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Alternative Tibetan Voices: A Comparative Study of the Narratives of Alai and Dhompa

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Abstract:

In this essay two Tibetan writers Alai and Dhoma have been compared to study the difference in their attitude and depiction of past. While Alai in his writings demystifies the past with a complex depiction of identity and culture; Dhompa glorifies it. Dhompa's romanticised portrayal of Tibet based on her secondary imagination creates her own version of Shangri La. However, both choose to depict the marginal stories of Gyarong and Kham people respectively avoiding the dominant Lhasa voice. The researcher has selected Alai's *Red Poppies*, Tsering Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* and refers to some memoirs voicing the nomads of Kham, their life, social structure and ethnicity. They further probe into their struggle and resistance shown by these people against the Chinese troops, thereby showing active participation in the uprising of 1959. The paper also throws light on their attitude towards Lhasa and religion.

Keywords: Shangri La, Lhasa, Kham, Gyarong, Tibet, Alai, Dhompa.

Introduction-

Tibet as a nation and Tibetans as displaced mass of people drew worldwide attention only after the upheaval of 1959. PRC (People's Republic of China) army had started entering Tibet since 1950; however by 1959 the situations worsened forcing the Dalai Lama to leave his land and take refuge in India. He was followed by an exodus of people that chose to stay close by their leader and practice their faith freely. The Central Tibetan Administration was then formed to govern and protect the Tibetans in exile.

Tibetans broadly got divided into two categories: one in exile forming the Tibetan Exile Community in Nepal, India and now worldwide; others who stayed back and continued to live under the Chinese Communist rule in Tibet. Both these groups have raised their voices presenting their own issues, situations and their understanding of the world. However, Tibetans on both side of the border have been largely homogenised in their literary output. Tibet was never a homogenous nation, it was a nation filled with people of various sub ethnic tribes who were culturally different owing to habitat but religiously more or less unified. So in exile these sub ethnic voices were nowhere to be heard. These people and their voices either got assimilated within the broader Tibetan Identity or got suppressed by the dominant identity. In Chinese occupied Tibet the scenario was different, as under the communist regime the existence of any Tibetan ethnicity as a whole was denied and hence the presence

of Tibetan sub-ethnic groups gets erased. However in both the situations they continued to thrive without getting entirely wiped out.

Aim-

In this paper I will make a study of the development of this dominant Tibetan identity, i.e Central Tibetan identity or the Lhasa identity over the ages and the subsequent marginalization of other voices. The effect of this hegemonic identity during pre 1959 Tibet on the various marginalised sub ethnic groups or popularly known as Tibetan nomads, will be discussed. Finally, through the narratives mainly of Alai and Dhompa I will examine and discuss their presence in the contemporary world and their representations in post 1959 literary scenario, the emergence of Tibetan Scar literature¹ and along with it the rise of marginalised voices and lost societies. The paper also seeks to present the contrasting situations in and out of Tibet represented in contemporary authors.

Rising of Lhasa -

Pre-Buddhist Tibet had many important cities. Since, the area was divided between various ruling clans all had important cities and towns. However, after the advent of Buddhism the whole area slowly became religiously united- changing from Bon to Buddhism. First, around 633 AD, *Srong btsan sgampo*² shifted the capital to Lhasa and laid the foundation of Tibetan Buddhist Empire. The creation of Potala and Jokhang are also attributed to him. However, the permanent seat of Tibetan government was shifted from Gtsang to Lhasa under the leadership of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, almost after nine centuries in 1641. He, with support from Gushri Khan, united the country, victimised with ill effects of civil war. He also ordained the *Dga' ldan pho brang* (Ganden Podrang) government (Tibetan Traditional Government) in the White Palace of the Potala (1645) from where it kept functioning until the uprising of March, 1959. Hence, from 1646 onwards Lhasa became the heart of Tibetan cultural and religious practice. Over centuries Lhasa gained such prominence that for the common understanding of the world Lhasa became synonymous with Tibetan culture and identity. The rise of Lhasa caused the downfall of other remote cities, which slowly lost their prominence.

The creation of Lhasa is mixed with myths and facts. Traditionally Tibet, the land is considered as a demoness (*srin mo*³), lying outstretched, which symbolizes both the uncivilized pre-Buddhist Tibet and its wild landscape. Mythologically, the demoness was pinned down geomantically at various vital points by temples and monasteries. Jokhang, the most ancient temple of Tibet is considered to be built exactly above the heart of *Srin mo* and it houses the *Jo bo*⁴ statue brought by Princess Wencheng in 641 AD. Furthermore, with the identification of the fifth Dalai Lama (*ta la'i bla ma*) as the incarnation Avalokiteshvara (the bodhisattva of compassion) and the recognition of it by the Emperor of China handed Lhasa

¹ Scar Literature-the literature of the wounded. Mainly the voices from Kham, as post 1980 form of literature.

² The empire traditionally credited with the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet

³ The ancestral goddess of Tibet. She mated with a monkey and bore six children who became the first Tibetans. She is also referred to as the female spirits subdued by Guru Padmasambhava.

⁴ Jowo Shakyamuni or Jowo Rinpoche is the most sacred image of Buddha.

more power and importance. Essentially, Lhasa became the celestial heaven with its Potala Place as the paradise (*bde ba can*) of Avalokiteshvara. Hence, with the association of all these myths, legends, power and beliefs Lhasa became the *bla gnas*⁵ for the Tibetans. As the belief goes “*If the Dalai Lama is well, then I am well*” (Dhompa 203)

The Voice of Exile-

Eventually, the literature of Tibet (pre 1559) became Lhasa oriented. The voice of Lhasa emerged as the grand narrative marginalising the other remote voices. This hegemony continued to prevail and dominate in the exile community literature as well in post 1959 scenario. Various political factors enhanced the need of a singular homogenous voice in exile that can be the representative of Tibetan identity; that can be associated with the Tibetan nationalism in the struggle for regaining their home land. Gellner while defining Nationalism says “*Nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.*” (Gellner, 2006, p.1) All the factors need to be well synchronised for creation and projection of the nationhood. Language plays an important role in this construction. A body of texts justifies these political claims, and bring people closer bound by an imaginary thread. Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* discusses various factors necessary in the formulation of a nation and in propagating the idea of nationalism. If the Tibetan community in exile can be studied in the light of Anderson’s theories one can find out almost all the discursive aspects. First, it is the creation of a rich past which brings a sense of the lost glorified homeland and a unique heritage to which citizens can look up to. This sense of loss brings them closer to each other. So a common mythical past develops a sense of unity among far distant people living separately. Second religion is a very significant factor in Tibetan case because the whole conflict is over the reign and supremacy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. So one’s faith in one’s own religion, the urge to practise it freely further tightens the tie.

“an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign...It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, B., 1983, p.6).

In such a situation of an imaginary communion, the tales of personal trauma becomes the suffering of the whole community. The pains and pathos are being subjectively experienced. This politically constructed framework, which Anderson talks about, ends up forming a national identity, a sense of pride and nationhood. In order to survive and thrive in the foreign nations the construction of such a national identity becomes imperative and Tibetan government in Exile has successfully created it. As a result, even after five decades in exile they have neither perished nor got entirely assimilated in the host societies.

The literary output of this community is highly uniform in nature with certain repetitive ideas -the pangs of lost glory, the idealization of the old Tibetan society, the identification of Communists as an entirely unwelcomed evil, the struggle for existence, the aim of preserving

⁵ *Bla* means soul, *bla gnas* is the power place of soul. So if that place is harmed the person related will be affected.

and practising the culture and religion etc. In the novels of Dhompa, Alai and some others, to be discussed in this section mainly reflect and support these facts. The voice that emerges out of these texts is an Anglophonic Lhasa voice where there is no place or identification of any sub ethnicity. The hill people- nomads are entirely denied any voice. Though their existence in the society became apparent from the novels yet their particularities and uniqueness are suppressed.

Dhompa and *A Home in Tibet*-

In *A Home in Tibet* which is autobiographical in nature, the narrator portrays her life as a refugee in this world. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa was born to refugee parents in Nepal, brought up in India and now resides in San Francisco. All her stories and ideas about old Tibet are based on what she has heard from the few living elders. So, going by the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, in *On Collective Memory* he discusses about the social and cultural construction of memory which fills up the loopholes in the knowledge of literature on sociology and cultural studies. Halbwachs's idea of human memory is functional only in a collective context. He asserts that this type of memory: collective memory is selective in nature which give rise to their behavioural traits.

Therefore what Dhompa hears is the collective memory of a displaced community. In Jungian sense of the term these kinds of collective memories associated with communities in stress are often a mixture of facts, rumours and imaginations, where people with age and time unknowingly blends them to form their version of truth. They tend to blur out the difference between what had actually happened and what they believed. Furthermore, this gets influenced by the social and political conditions. Therefore, what she writes is an instance of collective secondary memory combined with her own imagination. Essentially they are devoid of any firsthand knowledge of the events or certification of the facts. She openly admits it when she says "*It is as people have accepted the whimsicality of memory and in doing so they know one story cannot be the only truth. My knowledge is only partially true...*" (Dhompa 60)

She narrates her life as an immigrant and we learn that she develops her imagination of Tibet mainly from the stories told by her mother. Her actual encounter happens when she finally visits Tibet after her mother's death.

Tsering W Dhompa in her visit to Tibet learns more about her dead mother, her family lineage and history from the kins still living in Tibet. While talking about pre 1959 scenario she writes about the eastern regions, Kham, Dhompa. She belonged to the Dhompas, a fact that she narrates with a sense of pride because the title refer to the family of a great chieftain:

"my grandfather was the eleventh in the lineage of the Dhompas that began... some two hundred years ago." (61)

"...while I am in Tibet people refer to me as the niece of the Dhompatsang... I am of a lineage rooted in a specific location and culture. More than eleven generations of Dhompas have been chieftains" (60)

These places on the peripheries were governed by independent chieftains, under the rule of the Nagchen King. However, the titles of chieftains were bestowed on them by the Chinese Emperor, Qing King in 18th century. All their political powers were associated with China yet being on the Western border any close association was not necessary for them. Yet, they had to bow before Nagchen King and Emperor in Beijing for political powers and before Lhasa for religious assistances. These areas were populated by certain Tibetan sub ethnic groups, she mentions about the chieftains of Asha, Dhompa, Chungho and Gyatsap. These societies were abolished with the coming of the Communist army and they ceased to exist after 1959. The chieftains were reduced to nothing and the Tibetan clan system was destroyed. But instead of drawing a vivid picture of these forgotten societies she rekindles a sense of loss. Her personal loss becomes the pain of the same collective loss echoed by the refugees in exile.

However, interestingly neither she feels one with them nor her relatives feel one with her, when she visits Tibet. Owing to her Anglophonic attitude she is an outsider. All her actions and etiquettes are questioned by them. So imaginary Tibet might satisfy her mind but the physical Tibet is nothing of her own. She is not a Kham, anymore. She was imagining a homeland which was never her own, she was psychologically connected to that place as a symbol of her mother.

So people like Dhompa belonging to sub ethnic tribes thrive in the Tibetan exile community but their voice has been homogenised and now they feel distant with their kins still residing in Tibet. What they narrate is not their uniqueness but an overall Tibetan Consciousness. Another important observation in Tibetan refugee voice is the lamentation of personal loss, which, when camouflaged with a sense of community loss further questions the validity of the emotions. Rinchen Dolma Taring's *Daughter of Tibet: An Autobiography* describes her privileged life before 1959 in contrast to her refugee life post Chinese invasion. There are many other examples like this which are not written only to describe the traumatic plights. Their intention is also to draw the world's attention towards their cause. So, they are essentially politically motivated.

Unlike, Dhompa the authors like Alai, Tashi Dawa provide an alterity. They paint a different picture of these marginalised societies of old Tibet. Instead of lamenting for the lost past and idealising it they delineate the course of the downfall of Tibetan clan system critically and methodologically. Their portrayal vividly covers all the aspects of such social structure.

Alai and Red Poppies-

Alai, who belongs to a mixed parentage of Hui⁶ father and Tibetan mother considers himself a Tibetan but writes in Chinese. "*I am the Chinese grandpa's Tibetan Grandson*" (Alai, *Blood Ties* 138) He spent his childhood in the Maerkang County in the present day western Sichuan: a position perfect enough to experience everything that he later depicts in his novels. Owing to his personal experience he could retell the stories of these lost societies,

⁶ The Hui, one of China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups, are a predominantly Muslim people.

the culture of serfdom, the reign of chieftains. Most of his narrators- the idiot son of Maichi Chieftain with a Han woman in *Red Poppies*, the Tibetan Grandson of Chinese grandpa in *Blood Ties* etc have mixed parentage like him and writes fictionally about his own birthplace, the rivalry among the families, attitude of Han/Hui and Tibetans towards each other. Furthermore, because of his Chinese education he holds a position to critically evaluate the situation; he can talk more freely regarding this bloody feudal system. Another writer of similar Han-Tibetan mixed origin Tashi Dawa delineates the old Tibetan clan system and the modern developments side by side using the technique of magic realism, pointed the future of Tibet. They also hint at their aspect of identity through the conversation between father and son in *Blood Ties*.

“...he said “You think you’re Tibetan, right?”

“I am.”

“You really want to be one?”

...I want to, and yet don’t want to.”(Alai, *Blood Ties* 142)

This shows that the political upheaval has also shaken their orientation and identity. They are not what they are, even in their homeland.

In Alai’s *Red Poppies* the narrator, the second son of Maichi Chieftain, writes about the changing time. The lives of the Chieftains enjoying king like powers are contrasted with the lowly lives of the slaves who were referred to as ‘live stocks’ and not humans. The novel is set in pre 1959, in the South- Eastern border of Tibet (present day Sichuan). This region was inhabited by the Gyarong people- a sub ethnic group of Tibetan origin who lived in between the cultural borders of Han, Hui and Tibetan areas. They shared a relationship of daily contact and exchange. This region was also ruled by independent rival chieftains eg Maichi, Wanglo, La Shopa, Rongong etc in the novel. These chieftains in West enjoyed powers but had to bow down in front of the emperor in Beijing:

“... even though they considered themselves kings, they still had to kneel before those in power in Beijing and Lhasa” (Alai, *Red Poppies*102)

They shared interesting relationships with both Lhasa and Beijing, being at the border both the capitals were crucial for them. As the Maichi Chieftain explains to his son:

“As the saying goes, the Han emperor rules beneath the morning sun, the Dalai Lama governs beneath the afternoon sun. We were located slightly to the east under the noonday sun, a very significant location. It determined that we would have more contact with the Han emperor to the east than with our religious leader The Dalai Lama. Geographical factors had decided our political alliances.” (Alai, *Red Poppies* 20)

These chieftains, long ago, got their official seals from Beijing so their political powers rested with Beijing. Secondly, staying by the border they had to interact with Hans more frequently than people in the interior of Tibet. On the other hand, the myths of Tibetan origin say that all black haired Tibetans descended down from heaven as a strand of wool. So they needed to keep their ties very wisely. Moreover, Lhasa didn’t allow or certify the chieftains and

believed and insisted on monastic rule so a very close association with Lhasa brought the fear of losing the title, fortune and prosperity. White government in Lhasa also despised this social structure and was oppose to the presence of bondage slavery and other forms of cruelty. These things made them to maintain certain distance with the lamas and to always have an upper hand, in order to enjoy their royal glory. The overtly states that while saying

“Our family kept two groups of monks. One of them stayed in a sutra hall on the estate, while the other group lived in the Mondron Ling Monastery, (Alai, Red Poppies21)

“...to be honest we enjoyed the rivalry, since it kept the lamas from considering themselves too lofty...they also gave us guarantees that their prayers were more effective than those of others.” (Alai, Red Poppies 26)

The novel ends with the coming of the red Hans and the destruction of serfdom in Tibet. This simple looking storyline penetrates many complex arenas of Old Tibetan Clan system. First he ponders on the social constituency, every chieftain had a complex social set up, their subjects were from various *bones/ Shari* (caste) ranging from freemen- *kabas* (farmers and messengers), serfs (tax collectors and administrators)to bonded workers- executioner and slaves. There was little scope available for social mobility and the available scope always headed downward. Secondly, major section of the society was illiterate including the chieftains and their families. It is widely known that whatever little education available in Tibetan villages was basically monastic learning i.e., religious scholarship. So their knowledge of the world was nil. They were naive about the realities of the world and what’s going on and how that will affect them. For example the ignorant yet haughty comment of Cheiftain Wangpo when his adviser suggested him also to visit Beijing *“Which is bigger, Wangpo or China?”* (Alai, Red Poppies 21)

And the futile assumptions of Chieftains while talking to the advisor, Huang who has seen the world and understands it -

‘The Chieftains asked Adviser Huang who will win the war, the Red or the White Chinese.

No matter which side wins, the advisor said “the chieftains will never be the same. They will no longer be the lofty kings they think they are”

“Are you saying we can’t beat a single Han king even if we join forces?”

Advisor Huang laughed...’ (Alai, Red Poppies 381)

Furthermore when the narrator asks and talks about the Red and the White Hans it doesn’t occur to him that the colours are metaphorical, they symbolise their political inclination and not their body colour. He takes it in literal sense, going to the extent of trying to spot them out:

“Do you think they paint their faces?”he replied. “Their colors are in their hearts.”

“Then I can’t spot them.” (Alai, Red Poppies 397)

Or

“... *send them over so we can see which color we like better*” (Alai, *Red Poppies* 392)

Thirdly, it shows the religious rivalry among the monks of different schools and sects. The seemingly united and idealized Tibetan Buddhism becomes much worldly in the hands of Alai. Lastly, he shows the cruel side of the serfdom the sufferance of the slaves, the bloody feud between chieftains. Scholar and critic Patricia S Vedani while talking about the novels of Alai, Meizhuo, Yangzhen etc says that their

“... *novels humanize and demystify pre-communist Tibet's past to reinforce the importance of Tibetan culture, ways of life and tradition*” (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008: xx)

It is to be understood that Alai does not blindly criticise the Old Tibetan system he also critiques the Communists and their ideologies. In his trilogy *Kongsham* (not yet translated) or *Empty/Hollow Mountains* he delineates the situation post 1959. This novel clearly depicts his unbiased observational evaluation of the system. The trilogy is a compilation of various novellas where Alai depicts the harm done by communist party- the loss of great Tibetan grazing pasture, the destruction of benevolent nature. One important factor in Old Tibetan system was their connection and peaceful co-existence with nature. Both in *Kongsham* and *Red Poppies* Alai shows how China motivated and participated in depletion of Nature. His use of illustrative metaphors explains how the world order entirely changed and along with it has changed human morals and ethics. Similarly he also reflects on the boons of the Communist rule- education being one of them. In her autobiography *A Nomad Girl's Changing World*, Sonam Doomtso echoes the same truth; she describes how she got educated because of the communist reign. Otherwise she would have been a slave or servant under Tibetan clan system.

Both the authors Alai and Dhompa admit that people in their respective setting are not one with the people in Lhasa or Central Tibet. They are religiously even but culturally different people with their own version of dialect of language. Dhompa explains during her visit to Tibet how her aunt could never understand her Tibetan.

“*Yungyang... is never sure she has understood my Tibetan or what she deems as the Lhasa language... I speak Nangchen dialect but one that borrows some terminologies from the central Tibetan tongue when the dialect does not come to me...central Tibet and Lhasa are different countries, and define a politics and language not privy to her*” (Dhompa 100)

Similar idea is also echoed by Alai when his narrator says

“*...all the aristocrats who had come here had forgotten that Tibet was our homeland. And we gradually forget our mother tongue. We spoke the language of the conquered natives. Ofcourse there were still signs of our own language, but they were barely perceptible.*” (Alai, *Red Poppies* 101)

The traces of ethnicity are still present among the ones who stayed back in Tibet, witnessed the upheaval of 1959 and thereafter adjusted themselves to the changing norms while being in their homeland. In exile community they ceased to exist under the survival pressures in foreign land and foreign environment. However, in post 1959 Tibet, with the PLA's (People's Republic of China) mission of ethnic cleansing and integrity of the country, the situation was not at all favourable for these minority groups to survive. Though suppressed they continued to thrive with a dormant voice. The literature post 1950 consisted only of materials that agreed with the Communist party ideologies. They needed a literature that could be the mediator between the traditional system and the reformations under party's rule, a literature, for common mass, that embodied the popular native culture.

The situation improved only after the death of Mao Zedong which paved the way for a new leadership. Under Deng Xiaoping, China went through unprecedented changes. The party's policies were highly revised with special references to *shaoshuminzu*⁷ (minorities) and intellectuals. The policy of overt assimilation was abandoned. Instead they favoured cultural autonomy, the policies for the minorities incorporated diversities. Here, critic Baogang He rightly observes that *"the original purpose of exemption was to win the loyalty of minorities in opposing foreign intrusion; nowadays it is to achieve national unity and stability"* (He 66)

A fresh opportunity was created for the minority cultures to thrive and prosper, after decades of political suppression. These modifications played great role in the development of Tibetan contemporary literature. Tsering Shakya explains these changes and the revival of minorities if not in society but in literature. After 1990 a fresh interest generated in the life and culture of the nomads and tribes and writers like Alai, Tashi Dawa, Meizhuo wrote tantalising tales of this culture without the cloak of celestial glory. They, instead of romanticising the past, make it more realistic and lively. These unique voices came to be known as Scar literature in contemporary days. These texts certify the presence of diverse and unique regional ties throughout Tibet which were often disconnected. To probe further now days, as Lara Maconi says, the literature of Kham is illustrated as "Khampa", Sino-phone literature depicted by prominent authors like Jampel Gyatso (Ch. Jiangbian Jiacao), Liemei Pingcui, Zhangee Nima etc

Conclusion-

To conclude, instead of contrasting the ideas of these two categories of writers one writing from China and the other from outside China, what is more interesting is to study them as one writing about the nomads who fled Tibet, their sudden exposure into an unknown world, their struggle for existence outside Tibet and trying to make that world habitable. The Chinese were not evils for the slaves and the bonded men. However, the Tibetan social system was so and people were comfortable with it as a result the change could not be readily accepted. In exile people from various social strata got unified for survival, ignoring and keeping aside their differences of opinion and culture. These culturally different tribes got

⁷Ethnic minorities or non-Han people in China.

associated with Lhasa identity. And their literature became linear without much scope for variation or inclusion of other voices. On the other hand authors from China continue to give a multidimensional overview of the conditions and affairs. They recreated the chaotic past, not only making it interesting but also more authentic. Therefore, the nomadic tribes find not only a mention but a fully fledged portrayal in their writings, developed as a sub genre.

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