

People of a Lost Country: Exile and Sense of Dislocation Transmitted in the Poems of Tenzin Tsundue

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Abstract

The proposed research paper seeks to study the notion of home which has been defined and redefined in various ways predominantly in diasporic, partition and exile literature as history and heritage of thousands of years linked to it and the way this association was broken. Home became a floating signifier with each literary piece penned down with angst of exile. Tenzin Tsundue, an unusual blend of an activist and a writer articulates collective consciousness of the Tibetan people in exile. The target poems published in Kora, a collection of stories and poems written by Tenzin Tsundue analyze how the word 'exile' is catastrophic in many ways, how excruciating it is to untie with home/nation.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Nation, Exile, Existentialism, Hybridity, Third Space, Memory.*

Introduction

“Will we ever go back?

Where?

Home.

Home?

They were bewildered and anxious once again. Home, the very thought of home threatened to shatter their sanity just as a storm threatens to uproot trees.” (qtd. in Bhalla)

This conversation between migrants in Intizar Husain's short story *The Boat* reveals the sentiment which is the core of exile literature whether the exile is imposed or self-imposed. Being an expatriate is the greatest loss, has an immeasurable effect; even a thought of home distraught them, migrants lose their sanity at the very moment they listen 'home'.

The commonplace word 'home' became the significant aspect of Tibetan literature after the violent outcome of foreign invasion and suddenly turned into the pictogram of nation: “The first loss which the rightless suffered was the loss of their homes, and this meant the loss of the entire social texture into which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world.” (Hannah) The way these circumstances impact people is affectingly voiced in the first poem of *Kora* named *Horizen*: “From home you have reached; the horizon here.”

Rootlessness and Existential Angst

Physical displacement aggravated by psychosocial trauma resulted in craving to attain home/land. Being caught between the hope of homecoming and reality, memory and nostalgia remains as the only healing for both, physical and material loss. The beauty and grandeur of Tibet, its colours and magnificent culture, now remains only a lifeless form. Tibetans hope to integrate with sundered part which was brutally cut off and this yearning of reunion: “Mark the curves and cliffs around; for you may need to come home again”. Uprooted people try to find themselves through memory; attempt to amend the social fabric. Rosemary in *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* deny calling home as a neutral place and contemplates on the changing roles of home in the narratives of exile and exodus. It is constantly evolving place that fosters as well as becomes the sight of violence. Home is defined through the politics of difference as she states: “The term “Home-country” suggests the particular interaction of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home.”

Tibetans are physically rootless but find difficult to disconnect emotionally which is expressed in the poem *Losar Greetings*. Tsundue tries to overcome this imposed exile through his writings, endeavors to maintain familial, social and cultural connections and by re-locating his ‘self’ and ‘home’ in an unknown land. The poem presents perspectives on dislocation and displacement, how migration failed to replace the fixed geographical location, their homeland which is framed in their mind. Their land never becomes the ‘past’, it is present in their mind; desperately and uncontrollably, the stories of forefathers flow in their heart. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* stresses that “roots be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing history of the present.” The national identity is unstable, changing. Bhabha foregrounds this ambivalent state of nationhood that typifies the colonial contestation and the imagined construction of cultural and national identity, the painful remembering of the history, both the private and the public: “It is a painful re-remembering, putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. Tsundue portrays the real ‘self’ carrying geographic and the socio-cultural influence with which their ancestors were isolated. He compares an alien land with ‘borrowed garden’ which should not hinder the growth of Tibetans. Listening and writing about Tibet is an act of resisting the bitter truth and a way of reclaiming the bygone, building an ‘imaginary homelands.’ This resistance can be seen in these lines: “send your roots through the bricks stones, tiles and sand; Spread your branches wide and rises above the hedges high.”

Tsundue pens down the desire to gain the sense of belonging but all that Tibetans have is the tiny cultural roots in form of stories, memories and nostalgia offered by elders: "Private memory, fragmentary and partial as it may be, there is, flesh and blood, to testify the past which persists in the present trauma and represents the only site of mourning in the absence of any monuments, memorial or ceremony to remember the victims of Partition." (qtd. in Bruschi) Tsundue appeals Tibetans to recite an extra prayer while attending Morning Mass to fulfill their longing to celebrate Losar in Lhasa, learning an extra lesson so that they can teach children back in Tibet. These poems are unofficial versions which need to be located in historical, political and social context.

Story of the troubled and disturbed nation has not finished yet as the disordered state cannot be easily remedied which is displayed in *Desperate Age*. History of the nation, of its lost culture requiems for the loss performed “on the collective and individual bodies and memories-wounds which have turned into permanent scars, the indelible marks and reminders of a trauma which is still fresh.” (intro. Bruschi) This clash of private and public forces lines up with Bhabha’s term “unholiness” about which he writes in the *The Location of Culture* that the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. The act of resistance is symbolic in these lines: “Within the prison; the body is yours; But within the body; my belief is only mine.”

In that displacement, borders between home and the world; the private and the public dissolves. Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* discusses the “narratives as discourses that signify “nationness”, Bhabha writes about “the *Heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other” This passage, part of Bhabha’s introduction, directly associates the domestic to the national, inferring an intimate comfort in one's nationality, and terror at the domesticity of the ‘other’. The label of a refugee immensely contributed in Tenzin’s growth as an activist and as a writer. He expresses how painful and misfortune it is to learn as a child that one does not belong to the place, incapable to owe anything where one is born and currently living. Amorphously and unconsciously, the pain of separating from ‘own’ space remains entrenched in the substratum of Tibetan mind:

“Thirty-nine years in exile.

Yet no nation supports us.

Not a single bloody nation!

We are refugees here.

People of a lost country.

Citizen to no nation.”

With these striking lines, Tsundue begins his poem called *My Tibetanness*. The feeling of homelessness and ‘nationlessness’, loneliness and longing for home poignantly conveyed. Expatriation expressed differently in each poem, but yearning for home remains the same. Living with nostalgia, the word which is derived from ‘*nostos*’ (return home) and ‘*ailos*’ (pain: sickness), characterize their life as they desire to re-enact their peaceful past which makes these poems a tone of voice for those who lived with longing to touch the dust of their land like Tsundue:

“I am Tibetan.

But I am not from Tibet;

Never been there;

Yet I dream of dying there.”

The poet displays the psychological and inward transformation proving that transmigration and exile is more than biological, it “can be seen as out-of-body experiences. Both are defined by displacement and detemporalization, by eviction from a located space, a physical home.” (Gupta) Their identity keeps altering when they are looked as Nepali, Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Naga, Manipuri but never as Tibetan. Kavita Daiya brings light on this critical term “refugee” and the way people react and perceive this transformed identity. These intricate forms of “dispossession make it imperative to rethink the narration of the past in terms of refugee experience, the writing of subaltern histories of violence and displacement, as well as the very production of the immigrant as “refugee” and/or “citizen”. The line “Serene monks and bubbly traditionalist” describes beauty and dimensions of Tibetan culture. The most excruciating is the necessity of leaving behind one’s nation and an array of personal, social and cultural reminiscences results in the unwilling abandonment of older identities:

“At every check-post and office

I am an “Indian-Tibetan”.

My Registration Certificate

I renew every year with a *salaam*.

A foreigner born in India.”

The poem explores the construction of home and nation and embodies the sense of displacement and bewilderment through social and psychological suffering of migrants in whose memory the pre-dominant image is one of dislocation, disorder and separation. In exile literature, stories written in different context, set in different time and space but the trauma transmitted in these stories are the same. Joginder Paul’s Urdu short story *Thirst of Rivers* brings similar sentiment as protagonist is an elderly woman ‘Bebe’ who is pushed into migration. She clings to her haveli mentally by carrying the keys close to her heart. Her possession and obsession for the keys which opens no locks poignantly capture her pain of migration. Tsundue writes the way one lakh and thousand people nicely blended with various cultures but even after that they remained “a foreigner born in India.” Rosemary Marangoly George writes that home “manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions...Home is the desired place that is fought for.” The loss of originary home/nation brought multiple losses results in “cultural trauma”. Tsundue mourns about the way Tibetans are considered non-existent or outsider and marginalized, devoid of their rightful place in India. The next poem *Refugee* explores an ordeal of migrants, difficulties in resettlement and the way the term ‘refugee’ malformed the entire life, the suffering and pain still remained unhealed and overlooked. Culture and tradition, ethnicity and religion coupled with Home. People got shelter in a new nation but lost their ‘home’ which was their ‘own’, in which the heritage was preserved and nourished:

“When I was born
 My mother said
 you are a refugee.
 Our tent on the roadside
 smoked in the snow.

Rootlessness leaves Tibetans desolate and gloomy who oscillate between the optimism of being rooted again contrasted with existing situation. Tsundue utters: “What can I, a refugee, talk about except the wish to go back home?” (Kora 28). The cruel drama was performed which left Tibetan on another shore, their current geographical location cannot be called ‘home’:

“On your forehead
 between your eyebrows
 there is an **R** embossed
 my teacher said.”

Scratching and scrubbing of forehead is a symbolic act of removing the tag of born refugee. Tsundue feels he “never really belonged to anywhere, never really had a home.” (Kora 26) People moved leaving behind memories, dreams and a place of worship. His parents recollect their simple and peaceful life in Tibet spent playing in the pastures of the Changthang, grazing their yaks and sheep and suddenly foreign invasion forced them to pack up and flee the village. Villages destroyed and anarchy spread in the mountains; people had to track through the Himalayas and then to India. Tsundue can speak several languages but the one that sings is his mother tongue. The big ‘R’ on his forehead between his English and Hindi, the Tibetan tongue reads ‘*Rangzen*’ means freedom which is the sole purpose of his life. Demographic dislocation leaves them desolate and traumatized as “cultural baggage is...carried by those whom “deterritorialization has chosen...who are cast out empty-handed and empty-headed.” (qtd. in Rosemary) The poet responds ambivalently to the very identity of refugees in India.

Another poem called *The Tibetan in Mumbai* sarcastically explores life of Tibetans in the city. Conveying the sense of in-betweenness coming out of hybridism, it displays the way Tibetans in India deal with dual cultures. When Tibetan works as a cook at a Chinese takeaway, people think he is a Chinese run away from Beijing. When they sell sweaters in summer, they are looked as some retired Bahadur. They are able to speak ‘Bambaya Hindi’ with a slight Tibetan accent. Tibetans are non-existent and always misidentified; he addresses this issue also in *My Tibetanness*. Tibetans are unrecognized and their culture remains unnoticed in India where multiculturalism is celebrated: “The Tibetan in Mumbai like to flip through the MID-DAY; loves FM, but doesn’t expect a Tibetan song.” Tsundue describes the way identity is negotiated and clashed in the third space and emergence of

hybrid identity and the sense of in-betweenness. The historical process put those ill-fated evacuees in unresolved dilemmas of identity and belonging. An exile haunts Tibetan people who are now bereft of their cultural, geographical, historical and social identity: “The Tibetan in Mumbai are now tired; wants some sleep and a dream.” Tsundue narrates the way in which shift of national identity results into the failure of reimagining life in a new nation and desire to return through memory or dream if not in reality. With the loss of home/nation, identity and the sense of belonging were also lost in the tragic turn of history: “This re- definition of the self is a substantial motif...it has mainly to do with the loss of identity...originating from the interrupted sense of belonging to “home.” (qtd. in Bruschi)

Conclusion

These poems are not just a personal account but record the national history, the history of foreign invasion and violent outcome whose memory is still alive. The poet expresses his trauma in these words: “none of them can ever empathize with the plain simple fact that I have nowhere to call home and in the world at large all I’ll ever be is a ‘political refuge’...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.” Tsundue uses his writings as a means to protest, to spread awareness in others, to remind the purpose of life and to give strength to his own, to regain lost power and space. These writings are also healing narratives written for the therapeutic purpose. His poems and stories give a voice to the voiceless, marking Tibetan’s existence and an identity in a country where they are literary non-existent: “The Tibetan freedom struggle in exile has been more symbolic than confrontational as in Tibet.” The loss of an originary home/nation constitutes a recurring motif in the target poems which specifically looks at representation of Tibetan people’s experiences of dislocation across the boundaries of home and nation.

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