his lieutenant He Tao, Lord Hun takes the charge of the affairs of the kingdom from his uncle Lord Kang. While Lord Kang is unable to decide whether he should save the city or the countryside from the flood, Lord Hun has already made a plan to flood the countryside for the safety of the city.

The soothsayer's terrifying dream has troubled the lives of people of the city. They start behaving irrationally as they believe their world is going to end. The words of Madame Li present a true picture when she says:

The city is going crazy. Out of fright, some people are turning into jacals, other into rabbits. At the market, they are fighting with knives over a grain of rice. The Thought that the end of the world is nigh in troubling the firmament. People are losing their grip.

The conflict between the opposite forces reaches at climax in Scene 8. The Architect, encouraged by his wife, goes to the Palace to tell Lord Kang about the breach in dam. He is hopeful of getting the breach repaired. It will save the city from flood. But his good cause is halted by the Chief Intendant, who kills him for fear of being exposed. Later, Chief Intendant feels guilty of corrupt deeds against humanity and resolves to confess everything to Lord Kang. But Architect's wife kills him before he confesses. The Chancellor is also killed by He Tao.

The weakness in the character of Lord Kang is proved again when he signs the list of the gates of the city to be closed. He has nobody with him to tell him that he is mistaken. He has lost the sense of being right or wrong. He tells the monk, "Monk..... You have come too late. I have accepted my responsibilities. As of today, the countryside has been sacrificed and all the gates of my city are locked." As per the orders of Lord Hun all the gates of the city are locked to prevent the entry of countryside people. They will surely run towards the city the moment dam at Cherry Mountain is destroyed. This again hints how insensitive are the people of city towards the woes of countryside people who actually represents nature itself.

Wang Po's father and brother are killed by the guards when he attempts to enter into the city. In turn he kills the guards. This incident makes him a master criminal. He takes the peasants' fate into his hands and goes to join Duan and her lookouts. Wang Po and Duan are successful in defending the weak point of the dam. They defeat the army of Lord Hun. In the battle on the dam, He Tao is killed by Tshumi, but soon Lord Hun stabs Tshumi to death. Hun also dies in the battle.

The Monk comes and informs Wang Po and Duan that an unheard event has occurred in the city. The Northern Dam has collapsed causing floods in the city. He says that Lord Kang begs them to blow up the Cherry Mountain Dam as quickly as possible otherwise the city will disappear forever. Wang Po is happy to hear the news of the destruction of city. But Duan, being humane, is in favor of saving the city too. She wants to evacuate the villagers and let the waters pass. Wang Po opposes her idea. He insists on the destruction of the city- the world of Lord Kang. But Duan argues that they too are city by half. They have relatives in the city. Moreover, they cannot forget the markets, the theaters, the temples, the artisans and the library. For some time Duan becomes mother nature caring for all its denizens.

In fact, Wang Po has no other mission than vengeance, "no other virtue than hate." He is determined to kill the enemy and warns Duan not to stop him. But Duan grabs him to stop and mortally wounded in the attempt. She dies after some time. Meanwhile Lord Kang's army has invaded the Dam. It is successful in making a breach in the Dam towards countryside. Both, the city and country, have descended to the bottom. As far as the eye goes only water is visible. The dream of the soothsayer has come true as space for salvation has disappeared.

In the end of the play Helene Cixous personifies water and make it appear on the stage as a character. Through the words of Water she warns the reader against their negligence towards environment. If man will exploit nature, he will also have to face the wrath of nature in the form of natural calamities. Man is born in nature so it is like mother to man. But mother-nature also has power to take back man's life. The final words of Water echoes Cixous own anger:

You are all my ancestral fish, and I have come to take you back to the original void. The earth was your ship and you scuttled it through the sin of negligence and sloth of your souls. You had eyes for nothing.

Helene Cixous' pro-nature stance is apparent in the play. Though the protagonist dies while fighting for the cause of nature yet her struggle is exemplary for coming generations. The play can be seen as a strong satire on men's growing indifference to nature.

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