

Resistance in Exile: A Study of Tibetan Poetry

Synopsis

The present dissertation is an attempt to understand Tibetan poetry in exile. Tibetan poetry appears as a resistance to the Chinese colonisation of Tibet and the resultant mass migration of Tibetans to the various corners of the world. Poetry is the major form of literature for Tibetans in exile. More than any other form of literature poetry has been the most influential for the Tibetan community. This has been so throughout its history whether in exile or otherwise. Most of their religious texts are written in verse rather than prose. These texts were in the form of chants and were passed down to generations in the same manner. Stories, prose, drama, and such other forms of literature were rarely used. Even in exile, poetry gained a unique importance in the literary renderings of Tibetans. Such a spirit dedicated to poetic rendering makes their poetry the best possible vessel to transfer their thoughts. Perhaps it was the factor of exile that had made the Tibetans write these poems. Exile had concientised the Tibetan refugee to move on to the wide open world from his native land and to sing to the outside world about his plight. Hence the major part of modern Tibetan poetry was produced in exile. This study tries to understand how exile and present-day Tibetan poetry are connected and how both of them influence each other.

Tibet was for long a theocratic society, governed by the Dalai Lamas. The land was forbidden to foreigners and for centuries the Tibetans had lived in their secluded corner of the world. The Mongol and the Manchu emperors, who ruled China, conquered Tibet. But they had given special status to the rulers of Tibet. In the 1940s the Kuomintang party led by Chiang Kai-Shek overthrew the Chinese monarchy. He, in turn, was overthrown by Mao Zedong in the 1950s. With Mao in power China started conquering the nearby states. Mao's government had introduced several dream projects for China. But most of them were great failures which caused severe famine in China. Hence China conquered the neighbouring lands like Tibet, East Turkistan, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria in order to feed its teeming millions.

Tibet was occupied in the 1950s and from then on the successive Chinese governments started pumping the majority Han Chinese into Tibet in order to occupy these new "colonies", claiming that Tibet was originally a part of Greater China. The Chinese influence in Tibet was painful for the Tibetans. The Chinese exploited Tibet and introduced many rules which were unfavourable to the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama had to flee from Tibet in 1959. He became a refugee in India and established a Government in Exile in India. Following him thousands of Tibetans also accepted exile as their reality.

The Cultural Revolution during 1966-1976 was a great curse for the Tibetan culture. Monasteries and libraries were destroyed and burned down

claiming that they were part of the old theocratic state. This resulted in an exodus of the Tibetan community. The later governments from 1976 onwards had reset the norms of Cultural Revolution and turned the monasteries into tourist attractions. Anybody going against the Government policy will be duly punished.

Tibet had witnessed several resistance movements also. The most famous ones were those by the Khampa rebels in 1960. But as killing of any kind was against the philosophy preached and practised by the Dalai Lama he called off the resistance movement. The recent self-immolations of several Tibetan monks and ordinary citizens are clear testimonies of the new kinds of protests rising against the Chinese authority. From late 2010 onwards we find around 40 such self-immolations occurring in Tibet.

One can clearly see the presence of three generations of Tibetan poets in exile. Amdo Gendun Cheophel, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, and Dhondup Gyal form the first generation. They sing about the glories of their land and the miseries of exile into which they had fallen. Their poetry mainly dealt with the memories of the past. The second generation comprising K. Dhondup, Lahsang Tsering, Gyalpo Tsering, Ngodup Paljor, Tsoltim Shakabpa, and Norbu Zangpo has a different idea regarding the topic. The idea of an immediate return to Tibet, which they had been cherishing in their heart from the very first days of their exile, is now no longer the subject. Instead they have started to adjust with the realities of exile. These poets are aware of their situation of exile and they wish

for deliverance. The third generation consisting of Tenzin Tsundue and G.C. (Gendun Cheophel Jr.), Tsering Wangpo Dhompa, Buchung D. Sonam, Tenzing Sonam, Thupten N. Chakrishar, Kathup Tsering, Topden Tsering, Tsamchoe Dolma, Tenzin Trinley, Tenzin Gelek, Kalsang Wangdu, Ugen Cheophel, Namgyal Phuntsok, Sherab W. Cheophel, Gur Gyal, Tenzin Palzon, Dawa Wooser, Wongchen Tsering, Tsering Dolkar, Dhargyl Tsering. Pema Tenzin, Cherin Norbu, and Tsering Dorjee know Tibet only as a partial reality, different from the perception of their elders. They drew inspiration from their earlier generations. These poets of the present days represent their ideas in a powerful manner. The disenchantment with the dreams of return and the need to face the bitter reality of exile are always present with these poets. Their reality is powerful and it is painful.

The tool of ethnographic analysis, though not in its strict sense, is used to study these poems. Tibetans as a community are analysed and isolated based on their ethnographic differences. These differences when merged with the poetry give rise to some specific properties which are tabulated as an essential “Tibetanness”. It consists of seven major tenets. Tibetanness is deep association with religion and culture, specific ethnic identity, presence of three generations, right to exist and express, desire to return, presence of a strong hope, and voice of a political orphan.

Exile is the essential factor that overhangs all these facets. Religion and culture of the land had influenced the Tibetans in a great way. It has no affinity to the culture of India or that of China. Instead it exists as a separate identity of its own. This helps them to maintain a separate ethnic identity also. It can be observed that there are around three generations of exiled Tibetans. A first generation, who had witnessed Tibet in its heyday, a second generation, who were born in Tibet and were immediately brought to exile, and a third generation, who were born in refugee camps in India. The experience of Tibet is therefore different for the Tibetans of each generation. This is expressed in their literary works also. The poems are written in order to bring their ideas to the outside world. Most of this poetry states about their right to live in Tibet as free citizens. Each poem is also based on a deep desire to return to the motherland. The Tibetans have a strong hope to return even though they have been in exile for the last fifty years. Finally the voice of the Tibetan poet is like an orphan's. He is orphaned by the world which does not give any importance to his cries.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the topic concerned with the relation between poetry and literature. Poetry is always associated with the politics of the people in Tibet. The second chapter is a historical account of Tibet – a history of the Tibetan land and its people. Though the land was forbidden to foreigners, Tibet was associated with the intellectual history of the world. The third chapter is a detailed literary

history of Tibet. Tibet had a great literary tradition all its own. The fourth chapter is an ethnographic analysis of the subject; ethnographically differentiating the Tibetan group from other racial groups. Certain essential features differentiating them from others are summarized as “Tibetanness”. The fifth chapter analyses the relation between poetry and exile. Exile has transformed the Tibetans in such a manner that they had adjusted with the new realities around them. The sixth chapter analyses poetry as resistance to exile. The seven tenets of “Tibetanness” find their expression in Tibetan poetry. The seventh chapter concludes the thesis by affirming how the Tibetans use their poetry as a method of resistance.

Exile at present has become a very powerful reality which is thrust upon the Tibetans. It has taught them to build their community according to the needs of the new world. Poetry for them is the ways and means of resisting China’s hegemonic control over Tibet. Finally poetry is the soul of each Tibetan and Tibetanness is the soul of their poetry. Poetry shows the myriad facets of Tibetans in and out of exile. It steps out among the crowded realities of existence and represents the lone forsaken reality of being a Tibetan. Hence Tibetan poetry in exile is rightfully called resistance in exile.