

Tibetan Exile Literature: A Study of Tenzin Tsundue's *Kora: Stories and Poems*

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Abstract: Exile literature is a genre of literature written by exiles i.e. individuals or communities who have been forced to leave their homeland as a result of political upheaval, war, persecution or colonisation. Their literature foregrounds social, cultural and linguistic erasure and sometimes acquires a political dimension, as they use their writings as a weapon to reclaim the memories of homeland.

Key words: Exile, migrant, Kora, refugee, homeland, displacement

Introduction

The paper examines the representation of Tibetan exile in *Kora: Stories and Poems* by Tenzin Tsundue. Tenzin Tsundue's *Kora: Stories and Poems* is a collection of poems, essays, a short story and an interview titled "I am Born a Refugee". Tsundue is an artist and an activist who represents the Tibetan exile experience poignantly through this narrative.

It is important to discuss migrant literature also when we talk of exile literature as both of them share certain common features. Although the exile literature and migrant literature may appear similar in theme, they are strikingly different in the individual experiences. The common themes in both exile and migrant literature are displacement and cultural negotiation. But the condition of an exile arises out of involuntary, unexpected and external situations while migration is a voluntary choice to move out of the homeland for personal reasons.

The exilic condition happens out of forced displacement and is never a matter of choice. The exile literature attempts to preserve cultural heritage, identity and language by resisting the forces that caused the exile. Hence, frustration, anger and defiance become the characteristic tone of exile literature. The exiles struggle emotionally to assimilate into a new culture because they are always haunted by the memories of their homeland. Even though the exiles are filled with intense longing for their homeland, the exiles can never return to their homeland.

On the other hand, migrants often move in search of better living conditions or opportunities. Migrant literature explores the themes of hybridity, cultural adaptation and complexities of belonging to multiple cultures. The migrants can return to their homeland periodically or permanently. Migrant writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri or Chimamanda Adichie wrote on the negotiation between worlds rather than about writing about a lost homeland.

Tenzin Tsundue and Tibetan Exile:

Tsundue was born in India (1975) to Tibetan parents but he has never seen Tibet as Tibet does not exist as an independent country after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949. Tsundue is unambiguously a Tibetan and cannot be considered either as a Tibetan-Indian or Indian-Tibetan. Tsundue writes in "My Kind of Exile" that he is "more of an Indian" now except for his chinky Tibetan face (*Kora* 26). He has a Registration Certificate that states that he is a foreigner residing in India and is a Tibetan citizen. He even made an unsuccessful attempt to enter the forbidden Tibet and was imprisoned for the same. The red bandana that he always wears on his head is a sign of visible protest against the invaders. He has pledged to remove the bandana only when Tibet is free.

Thousands of Tibetans were forced to flee Tibet following the Chinese occupation and Dalai Lama's flight to India. Many of them came to India and settled in different parts of India. Tsundue is often considered as the spokesperson of the Tibetan exiles. He writes profusely about Tibet, the place of his ancestors, a place he has never seen and a place that does not any more geographically exist after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. For an exile like Tsundue, writing is not a luxury but a necessity, an outcry to the world that has deprived the Tibetans of their homeland. His poetic surge and activism go hand in hand because, it is through his writings that he expresses the angst of an exile and also the commitment to bring together the Tibetans spread across the world. But Tsundue dislikes to say that the Tibetans are "scattered" across the world and in his essay "Protest as Celebration of Difference" he puts across the scattered condition of Tibetan exiles more positively as "spread all over the world" (*Kora* 47).

Tsundue's *Kora: Stories and Poems* can be considered as the best expression of Tibetan exile. Tsundue's *Kora* is a collection of poems and prose pieces that captures the Tibetan exile experience with extraordinary clarity. *Kora* in Tibetan language refers to a "full circle". It is also a Tibetan Buddhist practice of ritual circumambulation around a sacred object. Tsundue uses the title both literally and metaphorically to indicate a ritualised recollection of memory. The ancient cliched and romanticised notion of Tibet as Shangri-La, where Lamas walk two inches off the ground is demystified to a great extent in the narrative (*Kora* 33).

The longing to return to the homeland and to live in dignity can be intensely felt in The Old Man's advice to the young activist Tashi: "Live one day, but with dignity and freedom" (*Kora* 40). Young or old, the Tibetan exiles are obsessed with the dream of

returning to their homeland. But this dream is something that is getting more and more delayed. The poem “Losar Greeting” is literally a wish or a prayer of the poet for whom the home is “real” but is “very far from it” (Kora 28). The poet shows his yearning to be in his homeland Lhasa at least for the next Losar: “This Losar/when you attend your Morning Mass/Say an extra prayer/That next Losar/We can celebrate back in Lhasa” (Kora 10). In the poem “A Personal Reconnaissance”, the poet writes: “From Ladakh/Tibet is just a gaze away/.../For the first time,/I saw my country/.../I sniffed the soil,/scratched the ground,/listened to the dry wind/and the wild old cranes,/I didn’t see the border”(Kora 11). “My Tibetanness” reiterates the sad plight of the refugees: “We are refugees here/People of a lost country/Citizen to no nation/.../At every checkpoint and office/I am an “Indian Tibetan”/.../But I am not from Tibet./Never been there./ Yet I dream/Of dying there (Kora 13). The poem “Refugee” tells further how the refugees are branded at birth: “When I was born/My mother said/You are a refugee/.../On your forehead/between your eyebrows/there is an R embossed/my teacher said/.../I am born a refugee/.../ The R on my forehead/ between my English and Hindi/the Tibetan tongue reads:/RANGZEN/Freedom means Rangzen (Kora 14). Not only was the poet born with an invisible R on his forehead, but he also doesn’t have any birthday to celebrate. The painful response he gets from his mother when asked about his date of birth is recorded in “My Kind of Exile”: “Who had time to record a child’s birth when everyone was tired and hungry?” (Kora 29). “The Tibetan in Mumbai” explores the linguistic insult poured on the poet and exasperation at the infinite waiting to get into the homeland: “The Tibetan in Mumbai /abuses in Bambaya Hindi,/with a slight Tibetan accent/ and during vocabulary emergencies/ he naturally runs into Tibetan./That’s when Parsis laugh./.../ He gets angry/when they laugh at him/’ching-chong ping-pong./’.../ I am tired for the country/ I have never seen./”(Kora 16-17). “When it Rains in Dharamsala” describes the acute poverty experienced by the poet and the helplessness of sitting on his “island -nation bed/ and watch my country in flood” (Kora 22). Even the raindrops are hostile to the poet but he decides: “I cannot cry like my room” (Kora 23). The “Exile House” clearly defines the unsettled mindset of the refugees. They cultivate fast-yielding trees such as papayas in their land of exile, hoping to leave the place any moment when Tibet gets independence: “We grew papayas/In front of our house/Chillies in our garden/And changmas for our fences”(Kora 25). He yearns to be back in his homeland where his Popo-la and Momo-la had their farm and lots of yaks. “My Kind of Exile” mentions that the “forty-year-old tiled roof drips” and they start “planting vessels and buckets, spoons and glasses, collecting the bounty of the rain gods.” His father never tries to revamp their roof because Pa -la thinks that they will soon return to Tibet. Tibet however remains a never-never land with the Tibetan exiles but they always dream of this fairyland: “Soon we will go back to Tibet/ Then we have our own home”(Kora 29).

Exile is not just a physical separation from the homeland; it is a complex psychological and emotional dislocation from the home country inflicting the mind with a wound that can never be healed. It is very sad to be nowhere in this world and to carry the homeland only in words and dreams. The interviewer Ajit Baral describes Tsundue as a “Homeless Poet: Born in Manali, India and educated first at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh and later in Madras, Ladakh and Mumbai” (Kora, 48). “Refugee” is perhaps the most commonly used term in Tsundue’s writings and interviews. The interview with Ajit Baral highlights the poet’s desperate yearning to be back in Tibet. The poet mentions that “Every year [he has] to renew his documents on which [he] is described as ‘refugee from Tibet’” (Kora, 48). The poet and many other refugees are not even refugees by law in India. Only Dalai Lama and Karmapa are given official asylum in India. The sense of exile is thus ingrained in the poet’s personality and he carries it like a tortoise carries its shell. Without a homeland to go, Tsundue describes himself as living in “limbo” as a political refugee.

Tsundue’s writings are basically about not likely to be fulfilled desires and “dreams” about his homeland. Because, the possibility of getting back to Tibet remains a distant reality that is not likely to happen. In the autobiographical prose piece “My Kind of Exile” (Kora 26-31), Tsundue mentions some poignant instances of extreme despair felt by the Tibetan refugee. In this piece, Tsundue tells how, even as a child he realised that he did not belong to the India and that he cannot own anything in India. Tsundue, further depicts his homelessness and linguistic exile when he says: “I like to speak in Tibetan, but prefer to write in English, I like to sing in Hindi but my tune and accent are all wrong” (Kora 26). Most of his poetry and prose writings express the helplessness of an exile: “Ask me where I’m from and I won’t have an answer. I feel I never really belonged anywhere, never really had a home” (Kora 26).

The Tibetan exiles around the world do not really know the customs and practices of the native Tibetans. Tsundue mentions an incident in his book where a group of young Tibetans in New York found themselves in a difficult situation when a Tibetan youth died and nobody in the group knew the Tibetan cremation rites. All they could do was to stare at each other. Tsundue writes: “Suddenly they found themselves too far away from home” (Kora 27). He is afraid that most of their customs would die with the death of the older generation. Many Tibetans did odd jobs that earned them some money even when it meant doing things that went against their religious and cultural beliefs. He quotes an incident where an old Tibetan refugee unwittingly worked in a slaughter house where at the press of a button he killed a chicken (Kora 28). The traditional Tibetan Buddhists considered killing animals a sin. He immediately left the job when he realised what he was doing. Another painful incident which Tsundue narrates is the inaugural ceremony of Sydney Olympics 2000. He could not control his tears when he saw each team parading under the banner of its respective national flag. He had to convince his friends that tears were rolling out of his eyes only because he felt happy for the participants: “They belonged and had a space of their own, not only on the world map but also in the Olympic Games. Their countrymen could march proudly, confident of their nationality, in their national dress and with their national flag flying high. I was so happy for them” (Kora 28).

Conclusion

Thus the whole of *Kora* depicts desperate homelessness, fractured identities, nostalgia and an intense longing to be back in the homeland the writer has not even seen once. The writer becomes the activist and the activist becomes the writer. In his response to the interviewer Ajit Baral’s question as to whether the activist overshadows the writer in him, Tsundue responds: “When I am writing, I am a poet. But when I publish them I am an activist”(Kora 53). Though the never-ending wait and struggle to reach the home land remain a mirage, the Tibetan refugees stubbornly continue to pursue that dream.

Works Consulted:

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