

“Let me grow in your garden”: Home and Exile in Tenzin Tsundue’s Poems in *Kora*

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Abstract

Literature in the hands of a writer and an activist becomes not only an expression of his emotions but also a site to register his/ her socio-political concerns. So is the case with Tenzin Tsundue who has emerged as the voice of the exiled Tibetans across the world. Born in India when his parents fled from Tibet during 1959, Tsundue’s growing up years in various cities of India brought him face to face the harsh realities of the Tibetan refugees and their longingness to return to their home land someday. Living the life of an exile with an idea of home finds a fine manifestation in the works of Tsundue. The intention of this paper is to explore the concerns expressed in Tsundue’s poems in the book *Kora* which sketches the very thought of having a home to which the Tibetans cannot return and the anxiety of carrying the label of a ‘refugee’.

Key Words: Activist, Writer, Tibet, Exile, Refugee, Home.

Tenzin Tsundue is a man rolled into many roles. A writer, poet and an activist, he has emerged as the voice of the exiled Tibetans across the world. Tsundue represents the ideas of the new generation of Tibetan exile community that shuns passivity and believes in drawing the attention of the world towards the reality of his land and its people through activism. Pankaj Mishra in his article describes the struggles of people like Thupten Ngodup and Tsundue and defines them as “Restless Children of Dalai Lama”. In this article, Mishra retells the martyrdom of Ngodup who set himself ablaze in the 1998 protests during the hunger strike in Delhi against the inaction of the UN over the issue of Tibet. The article then sketches Mishra’s meeting with Tsundue and his pro - Tibetan initiatives. Mishra talks about the new generation of Tibetan activists and the points of departure from the Dalai Lama regarding their ideas about independent Tibet. Mishra notes that Tsundue has emerged as the “most articulate representative” of the new generation of activists and goes on to describe him as “the new and most visible face, after the Dalai Lama, of the Tibetan exile community”.

Tibet has a long history of violent conflicts with China. The People’s Republic of China occupied Tibet in 1950. The spiritual and the political leader of Tibetans, Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 to Dharamsala in the foothills of the Himalayas. Hundreds of Tibetans also fled to India. A report by Tibet Justice Centre published in 2011 roughly identifies four different groups of Tibetans entering India between 1959 and 1979, 1980 to 1993, 1994 to 1999 and 2000 and present. The same report mentions that by 1959, approximately 30, 000 Tibetans had arrived in India who were given shelter in temporary camps.

Tenzin Tsundue's parents too left their country in 1959 and worked as road construction labourers in the Himalayas similar to other Tibetans who had left their countries in search of safe land. Tsundue studied at various places in India including Dharmasala, Chennai and Mumbai. Tsundue's growing up years in various cities of India brought him face to face with the harsh realities of the Tibetan refugees and their longingness to return to their homelands someday. As a student, he was actively involved in Tibetan Independence Movement that strongly demanded freedom of Tibet from China. He caught worldwide attention for his daring protests against China during the visit of the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to Mumbai in 2002 and Wen Jiabo to Bangalore in 2005. His fight for the freedom of his land is symbolised in the red band that he wears around his head as a mark of protest against Chinese aggression.

The main intention of this paper, however, is not to sketch the political activism and ideology of Tenzin Tsundue. Rather, the focus is on his writings that undoubtedly stems from his passion for his land. Tsundue's works like *Crossing the Border*, *Kora* and *Semshook* have made him an established writer and won him the Outlook - Picador Award for non-fiction. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concerns expressed in Tsundue's second book *Kora* which is basically a collection of some of his stories and poems. The text captures the imagination of the readers at once with its deceptive simplicity and profundity. The stories and the poems talk about the apprehensions of the Tibetans who are displaced from their homelands and are forced to seek refuge elsewhere. The present paper makes an attempt to revisit the poems in *Kora* which poignantly sketches the very thought of having a home to which the Tibetans cannot return and the anxiety of carrying the label of a 'refugee'. The ideas culminate to provide substantial theme for literature as Homi Bhabha's observes in *The Location of Culture*,

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature.

Living the life of an exile with an idea of home finds fine expression in the poems collected in *Kora*. For a refugee or an exile, 'Home' is not only a physical space that exists somewhere but it also becomes a space that instils collective memories and belongingness. The poem *Horizon* evokes this very notion of home. The poem begins with a note of leaving the home land and ends with the hope that one day "you may need to come home again". The poem *Losar Greeting* is addressed to his sister wherein the poet tells his sister to say an "extra prayer" this Losar that they would celebrate the next Losar back in Lhasa. The poet tries to prepare his sister both mentally and physically that they will soon be going back to their home land. He asks her to learn "extra lesson" in her school so that she can teach the children in Tibet when they go back. He wants her to grow well in the "borrowed garden", the phrase he uses to describe the land of exile. *A Personal Reconnaissance* traces the feeling of seeing his homeland from Ladakh, taking his first step on Tibet land, and the feeling associated with touching the soil for the first time. He states that he could hardly make any difference between his home land and the northern plains of India as there exists no differences between the two territories. The poem, *A Proposal* is an appeal to the world to

take him and the Tibetan refugees like him “in”. He earnestly places a proposal “let me grow in your garden”. He announces that he is resting in the doorstep and waiting to be let in. This corresponds to the condition of the Tibetan refugees and dislocation which Amitav Ghosh calls as a “terrible displacement”. As displaced masses, they are uprooted, forced to undertake the arduous journey from their lands and come down into the slums of the cities like Delhi, Mumbai etc.

The most conspicuous poem in this collection is *My Tibetanness* that sketches the manner in which the world treats the Tibetan refugees. They have been in exile for thirty-nine years and yet no nation “supports” them. They are treated as “people of lost country” and are “the world’s sympathy stock”. Tsundue draws our attention towards how Tibet is stereotyped as the land of “serene monks and bubbly traditionalists”. He talks about his unsettling identity as “Indian - Tibetan” indicating that he is a foreigner born in India. But he asserts that he is “more of an Indian except for his chinky Tibetan face”. He sadly admits that people who want to know his identity ask him whether he is a Nepali, Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Naga, Manipuri. But never ever he has come across anyone asking him the question whether he is a Tibetan? The lines explicitly suggest that Tibet does not exist for the world at all. The concluding lines enhance the effect of the poem wherein he asserts that he is a Tibetan who is not from Tibet and who had never been to Tibet and yet he dreams of dying there in Tibet.

Tsundue’s birth and growing up years as a refugee in India gets reflected in *Refugee*. Here, he echoes his teacher’s statement that the letter ‘R’ is “embossed” on his forehead. The label of ‘refugee’ is so deeply imprinted that it resists all attempts to erase it. He also tells that he is “born refugee” who knows three tongues. Amidst Hindi and English, Tibetan remains his mother tongue and the letter ‘R’ could also be read as ‘RANGZEN’ that means freedom. His one more poem, *The Tibetan in Mumbai* offers a glimpse of the kind of life that the Tibetans lead in Mumbai. The very first line announces that a Tibetan in Mumbai is not at all a “foreigner”. He is a cook in some Chinese hotel and people presume that he must be someone who has run away from Beijing. The sight of Tibetan selling sweaters in the hot summer is common in the Parel Bridge area and people assume that he must be some retired Bahadur. Tibetans could be seen selling sweaters in all seasons on the streets in Indian cities. A Tibetan in Mumbai can speak “Bambaya Hindi”, likes to flip the pages of Mid - day and loves to listen to FM. But he cannot expect listening to Tibetan song. Like any ordinary worker, a Tibetan in Mumbai catches a bus in the signal, walks through dark gullies and rests in his Kholi. A Tibetan in Mumbai too has emotions like anyone. He becomes angry when people make him a laughing stock. However, with the passage of time, the Tibetan in Mumbai is now “tired”. He is tired of protest marches, sitting in the dust on the roadside and selling sweaters since past forty years. He is tired of eating dal and grazing cows in Karnataka. He is tired of living in Tibetan colonies. He is “tired of fighting for the country” that he has never seen and never visited. These lines indicate that though Tibetans have been living in Mumbai since many years, they have no identity.

Betrayal is a poem that swiftly describes the conflict of a fighter who is also a Buddhist. The poet states that he is torn between admiration towards his father who died defending the home and the central philosophy of Buddhism that underlines peace and non - violence. Though he wants to fight like his father for his country, he is made to forgive his enemy which in turn amounts to betraying his father who sacrificed his life for a cause. *I Am a Terrorist* presents an angry tone where the poet ironically hints at the labels the world uses

to describe fighters and activists like him as terrorists. The world considers them as “humiliation” and a “shame” and therefore he demands that he should be shot down. *When It Rains in Dharamsala* is one more poem that describes his life under the tin roof of a rented room in Dharamsala and its plight during the monsoons. With the rains pouring heavily, his room becomes an “island nation” with his notes on freedom and his prison days surging to the surface like a “sudden recovery of a forgotten memory”. The rains in Dharamsala bring back the memory of his home land. The rains become a way to vent his emotion that he cannot live and cry like his room which is already wet. He announces that he has cried enough already in the prisons and in the “moments of despair” and now it is time for action. He knows for sure that there must be “some way out”. The poem does not offer any solutions on how to come out of such a situation to which the Tibetan refugees are put in. But ends on a hope and determination that there must be some way out to revive the forgotten memory of his land and get back to Tibet. In *Pedro’s Flute*, he makes a very sensitive observation that the whistling sound produced by the flute “turns into small needle arrows” that reaches the ears of even the owls that have hairs in their ears and sting even their hearts. The implicit idea becomes clear that the sad song that is being played in the flute does not reach the ears of the people and sting their hearts. *Exile House* once again evokes the idea of home. He states that his exiled home has become his home now with its roots grown and the fences turning into little forests. His exiled home was meant to be a temporary shelter. But they have been living in this temporary shelter for many years that it seems to have become his home now to such an extent that he cannot even tell his children where they actually came from. The poem hints at the feeling of finding a home somewhere else away from the home.

An interesting aspect emerges in these poems. The poems not only construe the idea of home in the eyes of an exile or a refugee and evokes the feeling of return. But they also sketch the courage, resilience and survival spirit of the Tibetan communities in “unlikely place” as noted by Ghosh, “It was an unlikely place, but Tibetans seem to have a talent for surviving on unlikely terrain”. Ghosh, in his essay ‘Tibetan Dinner’ states that ever since Chinese invasion, many refugee colonies of Tibetans have “sprung” up in India. He observes that they sell woollen goods in “unexpected places” like Trivendrum where people hardly wear woollen clothes due to high temperature. He talks about the Tibetan stall that he saw near Jama masjid in Delhi during a bus journey. He tells that the two Tibetan women sat there knitting and bargaining with their customers in broken Hindi. The crowd that had gathered around them seemed to him like having gathered to pay them a “tribute to their courage and resilience”. In the same essay, Ghosh talks about holding celebrity dinner parties for the cause of Tibet as it often happens in the cities like New York and sums up his point stating, “It cannot be easy to celebrate the commodification of one’s own suffering”. He hints at the mindset of the Tibetans who do not want Tibet and their suffering to be commodified or exoticised. Rather, they would prefer leading a life of courage and resilience both at home and away from home.

Kora, thus offers an insider’s observations of Tibetan communities in India through an activist and writer’s perspectives. Literary text becomes a terrain for Tenzin Tsundue to register his protest against the oppression, appeal to be taken in and longingness to go ‘home’ soon.

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