

LIMINAL SPACES- NOSTALGIA AND IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES IN CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The displacement of Tibetans in exile has also transmuted the concept of homeland for the new generation of Tibetans who are born or educated in exile. With novel expressions and a secular mode of modernist expression, they are forging new identities, negotiating culture and reformulating aspirations. The present paper attempts to read the nostalgia and exilic expression in New Tibetan Writings in English by exploring selected works of a few representative Tibetan writers. It focuses primarily on Tibetan poetics through the works of TseringWoeser, TseringWangmoDhumpa and Tenzin Tsundue. It also tries to understand how poetry and exile influence each other.

Keywords: Tibetan, Nostalgia, Exile, Patria, Culture, Displacement.

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1. Introduction

Devoted to contravening conventional borders, Said bids us to see new landscapes, in which, units heretofore considered separate -- occupations, realms of experience, cultures, -- become inevitably hybrid and interpenetrating, or what he terms as "intertwined histories and overlapping territories" (*Orientalism* 56). In *Culture & Imperialism* he points out how no one is actually free from a struggle over space, place, territory or geography(7). Further, grounding his statement on Gaston Bachelard, Said uses the metaphor of the inside of a house to direct us to how objective spaces acquire a sense of personality and sanctuary due to experiences that seem appropriate to it. He explains how the material spaces in a territory (for example, rooms of a house) acquire imaginative value(s) through which various cultural meanings are attributed to them. In this way, through this imaginative process, space gains a whole series of meanings that are otherwise not naturally embodied in any given material space (*C&I* 11). But how does it apply to Tibetans? For Tibetans writing in exile, "the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning ..." (*C&I* 17). A key feature of the concept of imaginative geographies that I'd like to point to is deductible from how Said gestures to imaginative geography in that it can "help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself..." (*C&I* 18). Therefore, for Tibetans writing in exile, the homeland becomes, not just the physical location-Tibet, but all the associations of cultural and social practices, descriptions of landscapes, religiosity and language --which are all memories of a nation state that they have perhaps never seen , but know to be their own. This helps them in creating an individuality of their own; something that sets them apart from the rest of the world. Cultural geographer and post-colonial theorist Derek Gregory has conceived Said's notion of imaginative geography to be performative and that space is a 'doing'.

2. Tibet-History and Society

Tibet was, for long, a theocratic society, governed by the Dalai Lamas. Forbidden to outsiders, the Tibetans lived in their own hermetic utopia. In the 1950s, under Mao-Zedong, China started conquering the nearby states-Tibet was one of them. The Chinese government began enforced settlement of Han Chinese to hybridise and ultimately cleanse these colonies. This resulted I the flight of the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 was a systematic act aimed at erasure of all Tibetan culture by destroying their monasteries and libraries by claiming that they were a part of the old theocratic and hence, now, anti-national state. This also resulted in mass exodus of Tibetans from their homeland. This turbulent

history, imprinted into the minds of exiled peoples, whether through oral narration, education or daily conversations constitutes the collective history and memory of patria for the exiled Tibetan writers. It is in this 'transcended space' that the writings of Tibetans try and give new meanings of place, space, time, identity and nostalgia about their homeland which most have never seen.

Since 1959, one of the primary concerns of the exiled Dalai Lama and the expatriate Tibetan community has explicitly been to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Tibet. This focus on the preservation of artistic, linguistic, spiritual and religious knowledge through education and systematic documentation was impelled by two real threats: the loss of Tibetan culture in the homeland under Chinese rule and the merging of exiled Tibetans into their host societies.

Poetry has become the major form of literature for the exiled Tibetans. But this has been so always, because most Tibetan religious texts are written in verse –in the form of chants. Other forms of religious expressions like story, drama or prose are rare.

Tibetan writers born in exile these writers are conscious of the fact that their memory of Tibet belongs to someone else. They belong to the generation of Tibetans who were forced to flee the homeland in the face of aggressive Chinese colonisation of Tibet in the 1950s. As a result of a history of events which lead to ontological disappointment and spiritual dislocation and, the tradition of exile, an epitome of modern civilization, is deeply rooted in Tibetan Writings literature. In other words, the Tibetan literary archive is punctuated with narratives of exile due to disasters of displacement, oppression and misery culminating in the flight from homeland.

3. Contemporary Tibetan writings-An Overview

Contemporary Tibetan writings are aesthetic as they are complex-defying a neat compartmentalisation in to post-colonial/postcolonial. Tibetan writings cannot be called post-colonial in the sense that Indian Writings in English or New African Literatures in English are post-colonial and postcolonial. It, then must carve out a niche for itself in the new world literatures. Hence nostalgia becomes an emotional and polemical standpoint for the Tibetan lived exilic experience as well as writing. The New Tibetan Literature in English (NTLE) explore this politics of memory and politics of oblivion. According to Nasrallah, memory is an immensely important tool in establishing identity. Its absence is a grave ontological loss. Memories are thus fabricated and woven into literature and 'spaces' to ensure a process of memorialization. Hence it is important to understand the politics of these projects of memorialization in the context of NTLE too.

4. Tibetan Poetics-Performed Reality

The Tibetan exiles have carried their homelands, their soil and memories while at the same time, going beyond all this. They have carried the experience of the movement to and from a "place" – this constitutes the idea that Tibetan writers have of their relation to a specific "place" in the diaspora; of how this sense of "place" in the diaspora gives meaning and purpose

to exilic lives. The Tibetan's encounters with new language, culture and modes of expression in adopted homelands results in acculturation which deactivates to some extent the pure 'Tibetaness' of the past. This is what Stuart Hall calls 'being' to 'becoming' of cultural identity(223-26) and it results in forging of new idioms in NTLE. According to historian TseringShakya:

DhondupGyal's work was a turning point because, while criticism was unacceptable to the Chinese authorities, he showed that it was nevertheless possible to speak implicitly about the "wound inflicted on the mind of the Tibetans" (bod kyisemskyirma), referring to the period under the leadership of the Gang of Four ().

This memory of hurt remains imprinted in the mind of the poet TseringLhasang when he writes in "No Country" when he is beaten and derided by his teacher on the charge of insolence:

That it was not the bamboo stick,
But the injustice that really hurt,
And what hurt me still more,
Was to know that to have no country,
Means you also have no rights,
when you have no rights,
You can have no justice. (11-18)

The marks of caning may have vanished , but the hurt persists.

In another poem, he laments the intellectual colonisation of scholars of Tibet who have tamely welcomed the conversion of a part of Tibet into a virtual heaven called "Shangri-La"-as a tourist attraction.

He says in "Tibet! O Tibet!"
Land of Truth and Peace
Now torn by Death and Destruction.
Land of Pure White Snow
Now bleeding Red with blood
....
Land of the Buddha Dharma
Now devoid of spiritual power.

Land of Tradition and Colour.

Now made bland with Communism.(18-30)

He voices the loss of his culture, the sale of a homeland for money, the moral and cultural erosion of an entire community.

The loss of homeland which only exists in the imagination of exiles is quite trenchantly brought out by Tenzin Tsundue, whose verse is powerful as it is exact. In "A Personal Reconnaissance" he states , quite without emotion:

From Ladakh
Tibet is just a gaze away
They say:
From that black knoll
At Dumste, it's Tibet.
For the first time, I saw
My country Tibet.
In a hurried hiding trip,
It was there, at the mound.
I sniffed the soil,
Scratched the ground,
Listened to the dry wind
And the wild old cranes.
I didn't see the border,
I swear there wasn't anything
Different, there.
I didn't know
if I was there or here.(30-37)

The expected thrill at the first glimpse of the imagined homeland fails to happen and the poet is left in a state of suspended emotion where he feels a sense of impasse.

This contextualisation is echoed in his “Crossing the Border” where he says: Through many monstrous mountains we crawled,/ whose death-blankets often covered travellers passing by.(8-9)

As he puts it himself:

Ask me where I am from and I don't have an answer. I feel that I really never belong anywhere. I was born in Manali but my parents live in Karnataka. I like to speak in Tibetan but prefer writing in English. I like to sing in Hindi but my tune and accent are all wrong. I have nowhere to call home...(Kora 30)

A similar sentiment of global citizenship or , alternately, homelessness is echoed by TseringWangpoDhomba when in an interview given to Hollie Hardy, the editor of the magazine *Fourteen Hills* who asked Dhomba about her definition of home :

And I think that the notion of home has always been sort of this place that is imminent. It's forming; it's coming. Because when I was little, our home was in Tibet. When we were living in India, we would call that home. So I think it's sort of, it's not a defined place, defined by geography. It seems still a place that is sort of everywhere in some sense, but also not really in one place. Maybe that is how it is for people in exile. For people who've had to live in exile. ... (14hills.net)

She goes on to state how poetry has been instrumental in helping her define the meanings and boundaries of homeland and bring all the elements of displacement into one space.

In her poem “Exile: an invitation to a struggle”, she demands the past to answer one all overarching question :

The question is also a statement
of a struggle.

If the word is a struggle,
you understand.

We cannot continue as we are.
We cannot forget we are guests
who have overstayed. I invite you
to living against (as we do.)
It is not enough to have one tongue.
It cannot point to everything
and in every direction.

We do not use our mother tongue
for our lovers. Beloved,
we speak your words.

*What do we want? Freedom.
When do we want it? Now. Protest
in the mother tongue. Free now
from the notion of continuity.*

.....
The inevitable, here, then gone.
Snow bound ground, snow topped ground, the only
assurance we have
is, it will melt.

Our bodies covered
and uncovered
are not the same. (8-37)

When we talk of the homeland as being a liminal space, the following words of Le Ann should aid understanding:

Liminality is derived from 'limen', meaning threshold. The concept of the 'liminal space' as introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner, suggests the idea of ambiguity and ambivalence. This in-between space should allow active exchanges of ideologies, concepts and methods of working. There is an indication of a transition from one state or space to another, an on-going search for answers, yet the end point might not or need not be defined. Therefore, the 'liminal space' might be read as a metaphorical realm where ideas and concepts: artistic, political, cultural, social or otherwise, are in constant states of contestation and negotiation (Ann, 2006)

In the abovementioned poems of Dhompas, the word has can be understood to indicate and define the concept of the homeland-as imagined by the exiled writers of Tibet, which is also transgressive in nature in so far its boundaries are concerned. It indicates the fluid image/viewpoint of patria in the exilic imagination and the sense of nostalgia, which is its very real outcome.

The imagined homeland is a distant reality which the poet may never see. Or even if she sees it, she doubts the meanings and association she will be able to establish with it. The sense of place is totally disturbed and though the sacred geography is invoked in expressions like, the rosy picture of a promised tomorrow that all will be well once the homeland is reclaimed as is evident in these lines from *In the Absent Everyday* :

Sentences shaped like the swallow
of your throat. When the pied piper comes
to this town, you will hide your shoes
and cover your ears. The river will not rush,
the mountains will not cleave. Chocolate

trees will bend so you can lick
their sweat off. It will all end happily, again.(1-7)

For Tsundue, the homeland that he has visited on several occasions seems to inspire conflicting emotions-those of alienation and lack of belonging. His poet persona sermonises himself to keep the memory of homeland intact with the use of physical pointers because he finds little to associate with it:

Pick the white pebbles
and the funny strange leaves.
Mark the curves
and cliffs around
for you may need
to come home again.”(“Horizon” 13-18)

A similar sentiment is voiced by Dhompa in the following lines from a poem in the collection “In the Absent Everyday”

Once a week we question whether our
country will be free. We are not warriors. We know
a working bowel is proof of a healthy life. We know
people who do not speak our dialect are sitting
at a table. With a pen and paper they will map our future.(5-10)

The mechanised ritual of displaying loyalty to the cause of a free Tibet seems to undermine the faith of the exiles and also disempowers the poet persona. These lines cry out for a genuine attention from stakeholders and decision and policymakers for the emancipation of the expatriates.

For TseringWoeser, a Tibetan living in a self-imposed exile in Beijing, and who writes in Chinese, the reality of homeland is rather different from those of Tsundue and Dhompa, but no less poignant, In her collection of poems called “The Past”, she says:

This snow-clad mountain, melting, is not my snow mountain.
My snow mountains are the mountains of the past,
Far at the sky’s edge, holy and pure:
Many a lotus, eight petals opening,
Oh, many a lotus, eight petals opening.(1-5)

Her poems indicate a nostalgia for a past gone by and the culture diminished by displacement after the Cultural Revolution. Exile has become a very powerful reality for TseringWoeser who is not allowed to travel outside China and her books have been banned in the country. The image of Lhasa is another powerful metaphor that Woeser uses to reclaim the past from memory.

O Lhasa, dreamlike nights!

A certain lotus may have never bloomed,

Sometimes a wineglass shatters at a tap,

Yet there are people, just a few—who blessed

Them with such spirit?—to whom this movable feast

Seems Paradise for banishment self-chosen.

If (imperceptibly) they weep, it's only

For a kinsman whom they couldn't keep. ("Lhasa Nights" 1-8 raggedbanner.com)

These lines are an attempt by the poet to evoke the past glory of Tibet and at the same time , a tribute to a venerated religious leader at *Potala*-a twin layered effort at evoking the culture through semantics.

Hence, poetry has become a powerful medium for the Tibetans to voice their experience. It helps them step out of the herded reality of existence and establish their own peculiar reality and resistance.

5. Conclusion

In attempting to grapple with the idea of patria, Tibetan writers are walking through innumerable screens and layers of displacement. The frameworks of these screens fail to contain the multifarious connotations of nostalgia and exile. The several definitions displacement: whether involving forced or voluntary migration or a dispersion of native population from the homeland, what ultimately holds this disjointed umbrella of groups is their ceaseless quest for identity. The ever-changing and ever-evolving spectrum of meanings and understandings that under-grid their self-evaluations or aspirations is the hallmark of their incessant struggle to bring meaning into existence. These longings, despairs, questions and hopes are what these Tibetan poets are trying to voice through their writings.

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