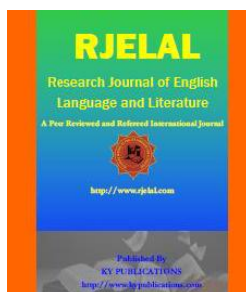




## TRAJECTORIES OF TIBETAN EXILIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SELECT WORKS OF TENZIN TSUNDUE

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Article Info:

Article Received:22/04/2015

Revised on:27/04/2015

Accepted on:01/05/2015

### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to look at the many facets and trajectories of the Tibetan exilic consciousness as represented in select works of the Tibetan Diasporic writer Tenzin Tsundue. It looks at the composite nature of this exilic space by studying complex and interconnected factors like the imaginary yet very real homeland, the manifold alienations and hence the ensuing resisting identities. The paper also observes the significance of Tsundue's writings that makes possible the voicing of the concerns of these exiled people. Thus Tsundue's writings are not just a resistance but a representation of the hitherto unrepresented.

Key Words: Exilic, consciousness, trajectories.

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Edward Said, defines exilic consciousness as the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: it's essential sadness can never be surmounted" ("Reflections on Exile", 173). He also notes that though the exilic condition is not new, being prevalent from the time when kings banished unlawful subjects, our own times is truly the age of the "the refugee, the displaced person" (ibid, 174). The twentieth and the twenty first centuries have witnessed different types of mass migrations and dislocations owing to myriad reasons ranging from ethnic cleansing, persecution by totalitarian regimes, and threats of genocide to causes like economic and educational advancements. These composite displacements have created a wide gamut of exilic subjects- expatriates, refugees, political asylum seekers and illegal immigrants to name a few. Exilic writings address these complex movements- voluntary or involuntary- and different trajectories that are simultaneous fallout of such

movements. Exilic writers- whether they are Jewish, Russian, South Asian or Latin American - encompass in their writings polyvalent issues tropes like imaginary homelands, complex identities, conflicting dichotomies like alienation vs. assimilation and so on.

This paper however attempts to "map territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself" (Said, 175). It focuses on the experience of the uncountable masses of Tibetan refugees who today face no prospect of returning to their homeland, people who were bundled out of their homes and prodded and walked to enclaves in India. Tenzin Tsundue a second generation Tibetan exile - a writer and an activist - attempts through his writings, what many other exiled poets and writers have done "lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity - to deny an identity to people" (Said, 175-176).

Although Tibet occupies a remote part of the world the Tibetan question has captured the

imagination and sympathy of many. From mid twentieth century the Chinese occupation of Tibet has resulted in untold suffering, poverty, hunger, rendering millions of Tibetans homeless reducing them to the status of refugees and asylum seekers .In March 1959, the Dalai Lama was offered refuge in India, by the then prime minister of India , Jawaharlal Nehru. Since then Dharamshala has been the home for the Tibetan exiles. Despite the influence and fame the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has had over the world the Tibetan problem continues even today. Tenzin Tsundue the second generation Tibetan Diaspora voices the composite anxieties of the Tibetan exile.

Miranda Hall in her interview with Tsundue observes how he first drew international media attention. In 2002 he staged a one man protest climbing the scaffolding outside the hotel where Chinese premier Zhu Rongji was staying in Mumbai with a banner emblazoned with the words, "Free Tibet: China, Get out." Hall also records that despite his imprisonment and travel band Tsundue repeated the same stunt in 2005 in Bangalore (April, 2014). In his book *Kora*, Tsundue notes how his parents along with thousands of other Tibetans escaped from Tibet. He was born in a roadside tent and there is no record of his date of birth. As he went on to meet hundreds of other Tibetans he realised the scale of their problem and it is then onwards that he pledged to be a freedom fighter. In his work *Kora* he addresses these multiple concerns of these exiles. *Kora*, published in 2000 is a collection of poems and prose pieces that has drawn many people's attention to the Tibetan's dilemmas and apprehensions.

One of the dominant motifs Tsundue returns to in *Kora* is the sense of a lost home and the nostalgia for a homeland left behind by his parents. Being a second generation exile, Tibet in his works is an image, metaphor in lieu of that tangible concrete space his parents remember. Salman Rushdie states how exilic writers "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands..." (10). But Tsundue's homeland though imaginary is also a material solid reality which has been denied to the Tibetan by the Chinese. For Tsundue this transgenerational memory of his

homeland handed down by his parents is the dream and desire that bereaves him with its sense of loss and he writes from a deep yearning to reclaim this homeland.

The poems "Losar Greeting" and "Exile House" capture a significant trajectory, specific to the Tibetan exilic consciousness- the tension between an actual desire to return to the homeland and yet the ir-recoverability of this lost patria. "Losar" is the Tibetan New Year that falls in February or March every year. Similar in many ways to the Babylonian Jewish lament and prayer "Next year in Jerusalem" the persona of the poem, a rootless Tibetan restlessly hopes that at least the next year he can spend it in Lhasa. William Safran in an important essay notes certain distinct characteristics of Diasporic communities exiled from their traditional homelands. Some of these facets are evident in the plight of the Tibetan exile in the poem. The persona and the addressee a fellow Tibetan regard Tibet (signified in the poem as Lhasa) "as their ancestral home as the place to which they or their descendants would eventually return" (Safran, qtd in Paranjape, 23). Beginning with the Tibetan New Year greeting "Tashi Delek", the persona, asks the listener to attune her spatio-temporal coordinates to a possible future-Lhasa while in a present-Dharamshala. So the listener is asked to "say an extra prayer/ that the next Losar/ we can celebrate back in Lhasa" (Kora, 10). And in the subsequent stanza education acquired in the host land is to facilitate once again the homeland, "...that you can teach children back in Tibet" (ibid). "Exile House" springs from a personal recollection , which Tsundue narrates in his prose piece " My Kind of Exile" .In this poignant episode his father does not want to mend the leaking roof of their home in Dharamshala as he is confident of returning soon to Tibet. This episode and the opening stanza of the "Exile House" like "Losar Greeting" narrate how this exiled community firmly believes that "they should be collectively committed to the maintenance and restoration of their original homeland "(Safran qtd in Paranjape, 23-24). In "Exile House" the father's conviction emerges from the collected conviction of the Tibetan Diaspora which regards "their ancestral home as their true, ideal home and as the place to

which they or their descendants would eventually return" (Safran qtd in Paranjape, 23-24). This conviction in turn leads to other trajectories, while the immediate return is not possible; the anticipated return in the present is replaced by an emotional and spiritual renewal of this homeland. Such a renewal of a homeland, frozen in the exilic imagination as a sacred site, is an ongoing necessity. This is done in the poems through a process of replication, if not reproduction. Tibet becomes for the exile a series of objects, fragments or narratives - like celebrating the Tibetan New Year in exile, linguistic tokens like "Tashi Delek" and "changma" (Tibetan word for fence). Through such fragments the exiles in this case try to "Tibetanise" their space in the host land. But such remembering also cause them to alienate themselves from the host land For they firmly believe " that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it "( Safran , qtd in Paranjape,25) . This insularity can be seen in the significantly named title of "Exile House" where the signifier "house" has none of the connotations of the warmth of an alternate signifier "home". This metonymic space like the host land for the exile remains a cold building "House". Notable symbols in "Losar Greeting" are the idlis that will not stand on the steel fork suggesting the speaker's cultural dislocation and his rickety transplantation in his host land.

However this ethno communal consciousness and solidarity in the host land which communicates a collective prayer and desire for a return to their homeland is undercut in both the poems by the ironic ,wry voice (typical in Tsundue's poems)which suggests the futility of the Tibetan exilic condition- that for them there is no next year in Lhasa. The speaker, in "Losar Greeting", for instance observes with biting satire that "Last year / on our Happy Losar/ I had an idli-sambar breakfast" (Kora, 10) .The implication is that this return had been a hope last year but - they are still here, hence the greater possibility that they might be here the next year and the next. Similarly in "Exile House" the loss of cultural roots and insularity that had earlier differentiated a host-home binary gradually disappears. For the earlier "changmas" have through

the years in exile have become a jungle and the exilic voice laments "now how can I tell my children/ where we came from?"( Kora, 25).So the poems move on this "contrapuntal" ( Said, 186) perspective that perceives simultaneous dimensions like - hope-futility, desire -despair , dream-reality - of the Tibetan exiles, whose memory and desire move backward and forward hoping to return in a future to their traditional homeland , though the present and the reality disparages such a possibility. As a corollary, the speaker in "Losar Greeting", suggests that the "sister", "grow well in the borrowed land" (Kora, 10) and try to "grow roots" in the host land. Though this assimilation is suggested as a possibility such integration of .identity becomes problematic for the Tibetan exile as reflected in other poems like " Space-bar/ A Proposal" "Refugee" , "My Tibetanness" and "The Tibetan in Mumbai". Commenting on the location of the exiles in the context of Anderson's "imagined communities" Homi Bhabha suggests that they live in-between nations or at the margin of nations. He defines this "disseminations" as a "Gatherings of exiles and *émigrés* and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers" (139). "Space-bar/ A Proposal" examines this "dissemination" of the Tibetan exile. The title of the poem significantly conveys this gathering on the edge by the Tibetan exile in India. Repeated references to a number of in-between spaces like the mezzanine, "under your bed" and "your garden" convey the attitude of the host land to the exile. The title is also a pun on the multiple spaces the Tibetan is barred from. Living in this interstitial space - dispossessed of his homeland and stranded as the outsider in his host land - the exilic voice's counter narrative debunks the refuge-aiding discourse of the Indian nation. In the poem the host land has veritably excluded this exile and so the exile offers a proposal how they can be included: "open your door/let me in/ iam resting at your doorstep/ call me when you are awake". This "dissemination" is made more explicit in "My Tibetanness" where the hyphenated identity " Indian- Tibetan" ( Kora,13) seems to suggest an access to two spaces but the poem narrates however that the Tibetans in fact belong to the "perilous territory of not-belonging" (

Said, 177). Said states that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls nations "habitus, the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitation" (Said, 176). However in the case of the Tibetans this works very differently while they might still have their "habitus", there is no place to inhabit. As the poem suggests "People of a lost country. / Citizens to no nation. / Tibetans: the world's sympathy stock" (Kora, 13). The poem narrates the complex terminal and interminable identity loss of the Tibetan as other cultural hegemonies erase their essential nation-ness in the name assimilation and refuge. Yet this xenophilia of the host nation is only superficial for the "chinky Tibetan face" (Kora, 13) marks him as the outsider. And even in this racial exclusion the Tibetan is denied his national identity for his facial significations homogenise him with other cultural hegemonies, "Chinese?" "Thai" "Japanese" /.../but never the question -"Tibetan"? (ibid)

"Exiles feel an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (Said, 177). This need can be seen in Tsundue's poems like "Refugee", "Betrayal" and "I'm a Terrorist". In these poems there is a strong resistance to incorporate the identity of the first generation exiles and an assertion of a new identity. In the prose piece "Why I'll climb more Scaffolding and towers" he points out what he and other Tibetan freedom fighters have achieved "... to demystify Tibet from the clichéd notion of Shangri-La, where Lamas walk two inches off the ground" (Kora, 33). In the three poems mentioned above one can see this simultaneous rejection and re-assertion. For instance in "Refugee" Tsundue replaces the refugee identity handed down to him by earlier generations suggested in the letter "R". This "Refugee-R" is replaced with "Rangzen-R" by the second generation. Rangzen, the poem goes on to add means "freedom". In "Betrayal" and "I'm a Terrorist" the poet rejects what he sees as stereotypical construct of the peaceful Tibetan to take arms and fight the Chinese. In these poems we see what Said comments exiles are in search of "armies or state...to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people" (Said, 177). Yet despite these radical shifts the Tibetan question has continued to haunt the Tibetan. Despite organisations like the United Nations, the

world continues to watch this disorienting loss of these people as they remain foreigners perpetually haunted and alone in an uncomprehending society.

As Tsundue comments about his exile, "To be in exile is to live the perpetual state of uncertainty, dreaming against all reason of a return to an unseen homeland this is a homeland that in the official world does not exist" (qtd in Hall, 2014). In *Kora*, speaking about the coming together of the two Germanys, he says, "I fear our broken families will never rejoin. My grandparents, brothers and sisters were left behind in Tibet. My Popo-la passed away a few years ago; will my Momo-la ever get to see her brothers and sisters again? Will we be together there so that she can show me our home and our farm?" (31).

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