



# The Soil and Green Shoots: Ecocritical Reading of *A Home in Tibet*

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**Abstract**— *The question of rampant environmental degradation resulting from the ambitious Chinese projects and policies in the Tibet region of People's Republic of China in the recent decades has been raised not only by environmentalists but also by the contemporary Tibetan writers and poets. The mission undertaken by the Chinese government to 'modernize' Tibet has subsequently resulted in polluting and destroying the ecosystem of the region. Surviving and thriving in the difficult terrains of the 'Roof of the World' since antiquity, the Tibetan people had mastered the skilful balancing of their needs and the resources provided by Mother Nature in a way that both had existed in perfect harmony until the mid-twentieth century. The contemporary Tibetan writings voices the disruption of this harmonious relationship in the recent past. The paper will critically explore this disruption by employing Ecocritical approach to *A Home in Tibet*, a memoir by Tibetan author and poet in exile- Tsering Wangmo Dhompa. This non-fiction prose by Dhompa is laudable for its depiction of the deep association of Tibetan people with the natural flora and fauna of their homeland Tibet. Dhompa's use of ecological settings and landscapes provides ample opportunity to study the problem of environmental awareness in modern Tibet. The paper will examine the conflict between the essentiality of modernization and the necessity of ecological consciousness in the Tibetan case by demonstrating the ecological implications visible in her book.*

**Keywords**— *Ecocriticism, ecology, environment, nature, Tibet, Tibetan literature.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is June and the Earth is slowly warming. Snow gives up inch by inch its adoration of the soil and the green shoots rise in clenched temerity. The ground is still cold and I think it must be a painful process, this period of thawing, even for stones and mud. Soon, beyond the pass on lower grounds, the grass will grow tall and inhibit easy walking and then it will be impossible to think of the grasslands as being any other colour but green. And yak and sheep will be unable to separate their dreams from their wakeful wanderings, thinking of summer as a delectable feast. (Dhompa 18)

In more than sixty years of colonization, Tibet which was once a nation, now a part of People's Republic of China (PRC), has witnessed a number of vicissitudes both in terms of culture as well as environment. Masking its

control on Tibet's language, culture and religion, China boasts of having provided Tibet with extensive economic assistance and development. (Dumbaugh) While the subjugation of Tibetans and destruction of their culture through policies and movements such as The Cultural Revolution has been much discussed, the issue of environmental degradation and exploitation is yet to be voiced in the Tibetan literary studies. The Contemporary Tibetan literature is yet to make its way from the periphery of Postcolonial Studies to the centre stage, but it surely has made a mark there by raising the essential enquiries on colonization, deterritorialization and exile. This paper attempts to introduce the contemporary Tibetan literature in the field of Green Studies or Ecocriticism. Recently, many scholars have raised concerns over the ambitious Chinese projects such as the extensive mining and building

of dams in Tibet region which has led to the degradation of grasslands and glaciers. They opine that the environmental problems which will arise due to these exploitative ventures will directly affect many nations in the Asian subcontinent and pose a serious threat to the ecological system of the entire world. (Environment and Development Desk) (Latif) (International Campaign for Tibet).

The concern for the natural world and its conservation against extreme human pillage took the shape of a movement known as Environmentalism in the 1960s. This apprehension was bound to find its path to literary studies as literature pictures not only the chaotic internal and psychological world but also the physical world and the environment in which we exist. Though poets and authors have depended heavily on nature to express and represent their emotions since classical times, environment and nature found a novel interpretation in literature in the form of the newest literary concept termed Ecocriticism.

The depiction of nature in literature can be traced from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the postmodern writings. Chaucer begins his most ambitious and acclaimed work *The Canterbury Tales* with reference to the weather in the month of April. Spenser's pastoral poetry celebrates the rural England. Shakespeare uses nature to depict human emotions. His plays have numerous references of forests, storms and seas. Nature has been represented in almost all genres and forms of literary productions of all ages however, the most prominent representation of nature is observed in the Romantic Age of 1790s when poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and others exalted it to new heights. Similar illustration of nature is seen in Transcendentalism, a movement that started in America in the 1830s. It is from these two movements from which Ecocriticism or Green Studies finds its bearings.

The term 'Ecocriticism' appeared in an essay by William Rueckert titled "Literature and Ecology – An Experiment in Ecocriticism" published in 1978. Rueckert defined Ecocriticism as the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature. However, the term was popularised as a concept years later by Cheryl Glotfelty in the late 1980s when he associated the term with the blanket concept of nature writing. Ecocriticism takes its bearings from the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century American Transcendentalist poets Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and David Henry Thoreau, who celebrated nature. Known as Green Studies in the UK, the concept took roots from the Romantic Movement of the 1970s and primarily voiced the environmental issues and concerns rather than mere celebration of nature. Ecocriticism studies the relationship of literature and nature. It focuses on how

nature is represented in creative writings. (Bazregarzadeh) Levin (2002) defines Ecocriticism as "a term used primarily by scholars trained in literary studies to describe an interdisciplinary approach to the study of nature, environment and culture". (Levin) It analyses how nature, humans and culture contribute to contemporary environmental crisis and outline their response to them. He argues that the sphere of this concept has now infact moved beyond the conventional boundaries of discussions on wilderness, conservation policy and environmental justice. Literature has always been concerned with environment "through a memetic and exegetical representation" and hence this new branch of literary studies is also called "the environmental humanities". (Umunc)

## II. ECOCRITICALEXPLORATIONSINA HOMEINTIBET

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is the first Tibetan female poet, born in exile, to be published in English. Born on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1969 in India, Dhompa grew up in the Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal. Her mother was the daughter of a Tibetan chieftain from Eastern Tibet, and had escaped to India in 1959. Dhompa is a prolific writer and the most widely distributed Tibetan American poet. She is an acclaimed author with three collections of poetry, two poetry chapbooks, and a non-fiction full length book of autobiographical nature. *A Home in Tibet* is a memoir and a poignant narrative of a daughter's visit to her homeland after her mother's death. *A Home in Tibet* was published by Penguin Books India in 2013. Later, it was published by Shambhala Publications (United States of America) in 2016 as *Coming Home to Tibet: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Belonging*. It is an absorbing acknowledgement of a mother's pain and efforts in raising her daughter in exile and Dhompa charms the readers with the immaculate poetic-prose description of her homeland Tibet, its landscape and the people in her debut prose composition. The constructs of culture, nature and society and their interaction is presented in the prologue itself where Dhompa describes the moment of Chinese invasion on Tibet by drawing a parallel between the chaos within the nation and the chaos in nature, a trait commonly observed in the Shakespearean drama. She writes:

It did not alarm her at first when she heard the Chinese Army had encircled all strategic Tibetan towns and cities. Nomads in her village professed to witnessing two suns, or two moons, or a barren sky. Trees collapsed. Rivers grew tumid. Then came news that the entire

villages of central Tibet were fleeing for Nepal or India. (Dhomba)

The culture and identity of the Tibetan people are deeply rooted in the natural environment and landscape of Tibet and even in exile, the Tibetans have not forgotten the sweetness and sustenance that their land offers. It is in nature fundamentally that one finds the feeling of well-being both physically and mentally. Dhomba further illustrates how nature sustained the Tibetans in exile too:

Every summer my mother culled the images of flowers from her childhood. There were the ones with white lollipop heads that grew with cheeky profusion impeding her stride; then there were the lissom blue beauties, translucent and shapely as a glass bottle, who fooled her into thinking they were half-reptilian; the turquoise and perfectly petalled flowers that hid in the shadow of rocks and caves; and the waxy and purple bulldog-faced flowers she could never uproot because they hugged the ground so tenaciously. (Dhomba)

The passage symbolically maintains that though physically the Tibetans have been de-territorialized and 'uprooted' however, the memories of the homeland which emerge in the form of the pictorial ecstasies of Tibet's flora and fauna essentially keeps them grounded to their identity in exile. It is particularly true to the first generation of exiled Tibetans who identify themselves as people from the land called Tibet, and what they remember of Tibet is the snow-covered mountains, yaks grazing the green fields in the short summer and thousands of prayer flags fluttering in the wind on every hill and mountain pass. The memories of the natural environment of Tibet acted as a soothing salve which eased their experiences of isolation and depression in exile. Experts have often stressed that nature experience positively impact cognitive function and mental health. They also opine that the "assault of modernization, development, and environmental degradation" in the cultures which have robust conventional attachment to their natural environs negatively impact the people. (Bratman, Hamilton and Daily)

The Tibetan literature has seen a major shift from being fundamentally philosophical and spiritual in its theme before the Chinese occupation (Mukherjee) to becoming a kind of Witness Writing after the exodus in 1959 and finally situating itself in the boundaries of Diaspora and Migration studies in the contemporary times. (Bhoil) The literature produced after 1950s by the Tibetans living in exile, detached itself from the more traditional

themes of religion as well as mysticism and voiced the realistic contemporary issues of displacement and colonization, thereby breaking the mystified image of Tibet. However, a common theme that runs as an undertone in almost all Tibetan writings whether contemporary or not, is the element of nature. Tibet is known as "Roof of the World" as it is located at a very high altitude and its terrain is inhospitable in many ways particularly to the foreigners. Yet, the Tibetans not only managed to live in sustainable synchronization with nature, but also thrive as an independent community. A report by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) elucidates:

Despite its cold environment, for thousands of years the Tibetan people inhabited this plateau and created cultural landscapes based on principles of simplicity and non-violence, in harmony with the environment. (Environment and Development Desk)

The Tibetan people acquired the skill of dwelling in these mountains and valleys which is covered with snow for almost three quarters of a year. It was the introduction of Buddhism which gave them the concept of conservation and protection of all forms of life that turned them from fierce horse-riding warriors into spiritual monks. Buddhism itself is known as the science of human living. The Buddhist philosophy of 'noble eightfold path' advocates sufficiency and moderate living which results in sustainable consumption of natural resources. (Donde) Nature sustained the Tibetan people and they protected it in return, a symbiotic relationship which led to the Tibetans living a self-sufficient nomadic life in this extreme landscape. Since they are surrounded by this beautiful bountiful nature, the motif of nature is indispensable in Tibetan writings so much so that Dhomba claims "the land is our ornament". The deep attachment to their natural landscape and environment can be understood from the fact that the Tibetans living in exile still express and represent themselves in their literary creations through the memories of the mountains, green valleys and rivers of their homeland Tibet. These lines from Dhomba's book perfectly present how "the land is imprinted in their memory":

[...] she carries a map in her mind anchored in the story of the ancestors, deities and lamas. She employs phrases like 'this side of the mountain' and 'that side of the river' to indicate boundaries and borders between clans and villages. (Dhomba 80)

*A Home in Tibet* candidly exemplifies the changes Tibet has gone through in these sixty years of colonization, changes which have resulted in mushrooming of grave environmental concerns. Conservation demands careful balancing of needs against available resources. It is important to be watchful of the long strides one takes towards modernization as it often tends to flourish at the cost of exploitation, pollution and eventual degradation of natural resources. Dhompa brings forth the reality of modern Tibetan cities which have “developed” after the 1950s as she writes:

The brown river carries an unending revelation of desire –cans, plastic bottles, old car tyres, the waste from the city’s new sewage system and remnants of the night’s libations – all these float alongside the occasional sanitary napkin, gaping bloodily. [...] I ask an eleven-year old girl playing near me if she notices anything unusual. She says she has never seen fish in these waters. She has never seen the river look blue. (Dhompa 31)

Here, Dhompa stresses on the need to revisit the Tibetan cultural values and assumptions about environment by problematizing, depicting and discussing the environmental issues. As Umunc (2015) asserts, the ultimate use of Ecocriticism is to instruct and upgrade people’s consciousness about the natural world by representing environment in literature.

Since religion, faith and spirituality are important aspects of Tibetan living, it is not surprising that it is frequently linked with nature. Tibetans regard the mountains as deities. They build monasteries on the hills and mountains and conduct regular ritualistic prayers to please their mountain Gods. The notion of conservation is intertwined in ancient mythology which forbade the Tibetans to plunder the wealth of the mountain Gods and the resources beneath the Earth. But under Chinese occupation, these resources are depleting at an alarming rate and the after-effects are being felt already. Dhompa articulates this in her book:

In Chumaleb, Dorje tells me, long stretches of land were mined for gold. Huge hills were blasted and plundered [...]. The land has never been the same. There is no water – this in a region where the Yellow River begins – and people in the town of Chumaleb have to buy water by the bucket. The grass does

not grow well anymore and the herds have shrunk. (Dhompa 170)

The chapter titled ‘faith’ in Dhompa’s memoir, is a presentation of Tibetan Buddhist approach towards nature and life which functions on the levels of culture and society. The simplistic and unambitious living of the Tibetan people had helped to maintain the ecological balance of the region before it became an occupied country. Explaining this Dhompa mentions:

Such a culture of beliefs does not build empires or evolve industrial nations. It does not even allow for the taking back of our country –not in the immediate future – but it has protected the mountains, the rivers and the animals thus far. It comforts the elders and as long as they are alive, they apply it to avert injury or death to others. They protest against all forms of mining on their land, fish leap in rivers without fear of being caught, flies are plucked to safety from tea cups, rats roam freely, lizards multiply without shame and stray dogs could form a colony of their own. (Dhompa 169)

Non-violence too is an important feature of Buddhism however, having scarce rainfall and short summers makes it difficult for the Tibetans to survive as strict vegetarians. They depend on the Yak meat and skin for the essentials to endure the long severe winters but the practice of conservation as well as their appreciation of all forms of life, restricts the killing to a minimal and only to a specific time of the year which Dhompa calls the *month of sin*. But even this necessary killing cannot be performed without a sense of guilt which is perfectly illustrated in these lines:

During the month of sin the sun does not come out. It grieves for all the animals being killed. (Dhompa 272)

This is also observed in the case of excessive picking of the ‘fungus caterpillar’ which fetches an impressive income to the nomads, but not without the fear of endangering this creature. Their spiritual bent of mind compels them to link the disproportionate picking of fungus to the weather changes such as hailstorms as they believe “killing so many of them saddens the deities” (126).

Throughout her book, Dhompa emphasises on the attachment the Tibetans have with the physical landscape of Tibet and the nomadic living to be at the heart of environmental consciousness. However, modernization is

the new reality of Tibet and it cannot be overlooked. In these sixty years after Tibet's incorporation into the PRC, it is rapidly developing modern infrastructure which along with the undue exploitation of its resources has resulted in the emergence of ecological hazard in the region. *A Home in Tibet* raises important questions on the need of modernization contrasting it with the sufficiency within nature and it rather puts one in a difficult position of making a choice between the two. While dwelling in the ecstasy of nature, Dhompa cannot disregard the fact that the landscape of Tibet is bound to change in the coming years. She laments:

[...] I feel a pang of loss when I think that there will come a time when the need for modern conveniences will transform the nomad way of life and these pristine mountains and rivers. (Dhompa 263)

But this realization is contradicted again by her own confession of the dilemma:

I take morning walks bearing a heart already in love with the land. I smell Juniper even though Juniper is growing on the other side of the hill. The flowers are abundant and when the wind blows and the hills look like dancing magicians in resplendent robes. [...] We are fools to leave such beauty and build cities of glass and stone. I think this but know I will return to such cities. (Dhompa 88)

### III. CONCLUSION

The relationship between man and nature is complex. This complexity is further amplified by the arising need for development and modernization which as many argue, is inevitable. However, what further problematizes the Tibetan case is that China blames the nomads for the environmental issues such as depletion of grasslands arguing that it is the unpragmatic system of land use for centuries that has caused these concerns. Dhompa counters this allegation and remarks:

But the very fact that the nomads have survived for as long as 2000 years and even prospered at times on a harsh and unpredictable land indicates a tremendous sophistication in their traditional knowledge and management of land and herd. (Dhompa 97)

She also raises important questions on the projected picture of development by the Chinese authorities, which has greatly overlooked the criticality of maintaining

ecological balance in the region thereby threatening the global ecosystem, as she points out:

How ironic it is the Chinese government should blame the nomads for the degradation of the Tibetan grasslands when they bring a train across miles of grassland all the way from Xining to Lhasa. (Dhompa 291)

Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* raises these questions about the necessity of modernization by discreetly drawing a comparison between the pre-colonized Tibet and the Tibet of contemporary times. It also depicts the simplistic life of the Tibetans who have lived in harmony with nature sharing an unbreakable bond since centuries. She emphasises on the affinity that Tibetans have shared with nature and her book is a perfect ecocritical work which compels the readers to ponder if that simplistic living is possible in the present times.

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