

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed and Indexed eJournal

9th Year of Open Access

Vol. 9, Issue-VI December 2018

Editor-In-Chief- **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

A Study of the Representation of Tibetan Refugees in the Select Poems of Tenzin Tsundue

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Article History: Submitted-29/11/2018, Revised-27/12/2018, Accepted-28/12/2018, Published-10/01/2019.

Abstract:

This paper examines the Tibetan Diaspora in the select poems of Tenzin Tsundue's, "My Tibetanness", "Refugee" and "space- bar: A PROPOSAL" from the book *Kora: stories and poems* (2002). The Tibetan Diaspora in India are referred to as Refugees and they are not given citizenship, till this day the Tibetans exist as political exiles in the Host country. The Indian-Tibetans are reminded of their refugee status constantly even from their own cultural community and from the responses they received from the Hostland. The Tibetan Identity in Diaspora as refugees further contributed in creating a consciousness among the exilic community of an existence of Homeland.

Keywords: Exiles, Refugees, Hostland, Homeland, Identity, Tibetan Diaspora.

In the mid 20th century, the Tibetans flee from Tibet to escape the persecution that was made against them by the People's Republic of China. The Tibetan Diaspora refers to the dispersal of the Tibetans from their homeland (Tibet). In the Tibetan Diaspora, there are three stages of immigration; the first wave of migration happened in 1959 when Tibet was occupied by the Chinese government which resulted in the immigration of Tibetan in Dharamsala in India. The Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh serves as the headquarters to the Tibetan government in exile to this day. The second immigration happened around 1980 when Tibet was open to foreign for trade, led many Tibetans to leave Tibet as they were occupied and persecuted by the People's Republic of China. And the third stage is an ongoing wave that started since 1996; the third stage of the Tibetan Diaspora includes the contemporary issues on Tibetans in exile. The select poems "My Tibetanness", "Refugee" and "space- bar: A PROPOSAL" deals with the ongoing issues and Diasporic experiences of the Tibetans in the present time. The poems discuss on the Refugee status of the Tibetans,

their Refugee position reminds the Tibetans that they are far away from their original Homeland and the need to fight for the Independence for a Free Tibet.

Tenzin Tsundue is a Tibetan writer and an activist who has become the voice of the Tibetans in exile in the contemporary times. Tsundue was born to a Tibetan refugee family in North India. He is a second generation Tibetan in exile; his writings are preoccupied with the image of Tibet and the hope to return to 'Lhasa' (Homeland). Tenzin Tsundue has been known for his radical activism against the Chinese government and his fight for an independent Tibet. Tsundue is known for his activism whose writing gives a stark representation of the Tibetan's who are displaced in India. Tenzin Tsundue was acclaimed internationally in 2002 when he staged a protest in Mumbai, he was arrested for his activism when Zhu Rongji, Premier of the Republic of China visited India, Tsundue climbed the scaffolding and reached the 14th floor of the Oberoi Towers where he unfurls the Tibetan National flag, with a banner that read 'FREE TIBET' later Tsundue was arrested by the Mumbai police. Tsundue is known for his one-man protest against the People's Republic of China. Tsundue's representation of the Tibetan Refugees in exile is a group of people with a lost nation and whose aim was to remind the people of their exilic condition and their common cause of reclaiming Tibet from China.

Tenzin Tsundue states that he never really belonged to any place or found a place to be called home; in India, Tsundue is a foreigner whose citizenship is Tibet, but the writer also states that Tibet as a nation does not mark in any of the political maps of the world. Tsundue's remark on the word 'R' with which he grew up and was reminded constantly of his refugee state. He had eloquently put forth the plight of the Tibetans in exiles and critiques the world for its silence on the case of the Tibetans. About the Tibetans in India scattered in parts of Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka mostly on hill stations. Tsundue narrates about the Tibetans when they first settled in Karnataka, the Tibetans grew only papayas and vegetables in the hope that they will return soon but now even the mango seeds that were dumped behind the yard are bearing fruits. It can be assumed that the exilic conditions of the Tibetans have not ended as they still exist as a political refugee. The Tibetans hopes for a return but their roots are growing in exile though they are not provided citizenship. Tsundue mentions that the waiting to return home seems to be redefining eternity.

Migration is an act of movement, often considered as a voluntary movement but migrations are also enforced on people or communities as a means of persecution faced in the

Homeland or country in which they reside. The individuals who have escaped the persecution seek temporary asylum in the neighbouring country or request to permanently settle in the host countries as refugees. According to the UN Convention, Refugees are group person who resides outside their country of origin as a result of fear of persecution for the fear of race, religion, nationality and political opinions. (121 Bookman, Milica Z) the Tibetans flee persecution from the Republic of China in Tibet; the refugees had undergone various phases of their transition in India. Richa Kumar mentions about the Tibetan's citizenship in her article 'Tibetan Diaspora: A Study of Citizenship and Identity' that by claiming the Citizenship of India, Tibetan's would lose their Tibetan Nationality and Identity, similarly it would be considered as a betrayal towards the independence struggle for a free Tibet. The Tibetans refugees' stateless status also reminds them of their cause, denying Tibetan citizenship indicates both the loss of one's national identity and the hope of returning to their homeland.

Tibet is the traditional homeland of the Tibetans; Tibet was occupied by the Chinese Government since 1959 leading to the exodus of the Tibetan leader the 14th Dalia Lama, whose escape from Tibet to trans- Himalayan in India and was followed by a huge wave of migration of Tibetans to India. The Tibetan in Diaspora believed that there is a Homeland and they believed to make a return to their Home. In the words of Tsundue, "Home for me is real. It is there, but I am very far from it. It is the home my grandparents and parents left behind in Tibet." (My Kind of Exile) Tibetan Diaspora can be categorized as victim Diaspora and they are also referred to as political exiles or refugees. Tenzin Tsundue's position can be seen as an "intellectual Exile" as he does not lament the situation but rather address his fellow Tibetan to make the best used of knowledge acquired in the hostland.

Tibetan Diaspora is a relevant area of discussion in the contemporary era as the Tibetan's are still living in exile. The Cultural identity of the Tibetans in exile is marked by their religion, ethnicity and their attachments to Tibet. Homeland and the hope of returning to Tibet is a concern in the writings of Tsundue. 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: its essential sadness can never be surmounted". ("Reflections on Exile", 173) The consciousness of an existing Homeland and the Tibetan nationality reverberates in the poems of Tsundue.

The paper aims to study the Tibetan exiled community of India and their representation in the poems of Tenzin Tsundue. The Tibetans were enforced to exile in India, living as stateless refugees as their home is occupied by the Chinese Military. Though home exists for the Tibetans, the Tibetans are banned to visit Tibet, their Homeland and its capital is known as Lhasa in the Tibetan language. The poems “My Tibetanness” and “Refugee” are used as the primary source of this paper. The poems are taken from *Kora*, a collection of poems and stories by Tenzin Tsundue. The poems are relevant for the study as it traces the Tibetans nostalgia and longing for Tibet; their identity in India as Tibetan- Indian and Exilic consciousness of the Tibetans.

In “My Tibetanness” the poet explores the life of the Tibetan’s in India and their difficulty to maintain their identity as refugees. “We are refugees here. People of a lost country. Citizen to no nation.” (Tsundue My Tibetanness) The persona makes a conscious remark of his Diasporic identity by acknowledging that he is away from home, establishing his refugee status, the persona also states the Tibetan’s are people of a lost country (occupied by the Chinese) and citizen to no nation (refugee in India). In “My Tibetanness” the poet talks about his condition as a refugee, he is a Tibetan in India but was rather address as a Chinese, Naga and Manipuri but was never question about his Tibetan identity. The poet talks about the helpless situations of the Tibetan in exile where they find no representation because no other nation acknowledges them or their stateless condition.

The poet also shows the dilemma of whether the Tibetan should represent themselves as Tibetans or Indian because he finds himself in a hybrid identity of Tibetan- Indian. “I am more of an Indian, except my chinky Tibetan face” (“My Tibetanness”). The poet is also critical of the hostland which does not include them and rather address them as refugees. The poet is critical of the whole world as he addresses the Tibetan as “world sympathy stock” that are rather looked upon with pity but was never helped any nation. The poet mourns the World and its silence against the Tibetan’s struggle without a Nation. The poet is conscious of his exile condition as a stateless refugee, though he has never seen his homeland; Tibet exists in his mind as an imaginary one, but a homeland imaginatively true. “I am a Tibetan. But I am not from Tibet. Never been there. Yet I dream of dying there” (My Tibetanness). The above lines could be assumed that the persona is aware of his physical dislocation as an exile, though the persona had never seen his homeland but hopes to return there one day, this could be referring to die fighting for Tibet. Tibet exists as Homeland for the Tibetans and though their fight is still far from achieving their independent Nation, the possibility of an achieve

homeland is resonated in the poem. The poet is critical of those younger generations Tibetans who try to forget their roots and culture by trying to assimilate in to a new culture in the host land. In “My Kind of Exile”, Tsundue brings forth an incident where he was watching the world Olympic which reminded him that he had no nation to cheer or mourn for; he comments that when Nations are talking about coming together for humanity by defying borders, he states that a refugee can talk about nothing but only wish to return home.

Similarly the poet deals with exilic consciousness as a thematic concern in “Refugee”, here the persona talks about his identity in India which is marked by an ‘R’. The collective Identity of the Tibetan in India is marked by an ‘R’, the persona comments on his identity which emphasizes statelessness and his hybrid identity. When the persona states that he is an Indian- Tibetan, his identity is marked by hyphen whereas the persona also states that he has three tongues, Hindi, English and Tibetan and the tongue that reads ‘Rangzen’ (Freedom) is his Tibetan tongue. He speaks in Tibetan but prefers to write in English, between the English and Hindi, is the symbol ‘R’ where the Tibetan tongue speaks ‘RANGZEN’, here the persona is conscious of his exilic state and his hybrid identity where he is making the best use of all the language that is given to him but the persona’s attachment with Homeland reminds him of freedom struggle for Tibet. The persona speaks of his identity as a Refugee which started from his home, when his mother reminds him that they are Refugee and this is not their home, similarly the persona is reminded of his refugee identity in schools by the teachers. In “My Kind of Exile” Tsundue said that the first thing he learned as a child in his school in Himachal Pradesh was that he was a refugee and does not belong to India, the ‘R’ he bores on his forehead reminds him of his identity as a refugee.

“Space-bar: A PROPOSAL” recollects the Refugees status of the Tibetan’s in exile, the persona in the poem asked his Host to accept him and allow him to grow in exile. As the persona says “Let me grow in your roses and prickly pears” could be assumed that the persona is seeking for shelter and an identity in the Hostland. The persona asks the owner of the house to open the door and let him in, the persona is resting at the doorsteps of the owner and he waits for the owner to call him. The persona addresses the host and asks him if there is some space for him where he can grow, and he asked if he can grow in the borrowed garden. The poem is a short illustration of the refugees experience in exile where the Tibetan refugee is seeking for an asylum and a protection from its enemies. The poem could also imply the persona’s seeking the help of the Government of the host country as he asked for shelter and a space where he can grow.

Tsundue's poems are characterized by the theme of exilic consciousness, cultural hybridity, and longing and hope of returning to homeland marked by their collective identity. The study of the poems brings forth the exilic dilemma of the Tibetan's in exile, in the poems the Refugee status is recalled many times. The Refugees are conscious of their stateless position but at the same time they are seeking for an acceptance in the Host country. The poet's concern with the Tibetan's in exile is to remind the people of their origin and the cause of the Tibetans, the 'R' in the Tibetan Identity in exile reminds them that there is a Homeland and their refugee status binds them as a community in exile. Tsundue in his poems refers to the stateless conditions of the Tibetans as refugee who are not granted citizenship or support by the whole world when their plight is seen everywhere, people observe the Tibetan cause with sympathy but not a single Nation dared to help the Tibetans in their independence struggle. The poet mourns for the world's silence towards the Tibetans and warns the readers that this silence and not taking action will not help in rebuilding the Home of the Tibetans.

Many Exilic writings address the exiles as foreign but the Tibetans are often referred to as refugees. It is their culture, religion and their dislocation that contributes in their exilic pre-occupation, their hope to return and their Tibetanness is what connects them together. The reality of their exile both at the physical and psychological level become part of their Tibetanness. The idea of resisting to assimilate is reflective of their consciousness of a return to an existing homeland. In Tsundue's poem we find the tone of anger and the assertion of hope, as he continuously creates an idea of a homeland where he believes that one day the Tibetan will return. Though the poet speaks about the problems that the Tibetan Refugees are facing in exile, the poet's major concern is to maintain the consciousness among the Refugees that they don't belong here but Tibet, is their place of origin and their Homeland. It is this preoccupation of exiles with the Homeland that keeps the individual from assimilating into the Host culture. Refugee state the inferiority and alienation of the Tibetan Diaspora's as they are forced into exile but this same Refugee status in the poems serve as a positive factor for the Tibetans who are in exile. The Tibetan's Diasporic communities are bind together through their Refugee status as a group of people who are stateless. The Tibetan's in Diaspora are connected with their idea of Homeland and their hope of returning to Tibet as their collective identity is linked with Tibet. The thematic concern of the poems greatly reflects the poet's activism and political view on the Tibetan's exile and their struggle as a group of people without a Nation.

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