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Rephrasing the Tibetans' *Koan*: Shadows of Memory in Sharad P. Paul's *To Kill a Snow Dragonfly*

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Abstract:

Since the escape of the Tibetans' spiritual and temporal leader, His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama from the Land of Snows in 1959, to India, the identity of Tibetans has been lost somewhere in the matrix of the myth of Tibet i.e. 'Shangri la'; its history, and in the politics of the Peoples Republic of China. For the freedom of Tibet, no one is helping or voicing for these people as the case has either been less represented or misrepresented. The Dalai Lama is the only hope for them, who has incessantly been trying for the freedom of their country through his rhetoric on spiritual discourse, and writing books on Tibetan history. As the condition of forced exile and the consequent pain always filter in narratives through shadows of memory that become even an expression of resistance to their perpetrators, Sharad P. Paul in *To Kill a Snow Dragonfly* (2011) has also traced the entire history of Tibet and circumstances leading to the forced exile of Tibetans. He has rephrased the entire history of Tibetan hinterland through the memories of Lobsung, the protagonist, who is witness to the entire politics behind the victimization of the Tibetans. This paper reflects on how Sharad P. Paul has objectively rephrased the history and the plight of Tibetans' in exile through the remembering of Lobsung; and how he has suggested in his own ways the solutions to the Tibetan's *koan* (unsolvable riddle).

Keywords: Tibetan Diaspora, *Koan*, Buddhism, Shangri la, Resistance, Exile

The experience of violence, repression and exile results in recollection of home and identity that have been fragmented by displacement and diasporic living. The condition of forced exile and the consequent pain always filter in narratives through shadows of memory that become even an expression of resistance to their perpetrators. In such literatures, the past continues to shape the present and also continues to haunt the individual's resilience. Shaped by the unstable notion of home, the diasporic writers seek to reframe all those things that make them nostalgic and which would be helpful in solving the mystery of home and exile. In Tibetan diaspora, the 14th Dalai Lama, in his autobiographies, *My Land, My People* and *Freedom in Exile*, has extensively narrated the entire history of his people and consequences of exile. However, in *To Kill a Snow Dragonfly* (2011), Sharad P. Paul has rephrased the entire history of Tibetan hinterland through the memories of Lobsung, the protagonist, who is witness to the entire politics behind the victimization of the Tibetans. The narrative is an evocative journey to the geographical, political, and the cultural conditions of Tibet through

revolutions and disruptions, desires and memories, friendships and exile, wherein the narrative moves from a tranquil Tibetan village to a boarding school in south India and eventually to Bombay.

The present paper is a study of how Sharad P. Paul in *To Kill a Snow Dragonfly* has objectively rephrased the history and the plight of Tibetans' in exile through the remembering of Lobsung; and how he has suggested in his own ways the solutions to the Tibetan's *koan* (unsolvable riddle).

The title of the novel alludes to the intention of a horrendous force to kill a dragonfly which is snowy viz. peaceful, pure and non-violent in nature. It infers the murdering of the innocence of the Dragonflies, the "tipsy insects" which has always been "independent" (1). Metaphorically, the snow dragonfly relates to Tibet, which has been occupied by people whose "flag is red and has an image of a large yellow star and three or four smaller yellow stars." (5) The narrator, who is, inevitably the author, has been listening to the story of a Tibetan friend who had faced the brutality and trauma of the Chinese invasion in Tibet. In the 'Prologue', the narrator informs that the journey of Lobsung is such which shows that "not all journeys have returns." (1) He is a forced exile from the land of snows whose "imagination are haunted by shadows of fear." (1) "Childhood memories can be fickle" (220), but the author has ample experience to rebuild the whole narrative. His shadows of memory take him to the lane where it is impossible to go: "Why I am writing this story? As time passes, I have come to realize that while I cannot go back, my thoughts can. [...] These chapters have come about as a result of negotiations between my past and present to permit a glimpse into the tunnel that leads to my childhood." (1) It is this feeling of negotiating the future with the past that compels Lobsung to tell his story of exile from his homeland; and the resistance that they have been posing in getting their country free from the clutches of the Dragon.

The book has been divided into twelve chapters named on the years and their corresponding tags according to the Tibetan and Chinese astrology. These names represent the 12-year cycle associated with 12 Zodiac animals that are 'mutually arising' order/cycle of the fundamental forces. The repetition of years along with their zodiac animals shows that during that period everything was working well as presaged. The six chapters show the well-being of the people but the other six have the unusual combination of the earthly material and their corresponding animals. However, Earth bird, water ox, iron boar and fire pig doesn't conform to the zodiac cycle, but amongst them, the iron Dragon is the most significant as it is often associated with wood. This change in the animal monkey to Dragon and the corresponding adjective to Dragon in the year 1980 symbolizes a sign of bad omen and the ambitious nature of China in relation to Tibet. According to this system, the country showed a very opinionated, stubborn and unreasonable attitude that is susceptible to being merciless and unkind, and unafraid to cut ties with those who fail to conform to its expectations or hold opposing views. In this controlling cycle, wherein one element controls the other, one element, wood is missing which shows that a complete harmony is not possible as all five elements/ energies of earth, fire, water, metal and wood in one's life would be helpful in keeping the balance. In addition to this, all chapters have an epigraph, which has been taken

from diverse authors to show and solve the condition of Tibet and Tibetans. Hence the title of chapters hints at the confusion, disturbance and jeopardized Tibet in the novel.

The novel is the story of Lobsung, a Tibetan exile in India and friend of the narrator, is a refugee studying in the Tibet friendly atmosphere of Dharamshala to become a Tantric Lama like his grandfather. It's about a family in Tibet living through Mao's Cultural Revolution and invasion of Tibet, told partly through the eyes of the son, Lobsang's best friend when he goes to school in India. In the novel, Lobsung recounts to the writer the episode of his and his family's life in occupied Tibet and his escape to India with his sister Bhunchung. He tells him the story of his life in the Tibetan hinterland where they have been living like the dragonflies that "seem unnaturally big in the mirror image" but are "independent". It was also considered for them that "[...] if you disrespect a dragonfly, it falls to the ground and turns its compound eyes heavenward, as if searching for a million reflections of reincarnation." (5) This simmering allusion of Dragonfly reflects the culture, history and politics of Tibet before and after the invasion of her by the Chinese army.

The very idea that the narrator longs for is to rearticulate the Tibetan 'koan', which is, as the Grandfather explains to the snow: "A koan is a riddle that cannot be answered by the intellect. [...] It is used to clear the mind and focus it during the meditation." (16)

The opening chapter of the book is about Tibet! There is complete agony over the appearance of a mole; a *naevus* on a child's left cheek. In the words of her Grandpa, she is destined to become a black widow: "It's a catastrophe! Anyone who marries Bhunchung will be doomed to die an untimely death. This matter of a fatal mole on a six-year-old cheek calls for very careful consideration." (9) This aspect of superstition, which however is a corollary of religion, in the Tibetan society becomes the key element in driving the action of the novel. However, the grandfather, a revered lama named Zonchung Rinpoche, with his mantras can "frighten lions and defang cobras, but this mole does not want to be tamed." (13) All his mantras have been thwarted by that "homicidal miniscule nubbin of flesh" (21).

Religion forms the very core of the Tibetan society that believes in Buddhism. However, they don't have the any statues built on the mountains as they think that "Buddha is everywhere." (17) It is their firm faith in religion which makes them "appreciate the good, even in bad situations." (125) Lobsung takes proud of the fact that Snow Lion is the emblem of Tibet, as they have even preserved the soul of extinct animals. However, he feels agonised while remembering his homeland: "Tibet has become a desert ... a barren landscape in which 'devotion' has become a forbidden word." (110)

Tibetans are not only religious, but logical as well. Lobsung, not only criticizes China but quite logically records the prevailing positivity in it. He emphasises that "communism without the communion of hearts is dictatorial and opposed to peoples' normal precepts." (217) The grandfather elucidates that the Chinese has not respected their belief in diversity, but have imposed their communism on them. However, Lobsung contemplates that China is not a "sleeping dragon. [It] has lifted three hundred millions of its people out of poverty in thirty years, a feat which took Europe three hundred years!" (218)

Tibetan families and society practices polyandry which they consider it a positive aspect as they enjoy living in peaceful and serene life. Although in such society, nobody knows who exactly the father is, but there has never been a crisis amongst them. Even Lobsung and his sister don't know who their father is, but that was something immaterial to them and all in the family. "‘Come here if you are the son of my seed.’ Father would say, and Uncle would repeat the same words. Lobsung would be confused. Not knowing who his real father was." (9) This stance takes a positive note when Bhunchung asks Suleiman, "Is it true that you are a Muslim and can have four wives?" (50) In reply Suleiman even questions the Tibetan practice of polyandry that how can they identify their kids, and tells that, although he is unmarried, but his people would "kill their wife if they found she was carrying a child from another man." (50) Finding Suleiman's inability to grasp the real meaning of the family the grandfather proclaims:

‘There can be no tree more unalloyed than a family tree,’ he elaborates. ‘Within a tree, the beauty lies in the sprouting of new, fresh branches. Who cares which branch of a root the new shoot originates from? Why is it important to know who the father of a child is, as long as the child is cocooned in a loving family? Most people are insecure because of fear, guilt or sadness. A family is different—it stays together and is one in spirit. For instance, everyone knows a lama is celibate, but that doesn't stop him from being the ‘grandfather’ of the family.’ (50-51)

The snow of Tibet is a character in its own right who converses with Lobsung and the Grandfather, and has its own thoughts and motivations. It is an omniscient presence in the book, powerful and compassionate, enthralling and ambassadorial, like the cloud of Kalidas's *Meghdoot*. Lobsung's approbation of dialectics has not that capacity to win the willing suspension of disbelief of the reader as the snow does. And this winning over is needed in the interest of the structural cohesion of the book. The grandfather's dialogue with the snow in the book is the author's own unconscious input as a literary artist. He converses with him as:

I had to do it,’ Zonchung Rinpoche says to the snow. ‘I am sorry that I had to blunt your power, but I had to save the family's Yaks.’

‘All you can say is sorry?’ splutters the snow. ‘I tried to spare the yaks, if you must know. (8)

The snow has been personified and considered an essential element that is all encompassing. It doesn't like the sun, and waking up early because of "spending all night huffing and puffing and pushing snowballs." (15) It talks to the characters in the novel and even gives its suggestions and protection to them. The Grandfather says that "there is a world hidden within the snow. After all, the snow forms glaciers, which in turn feed the rivers. Rivers nurture the soil, bringing forth plants and grass that sustain the animals, and therefore all human beings. [...] Snow to snow—that is the real circle of life." (14) There is a complete description about the character of snow: "... it is full of benevolence ... [it] hates equipment but loves the perilous battle between men and mountains. [It] has a great thirst for warmth

and has no long-term memory of trees and houses— or ski fields for that matter.” (14) The narrator tells that the only thing that it keeps in its memory is “Tibet—the only spiritual place that reveres its existence. Naturally, occupying the loftiest peaks in the world makes it feel great—revered in God’s hierarchy.” (15) Consequently, it is the sheer reflection of the spirituality of the Tibetans that has so much respect for snow irrespective of its darker side. Lobsung, in utter disgust, says that “the dying-out of the Tibetan language amongst the youth is too cruel” (210), but as long as the snow is falling even in exile, “there is always a hope.” (211). However, “the snow has become anonymous” (121) due to the Chinese Revolution, no matter if it is prevailing there as before.

The breathtaking episode in the novel is the escape of Lobsung and Bhunchung from the restrictions and ultimate trap of the Chinese army via unconquerable mountains. Herein also, the snow seems to exhort and plays the role of a mascot. While escaping, they hoped for “an impossible conquest; behind them is a village now ravaged by a deceitful revolution. Ahead, a ray of sunlight shines” (147). “FREEDOM—the mere thought sounds like paradise, albeit an unknown promised land” (131). However, “the gain of freedom from oppression in Tibet also means the loss of their mother and father” (150) and his girlfriend Tenzing. Lobsung also criticizes the bureaucrats on the borders whom he thinks as faceless and insincere.

The novel also gives a thorough account of the predicaments of an exile. Survival in exile is never an easy thing and the exilic beings face trauma, nostalgia and a longing for homeland. S/he remembers the naming, marriage, food, language, and all other cultural markers and tries to keep them alive. For the Tibetans, their escape to India has become an “unending voyage” (145) that is fruitless till now. However, the Grandfather has been quite optimistic about carrying his Tibet with him: “You can take people away from our village, [...] but you can never remove our village from their hearts.” (147) When he disappears from Tibet in most unusual circumstances using his tantric powers, he even has managed a safe escape for his grandchildren. In his letter to Bhunchung, he advises them that “*While tissues of a body shall perish, memories shall never fade.*” (185) He further adds that “*Lobsung and you might be outside our beloved land of Tibet but no one will ever be able to remove Tibet from your souls. Amongst all the lavishness of the Tibetan mountains, there are caves which shall harbour every Tibetan’s soul.*” (187) He informs them how the fourteenth Dalai Lama along with his countrymen have established a mini Tibet in Dharamshala to preserve the Tibetan culture in India, wherein all institutions of their cultural importance have been opened up alongside the Tibetan Government in exile. “[Dharamshala] reminds me of Tibet,” Lobsung says, ‘I can see snow everywhere I look on the mountains.’ [...] That’s what the Dalai Lama thought when he decided to set up his government here. This place has the stillness of Tibet—not quiet, but a sense of calm.” (167) Hence, Lobsung’s family “... accepts their troubled past to be a vivid reality, they look forward to the future—a life in India, a country with no less than a billion people, but always with a heart large enough to accommodate a few more.” (169) Sitting in the bustle of McLeod Ganj, Lobsung feels “riding on clouds in the Himalayas.” (170) Compared to other languages like English or Hindi,

Lobsung feels proud of the fact that “Tibetan is more an experience which adulteration cannot dull.” (171-72) Thus the grandfather has clearly advised them that “our life is now in India and it is important that we understand how the Indian people think.” (173)

To conclude, Nandita Bose has rightly proclaimed that the novel is “Ambitious. The scope is vast enough to be epic. In conceptualization and those deft masterstrokes of immensely powerful story-telling, Paul succeeds in drawing his reader into that shadowy wonderland that is fictionalized fact.” (1) The author has shown full faith in the Tibetan ways of living vis-à-vis their superstition, polyandry, belief in the institution of the Dalai Lama, non-violence as the only way to register their protest etc. When the narrator asks Lobsung if the Tibetan refugees hate the Chinese, he, in quite evocative and politically involved tones, defies and even clarifies:

Hatred can never be abolished by hatred. . . . We must not kill in retaliation but make them reflect on their actions. See the biggest thing about Tibet . . . or any troubled region in the world is this: Powerful nations always think that we seek a place on the map, when all we ask for is our history; we seek not a geographical identity but an understanding of the map of our human hearts. (218)

Lobsung further adds that the way to bridge the future with the past is possible by reawakening in the minds of the Tibetan youth a love for their language and thereby stemming their “lemming-like rush to become Americanized.” (210) He also pronounces that the Chinese Dragon too would, one day, having eaten its fill, look for love and for genuine friendship from fellow countries. So, all through negative feelings, the Tibetans and the entire world should have to approve Lobsung’s idealistic and futuristic utterances in order to solve the conundrum of Tibet. “The stains in his mind are not the shades of longing [now] but the tinctures of love.” (162) To him, “Even the coldness of Tibet cast a warm shadow over his memories.” (52) That’s how the author has been able to identify and rephrase the Tibetans ‘*koan*’, that could resolve by non-violent means rather than anything else. The very idea of non-violent protest is a powerful strategy of expressing dissent, as a feasible and potent mode of pressurising the opponent into a listening, and dialoguing stance.

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