

Contemporary Tibetan Literature in English: Witnessing Exile

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Abstract— *For a very long time, Tibetan scholarship had been much focused on mysticism, spirituality, philosophy and religion. Tibetan medicine had also found its due place in the vast corpus of Tibetan studies. This linearity of development of Tibetan literature that had started with the advent of Buddhism in the 7th century, was brought to an abrupt pause and the course of its progress was altered when Tibet was violently occupied by the People's Republic of China in 1959. Although a major portion of this tradition has Buddhist teachings as its chief motif, the diversity within the Tibetan literature is easy to observe. It includes subjects such as linguistics, literature, biography, history, philosophy, astronomy, medicine etc. The translations of Indian Buddhist treatises that are occupying the maximum of the Tibetan literature corpus. The present research intends to explore how the contemporary Tibetan literature has arisen in exile has brought the issue of Tibetan displacement on a global platform fetching much support for cause of 'Free Tibet', offering an opportunity to observe and contemplate on the problem of exiles perceived by the Tibetans living outside of Tibet.*

Keywords— *Exile, Contemporary Literature, Expatriation, Translation, Culture, Buddhism.*

Living a nomadic life in the high terrains before the political chaos took place, the Tibetans had learnt to survive the hardships in the cold mountains, delimiting themselves to minimized needs which were fulfilled from their land and livestock. Along with their spiritual leader, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, around 80,000 Tibetans left Tibet on foot and crossed the Himalayas to reach the borders of Nepal and India to escape atrocities at the hands of the Chinese. Being a theocratic nation for centuries, governed by the Dalai Lamas – the spiritual leaders revered by all Tibetans, it isn't surprising that the Tibetan literature was more or less synonymous with Buddhist literature before the invasion. The Tibetans were and still are, firm believers of Buddhism which outlines their approach towards life, such that their thoughts and actions are defined by the teachings and philosophies of Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism had always occupied the centre stage of Tibetan literature which was particularly created by monks and religious who had the privilege of literacy. The Chinese invasion on Tibet in the 1950s caused the displacement of thousands of Tibetans inflicting upon them the suffering of exile, however, the visionary effort of the Dalai Lama to educate every Tibetan child brought a transformation in the Tibetan society in exile. Not only monks and lamas but the lay Tibetans also became involved

in the literary activity which led to a major shift in the content and form giving shape to what is now known as Contemporary Tibetan Literature. The exile gave the Tibetans the opportunity to acquire a new language – English, which amplified their reach and empowered them in exile. Moving beyond the mysticism of spirituality and philosophy as literary themes, the emergent literature in English by the exiled Tibetans voices the grave issue of displacement, loss of identity, homelessness and primarily the quandary of “inbetweenness”. Academic studies have been steered on the literature formed by countless ethnic groups around the world who have suffered displacement. The contemporary Tibetan literature which has arisen in exile has brought the issue of Tibetan displacement on a global platform fetching much support for cause of 'Free Tibet'. It offers an opportunity to observe and contemplate on the problem of exiles perceived by the Tibetans living outside of Tibet. It predominantly raises enquiries on the issues of identity, continuity, memory, alienation, assimilation and homecoming. Tibet's literary heritage which is more than 1300 years old, had remained inaccessible to the scholarly world until it was brought outside of the boundaries of Tibet after the political crisis. (Tsepag, 2005) Although a major portion of this tradition has Buddhist teachings as its chief motif, the

diversity within the Tibetan literature is easy to observe. It includes subjects such as linguistics, literature, biography, history, philosophy, astronomy, medicine etc. The translations of Indian Buddhist treatises occupy the maximum of the Tibetan literature corpus.

Migration and displacement have been important factors in the course of human civilization. It acquired terms such as exile, expatriation and immigration with time but in this unending process of moving and settling, man has always felt the need to be connected to his roots and keep the memories of his origin thriving. There is a strong urge to belong to some territory which can be called 'homeland'. Particularly, when we talk about exile, the sense of loss and the 'urge to reclaim' becomes prominent. Identity crisis is an essential feature of diaspora writing. (Mishra & Mishra, 2018) Today, thousands of Tibetans are living as refugees in various parts of the world. The plight of the Tibetans who had to flee from their homeland leaving everything behind in the dark of the night, taking the perilous journey through the snow-capped mountains for days to reach an unknown but safe land, then surviving the harsh weather and sicknesses in the new land and live in poverty as homeless refugees, is not easy to imagine. India has been home to the largest Tibetan refugee community since last sixty years but majority of Indians primarily identify a Tibetan either as a monk wrapped in a maroon shawl or as people who come to sell woollens in temporary stalls in the winters. The distinct tradition, rituals, language and culture of the Tibetans and their somewhat shy nature has to some extent led to the creation of a gap between both the communities such that Tibetans have lived unnoticed among us for long. The Tibetans before the invasion and exile had lived a self-sufficient nomadic life in the midst of mountains and fields in spite of the hostile and harsh conditions of weather and landscape. (John, 2016) The love for their homeland and their desire to return was very strong and this nostalgia is the inheritance of the second and the third generation Tibetans in exile. Therefore the immigrants dwell in between two different worlds, compromising the two variant cultural modules and absorb hyphenated identities through bi-national transfer. This mingling and acclimation of a new culture forms in-medial spaces. (Mishra & Mishra, 2017)

After almost six decades, there has now surfaced a certain form of Tibetan literature in English which can be considered as a direct consequence of their experience of exile. It is vital to approach the contemporary writings of Tibetans living outside of Tibet as exile poetry/narratives to understand the sociocultural and psychological effects of displacement on individuals and communities. The emerging exilic writings by the Tibetans settled in various

parts of the world is gaining the attention of the literary world. Their poetry and narratives have emerged as the very expressions of pain and nostalgia that these people experience every day in exile. Today, the Tibetan community in exile is one of the most successful refugee groups in the world having been able to sustain themselves economically and at the same time being able to preserve their culture. The Tibetan nation which was theocratic for long, formed a democratic government-in-exile. It transformed from a society in which the lay people were largely illiterate to a completely literate society. (Ed. Bernstorff & Ed. Welck, 2004)

Tibetan Literature is segregated into four sections or periods. The Early period includes literature produced till 10th century, the Middle includes literature produced from 11th to 18th century, Modern period which is up to 1950 and literature produced after 1950 is categorized as Contemporary Tibetan Literature. (Kar, 2017) During the early and the middle period, the works of the Tibetan scholars who were the authors of the vast literature, chiefly dealt with subjects of philosophy and religion however, the scholars also devoted themselves to historical works and to subjects such as grammar, medicine and astrology. They compiled the Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionaries, vocabularies of technical terms and old words, bibliographies and treatises on the art of government. Pilgrim's guides and travel accounts with geographical descriptions have also been found. Collections of letters written by high-ranking ecclesiastics to colleagues and kings and notes taken during classes or lectures also form a part of the Tibetan literature. We get the glimpse of the art of writing or creative writing in various enriching legends. Many works including chronicles and biographies have been written in ornate flowery style which displays the influence of Indian alamkara. (Stein, 1972) Tibet's long literary history includes both – works directly influenced by the Indic Buddhist literature and the indigenous works of the Tibetans. Though a script was devised in the 7th century, the pre-existing oral literature contributed immensely to shape the Tibetan literature of that time. Tibet already had a rich folk tradition and the amalgamation of Indic tradition and Tibetan indigenous folksongs resulted in the creation of the major corpus of what we know as Tibetan Literature today.

Contemporary writing in English presents a strange conjunction between at least three different categories: language, society and cultural tradition. This is a journey astride two cultures and across two traditions, yet it is an ongoing journey where, hopefully the forms and structure will expand to accommodate cultural needs of today. (Dutta, et.al. 2019). The Contemporary Tibetan Literature

is different from other periods on account of its diversified themes. Before the exile situation, the Tibetan literature was primarily composed of 'buddhism, philosophical texts, and liturgical and biographical accounts of the lamas' but the exile has resulted in a more diversified creative writing and the contemporary Tibetan English writings are 'politically and aesthetically complex'. Today, it is difficult to give an accurate number of languages available across the world because a particular language has many sub-plots as per its dialects. Thus, linguistic variety, diversity and multi-linguistic approaches are dominant over the entire world and India is not an exception. (Mishra & Mishra, 2020). Bhoil (2011) argues that exile of Tibetans has brought about a change in the language and culture along with other changes but new languages and forms of expression which emerged in exile empowered them to negotiate their culture, identity and aspirations outside their homeland. The connection between socio-cultural contexts, language and genres in the contemporary manifestations of ancient Tibetan culture and history in the modern popular Tibetan poetry shows that 'much of the Tibetan secular and lay culture was transmitted and experienced orally through poetry and especially 'song' in Tibetan culture. The genre of poetic songs was more about the experiences of the poet and it is this genre in the contemporary situation which has evolved due to the exile experience and taken the form of protest poetry conveying nationalist sympathies and is playing an important role in articulating and unifying Tibetan resistance. The contemporary Tibetan poetry has emerged as a spiritual as well as therapeutic remembering. Memory and oblivion manifest itself in these literary works particularly the ambivalence between past and immediate reality of the diaspora. While the Tibetans have maintained their roots, they have also evolved in the foreign societies bringing a sort of transcendence which is the new reality reflected in the contemporary Tibetan writings. (Puri) The common feature of all contemporary Tibetan writings is the urge to return to their homeland. Certain features make up the essential 'tibetanness' such as deep association with religion and culture, specific ethnic identity, presence of three generations in exile, the right to resist and express, the desire to return, presence of hope, and the voice of a political orphan. These are visible in some or the other form in the contemporary Tibetan poetry in English. (John, 2016)

The contemporary Tibetan writings in English, particularly poetry, is a mode of showing resistance to the colonial oppression in exile. John (2016) categorises the Tibetan poets into first, second and third-generation poets. The poets who were born and raised in Tibet, who were forced out of Tibet only after the invasion of 1959 have been

called the first-generation poets. Their poetry is mostly about the golden past of Tibet, its beauty and culture. The themes are derived from the rich mythical sources and legends of Tibet. AmdoGendunChophel, ChogyamTrungpa and DhondupGyal are the prominent names among the poets of this age. The second-generation poets are those who were either born in exile or were brought into exile at a very young age, immediately after the Chinese invasion. These poets had the opportunity to grow up in the foreign land and experience the culture of the host land. For these poets, Tibet is what they can see from the eyes of their parents. The motif of exile takes a major space in the poetry of these poets and disillusionment is a common theme. K. Dhondup, Lahsang Tsering, Gyalpo Tsering, NgodupPaljor, Norbu Zangpo and TsoltimShakabpa are the poets and writers belonging to the second generation. John defines the third-generation Tibetans as those who were born and brought up in exile much later after the invasion. Their experience of the host land is very different than that of the earlier generations. They are familiar and to some extent comfortable with the language and culture of the foreign land. Their idea of homeland is completely based on the memories passed on to them by their elders. They have accepted the reality of exile and their poetry is more about the problematic of exile such as alienation, assimilation, memory and continuity. Having received the modern English education, these poets are comfortable writing in the foreign language which does not seem foreign anymore. Tenzin Tsundue, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, Buchung D. Sonam, Gendun Chophel Jr., Tenzing Sonam are very few names out of the big group of authors, poets, essayists and translators that make up the third-generation. (John, 2016)

The exile experience has had a profound impact on the contemporary Tibetan literature. The Tibetan poets/authors in exile are connected strongly to their homeland Tibet and their writings raises questions about identity, home/homecoming and memory. As such, the emergent Tibetan writings in English has provoked deeper analysis and a place for itself in the contemporary Exile Literature. What makes Tibetan exile unique is that the sense of being displaced and the nostalgia persists in the second and third generation Tibetans too. The desire to return to their homeland Tibet is as strong as that of their parents and grandparents who were actually a part of the exodus that happened six decades ago. Berg's (1996) remark below helps us to get a better understanding in this context:

The exile is subject to bouts of nostalgia, in which memories of the past is richer than the actual present. The loss of home creates the desire to regain it whether through return or recollection.

Home becomes more precious for having been lost, and most precious by having been lost forever. (Berg, 1996)

Meerzon (2017) argues that unlike other forms of movement such as immigration, expatriation, migration etc, the term 'exile' signifies a metaphysical condition which affects an individual metaphorically and psychologically. It is more than a mere physical displacement. It defines a situation of alienation, loss of home and disconnection from home and kinspeople. The scholars agree that the term 'exile' may be more appropriate to discuss a displacement which has connotations of force and suffering with a political bearing. Said (2000) comments that exile is a situation of pain and loss and that 'longing to return' to homeland is its essential feature. These essential features of exile such as memory, nostalgia and longing are observed in all the three generations of exiled Tibetans. In the concept of exile, homeland plays a major role. Dao (2014) comments that "loss of homeland marks exile's beginning and thereby continuously defines and reproduces it." Longing, nostalgia and a prolonged memory are the essential features of exile. The question of 'home' is difficult as well as fundamental to any debate on exile, migration, or displacement.

Based on this brief analysis, we can conclude that the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th century was a turning point in the development of Tibetan literature as well as Tibetan culture and society. Classical Indian literature is a medium through which one is offered a sneak peek into the ancient times. (Sinha & Mishra, 2019). A script was devised by the Tibetan scholars and Sanskrit Buddhist texts were translated in Tibet shaping and influencing the Tibetan literature forever. Since then, the Tibetan literature progressed continuously on a linear path enriching itself with knowledge of all field such as linguistics, literature, biography, history, philosophy, astronomy, medicine etc.; but it was primarily concerned with the philosophical and spiritual Buddhist teachings and accounts of the lamas. Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan literature grew parallelly seventh century onwards. However, the Chinese invasion, exodus and exile in 1959 disrupted the linear evolution of the Tibetan literature changing its path again. Diverting it from the philosophical motifs, it brought the world face to face with the immediate reality of exile of the Tibetan community. It broke the mystic image of Tibet, the image of the "forbidden land" and compelled the world to perceive the problems of the Tibetans in a more realistic sense. The major motif visible throughout the contemporary Tibetan literature is that of exile. It compels readers to contemplate over the problems

of identity crisis, alienation, assimilation, memory and homecoming. The shift of language from Tibetan to English has allowed wide readership of the emergent Tibetan literature across the world. Communication, both spoken as well as written is an essential aspect towards empowerment and cultural identity. (Mishra & Mishra, 2017) Accepting and adapting themselves to the requirement of a new language gave them another opportunity to empower themselves and create a cultural identity in exile. These are significant changes in the Tibetan literature, a consequence of exile and it won't be an exaggeration to say that exile has shaped the contemporary Tibetan literature significantly. These exilic overtones of nostalgia, pain, homesickness and longing to belong define the present-day Tibetan literature.

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