

PERSPECTIVES ON ASIA

Identity, memory, and homeland: in conversation with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, a Tibetan author and poet in exile

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Abstract

The annexation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China in the 1950s led to an exodus of nearly 80,000 Tibetans along with the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Since then, thousands of Tibetans have taken refuge in the neighboring countries. Many live as refugees in different parts of the world today. Although the Tibetan refugee community has emerged as a successful model for other displaced communities, the individual struggles of these refugees in foreign lands cannot be underestimated. Dhompa's book *A Home in Tibet* shines a light on this other side of their exilic existence by raising questions about identity, home, country, and memory. It outlines the hardships, confusion, and contestations that Tibetans face on a daily basis. After a short introduction to provide context, this article reports a conversation with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, which grippingly addresses these issues.

Keywords: Exile; homeland; identity; memory; Tibet

Introduction

India has been the “home away from home” for Tibetan exiles for the past six decades. The Tibetans expected the political circumstances to be soon in their favor and were hopeful of a swift return, and therefore did not assimilate (Basu 2012). However, with the passage of time, the prospect of return to the homeland is transforming as the Tibetans now turn their gaze toward the West and other parts of the world (Batarseh 2016; Gupta 2019), creating more and more hybridized and hyphenated identities as time passes (Ramanathan and Singh 2021). Yet they carry their “Tibetanness” in their hearts (John 2016). Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is the first Tibetan female poet born in exile to be published in English. Born on March 6, 1969 in India, Dhompa grew up in Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal. Her mother, Tsering Choden Dhompa, daughter of a Tibetan chieftain from Eastern Tibet, had escaped to India in 1959 along with thousands of Tibetans who had followed their spiritual leader, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, into exile (Bhoil 2013).

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa received her early education in Mussoorie, a beautiful hill station in north India. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Arts from Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi and pursued a Master's Degree in Arts from the University of Massachusetts. She did MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. She holds a doctorate in Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Dhompa is a prolific writer and the most widely distributed Tibetan-American poet. She is an acclaimed poet and author with three collections of poetry, two poetry chapbooks, and a full-length book of autobiographical nature. Her first book of poems, *Rules of the House*, published by Apogee Press in 2002, was a finalist for the Asian American Literary Awards in 2003. It was followed by two more collections of poetry, *In the Absent Everyday*

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(2005) and *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake* (2011), both by Apogee Press, Berkley. Dhompa attracted the attention of critics and literature lovers by writing a memoir, a touching narrative of a daughter’s visit to her mother’s homeland who had long awaited her return to Tibet one day, a dream that was left unfulfilled by her tragic death in exile. Her book titled *A Home in Tibet* was published by Penguin Books India in 2013. Later, it was published by Shambhala Publications (USA) in 2016 as *Coming Home to Tibet: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Belonging*. Apart from these well-noted books, Dhompa has written several articles and scholarly papers. Dhompa is fluent in Tibetan, Hindi, and Nepali; however, she chooses to write in the English language. She has received grants from the San Francisco Arts Commission and Galen Rowell Fund. She has also been a writing fellow at the MacDowell Colony and Hedgebrook.

The emerging Contemporary Tibetan writings in English provide an opportunity for the academic community to redefine and reinterpret the meanings and implications of deterritorialization and migration as they bring to light the experiences of the Tibetans in exile (Vasantkumar 2016) and Dhompa’s literary works contribute significantly to these issues. It is on account of the political turmoil and the connections between religion and self-perception, along with the over-emphasis on mystic aspects of Tibet, that contemporary discourses frequently problematize identity and representation (Basu 2012). On numerous occasions, these writings raise concerns about how Tibetans understand the secular as well as the sacred and build their identities around them, particularly at a time when Indian as well as Western influences on Tibetan culture are becoming unavoidable due to worldwide exchanges of information and culture (Siganporia 2015). Dhompa’s *A Home in Tibet* engages with these quandaries. Cultural survival, as an idea, has become an essential political instrument for indigenous people and ethnic minorities, such as the Tibetans, who are struggling to preserve their identities and achieve autonomy or self-determination (Kolås and Thowsen 2005), and language has a key role to play in the understanding of culture. Learning a foreign language while living abroad is more difficult than it first appears (Menard-Warwick *et al.* 2019) and although exile has “displaced the Tibetan language to some extent,” modern languages and forms of expression have also given Tibetan youth more power to negotiate their identity, culture, and aspirations on foreign soil (Bhoil 2011). While Tibetan women were not the prime focus of discussion in Tibetan studies in general or in literature specifically (Makley 1997), the role of women in the “re-writing of Tibetan history” has been studied recently through an examination of some contemporary publications by exiled Tibetan women (Ofner 2019). Many Tibetans are participating in literary endeavors (in English), which considerably enhances the representation of Tibetan refugees in the international arena (Bhoil 2013, 2014; Lahiri 2017; Wangchuk 2018). The development of digital technology has also had an impact on how the diaspora community negotiates, explores, and validates its identity and political viewpoints, “going beyond passive adoption of conventional beliefs anchored in the Tibetan community of the country and in exile” (Brinkerhoff 2011). Additionally, new stories are emerging every day that highlight the transitional stage of the Tibetan population in exile (Siganporia 2016) and Dhompa’s writings are good examples of this. While the world looks at the Tibetans in exile as an example and a model of a successful refugee community (Michael 1985), the memoir *A Home in Tibet* flips the focus by raising compelling questions of identity, home, homeland, return, and memory by presenting the struggles, dilemmas, and contestations that Tibetans experience every day in exile.

In 2013, researcher Shelly Bhoil published her interview with Dhompa in her scholarly article “Of exile and writing: An interview with the Tibetan poet Tsering Wangmo Dhompa,” elucidating the postcoloniality of Dhompa’s writings as they engage with imperialism, displacement, and identity that concerned Tibetan refugees. The interview, conducted through email exchanges between Bhoil and Dhompa in 2010, was based on Dhompa’s first collection titled *Rules of the House* (2002). The questions posed in the interview were in the context of Dhompa’s experience of exile and her ideas about memory, identity, writing, and language; almost similar questions re-posed to Dhompa in my interview ten years later. However, while Bhoil’s interview reveals how Dhompa’s routine negotiations as a refugee in a foreign land shaped her understanding of the world around her and her

perception of self, the present interview reveals Dhompa's contemplations over her identity as a Tibetan, as a Buddhist, as a woman, and as a refugee in her homeland. Over the past ten years, Dhompa has published several other collections but she gained significant acclaim with the publication of her memoir *A Home in Tibet* in 2013, her debut in prose writing. Although similar postcolonial concerns again are observed in the memoir, the work is special because it discusses her return to the homeland. While most of her works dealt with the experiences in the host lands, this work is based on her new and temporary experience in Tibet. This work is significant as it discusses how her experience as a refugee in different countries consciously and unconsciously influences her experiences in the homeland, and she constantly draws comparisons between them. The role of memory becomes even more complex as Dhompa tries to associate everything in the homeland not only with her own memories of the places she grew up in but also making associations with the memories of Tibet transferred to her by her mother in exile. The postcolonial questions remain imperative in my interview as well however, to explore the complexity of the relationship of a refugee with her lost homeland. Hence, this interview with Dhompa in 2020, in reference to the book *A Home in Tibet*, is significant in tracing her exile experience in a new light. I interviewed Dhompa online on Skype on March 17, 2020 as a part of my Ph.D. research on Contemporary Tibetan Literature.

A home in Tibet

Home, to me, was any place by my mother's side. Since my mother's death the idea of home has assumed many forms. [...] I feel I am in many places and not quite in the right place. Home is a place that is always eminent but never present. Or maybe it is the very opposite, maybe I am at ease wherever I am and the feeling of not belonging to any one place is a condition of being at home (Dhompa 2013).

Contemporary Tibetan literature is noteworthy in its attempt to demystify Tibet by diverting from the dominant literary motifs of the past such as spirituality, religion, and philosophy in Tibetan studies, and discussing more serious and pressing issues of struggle and survival caused by displacement. Dhompa's book does the same. In this travelogue, the postcolonial issues of dislocation, identity crisis, memory, and hybridization take center stage. The connotations of home, alienation, assimilation, and dilemma manifest in different ways in the memoir. The question of "home" is crucial to any discussion on exile. In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, Rushdie comments "my past is home, even though it's a lost home in a lost city during a lost time, and my current is foreign" (Rushdie 1991). *A Home in Tibet* is momentous in attempting to portray what "home" is to a person who is displaced. It is an idea that has both literal and metaphorical meanings, but it can primarily be thought of as "a place where one belongs." Dhompa's experience as a refugee, a condition that essentially signifies dislocation from home, serves as a vital inspiration for her literary works. She remarks that once someone is exiled, they will always be "exiles" despite receiving citizenship from any country because there will be "no comfort of known languages and customs." Both the issue of belonging and the identity crisis will always exist. She writes:

When I am with my mother's people, I inspect myself as an outsider and as an insider. Coming to Tibet is a form of exercising my privilege as a transnational body. I have my passport in my own possession and can travel at will as long as I have the means. I have also been stateless and without citizenship for half of my life [...] (Dhompa 2013).

Dhompa creatively discusses memory, nostalgia, inheritance, and homecoming in *A Home in Tibet*, and contextualizes the questions of belonging, identity crisis, and memory by bringing out the multiple meanings of "home." It is through the transferred memories of the elders that the younger Tibetans in exile have inherited their homeland, though a distant one, and to some extent imaginary as well. Without having seen this homeland, habitual storytelling in exile has helped second- and

third-generation of Tibetans to be connected to Tibet to a similar degree, though differently, to the way their parents were. This can be observed in Dhompa's remark "Those of us born in exile inherit Tibet by inhabiting the memories of our elders" (Dhompa 2013). Home, a place of family, and origins (Brah 1996), is a place one is emotionally attached to, marked by a feeling that one relates with a specific place. Homeland, on the other hand, refers to a region where one imagines to have his/her origin, a place where the ancestors have always dwelled. Identity, belonging, memory, comfort, and familiarity are key components of both homes as well as homeland, which explains why they are sometimes used in interchange. This is illustrated well in the following lines:

This land has been home to the family of Dhompas for over two hundred years. It was the imaginary home I grew up in through my mother's stories and her insistence that it be remembered as home (Dhompa 2013).

Maintaining a "collective recollection, vision, or myth" of the ancestral home is crucial in displaced communities, inclusive of not just the geographical area but also its history and achievements. The community considers this homeland as their "true" home and aspires to return there someday (Safran 1991). In a situation where the possibility of actual return no longer exists, writing about the homeland left behind serves as a way to reclaim the past through an imagined journey (Píchová 2002). On several occasions, motifs of return can be observed in Contemporary Tibetan literature, for instance in Tenzin Tsundue's collection *Kora*, and writing about a lost homeland can be understood as an act of reclaiming the past. Dhompa's journey back home to her ancestral land can be understood as an act of reclaiming what was lost, ultimately leading to a novel self-realization. She claims that she is finally able to embrace her "transnational nomadic existence" as well as her identity as a Tibetan born in exile, living in foreign land yet belonging to the land of Tibet, an imaginary homeland, as a result of her internal journey. She writes:

Now I feel I should return home even though I am not certain anymore what I mean by it. [...] And having arrived, a longing arises to return because we are nobody if we can not hold the comfort of a country to which we can return. The imagined country never leaves us. It exists and is created to give us authority, identity and a cause. Tibetans born in exile learn a language of desire, to be a part of what is twice removed from us. We can not claim the experience of parturition from home because we have never inhabited the home we seek to return to (Dhompa 2013).

The condition of exile, also understood as a condition of denial of identity and respect (which could happen outside of the homeland or in it), is inextricably linked to a sense of loss and pain (Said 2000). Apart from factors such as space and belonging that are crucial to identity formation in the host land, a nationality that is often associated with a person's place of birth also influences this process. Often these "undocumented" foreign nationals who lack a "tellable history" become lost individuals. These individuals are victims of lost identity more so than they are of losing their house, country, or territory. A rupture or fracture consequently follows exile. The "nourishment of custom, family, and geography" is taken away in such a situation and this loss, especially the loss of identity, causes alienation and estrangement. Between "us," the identification of the natives of the host country, and the "outsiders" or "others" to which the exiles belong, there is a space of not-belonging. Exile is primarily about disconnecting from one's "original" condition of being. Disconnection from one's past, family, and country of origin characterizes it (Said 2000). The Tibetans have made all attempts to remain rooted in their culture and uphold their ethnic identity in exile, reshaping their own definitions of "self" and "return." The past is as significant and crucial as the future and the idea of a nation and nationalism has been continuously redefined in exile. This redefining is brought about by a shift in the perceptions of traditional ideas of the ancestors and creating that fine balance is crucial to the representation of this community in exile. Dhompa comments in this context:

As a displaced community, Tibetans often speak of learning to look to the future without forsaking tradition. And as Tibetans continue their flight from Tibet to India or Nepal and then scatter farther and farther away from the physical land of Tibet, the conversations on identity and culture become more crucial and complex. As the distance increases so does the desperation in keeping Tibet as the eventual home, our aspired home. Yet it is patriotism and identity in new ways that are not guided solely by Buddhist philosophy. Self-assertion- an approach avoided in the past because of the Buddhist aspiration to prevent focus on the self- enters our identity as Tibetans (Dhompa 2013).

When exiled, one finds oneself trapped between nostalgia for the past and the reality of the present, between continuity and memory, which results in the trauma of a torn identity and a fractured self. As a psychological state, “ambivalence” results from the coexistence of opposing tendencies, emotions, or attitudes. It is comparable to a scenario in which a person discovers himself/herself simultaneously in two locations. Ambivalence is a crucial component of the transformation process. It is a state in which both the positive and the negative aspects of the emotive attitude are present at the same time in a manner that makes them inseparable. The displaced person experiences a traumatic dual life marked by doubts, self-examination, and confrontations simultaneously belonging to two different realms (Rajan 1990). The Tibetans too juggle between different identities several times a day, experiencing fragmentation, sometimes living in the past and sometimes in the present. This condition of ambivalence is marked by a constant oscillation between both, making it impossible to settle down, find a home, belong, and forget. They are living their present as well as the past of their parents. They are physically away in a foreign land dissociated from the sustenance a homeland provides in terms of identity and belonging, but at the same time connected to the Tibetan territory through the transferred memories. Dhompa’s collection *In the Absent Everyday* is another fine example where she discourses rupture in her poetry (D’Rozario 2022) and the affinity these exiled young Tibetans experience for their homeland which they have never seen can also be clearly observed in the following lines from her memoir:

I understand what the elders mean when they speak of the old days, for it feels as though we are still somewhere deep in the past. I can see why my mother could not forget the land. It is the land that surrounds us and nothing else: the mountains we climb with great effort, the rivers we can not wade through during the summer months, the long winters that make the road so icy that it neglects its purpose and traps all living beings. It is the land that envelops us like a womb (Dhompa 2013).

As the displaced community struggles to reconcile with the pressures of the new environment with the memories of their traditions, culture, beliefs, and history, “dual consciousness” can be seen in their writings. This duality compels them to constantly negotiate between the realities of the new home and the recollections of the old one and more than often, they choose to dwell in the recollection of the past (Yu 2008). Dhompa (2013) resonates with Yu when she remarks “I was more rooted in her (mother’s) past than in my own life” in her memoir. This rootedness, not in one’s own past but the past of the parent, results in a strange complexity between the present, the past, and the memories of something that one has not even experienced. This situation of memory crisis results in hyphenated identities leading to both alienation and belonging at different times, forcing second- and third-generation Tibetans to experience an “in-betweenness.” The irony is, no matter how problematic the transferred memories are, it has a crucial role to play in the notion of self which compels the exiled children to cling to the painful memories of their parent’s homeland. What further complicates this is that to get rid of these memories is almost impossible. While the dependence on ancestry and homeland is quite necessary to emerge as a distinct community in the new country, dissociating from the past has never been easy for the displaced communities (Bhabha 1994). Due to the continuous narration of the lost homeland, the displaced communities struggle to fully integrate into the new

reality (Rushdie 1991). They experience ambivalence when they are simultaneously connected to and detached from both the past and the present (Said 2000). But the past they identify with is a notable one because they believe time stopped there, which is untrue because the past itself is dynamic and gives way to the present, which is distinct from the supposed past of the displaced people (Hall 1991). Dhompa’s writings present this crisis which arises due to her exilic existence and her refugee experience. *A Home in Tibet* presents how transferred memory shapes the identity and idea of homeland in the second- and third-generation of exiled Tibetans. The following passage illustrates the same:

And there were evenings when sitting with others like her- her friends [...], I came to learn the purpose and the effort of the words and images they adopted to help them identify happiness. They recalled the silhouette of the land in the hushed night late in June or September when a mountain took the form of a hunched rat, in the leather slippers left cold beside the bed, in the smell of a certain grass which they compared to the aroma of fresh homemade Tibetan flat-bread, the surprising dampness of the dew, the suppressed snuffles of sisters and mothers as their homes disappeared from view with each step. They explained the beauty of the calamitous mountains and rivers of Tibet in economical sentences, relying on approximate replacements in exile so their land would turn real for us, the children who came after the upheaval (Dhompa 2013).

Dhompa’s book will remain significant to the discussion of Tibetan exile as it not only presents an opportunity to understand how the Tibetan refugees negotiate their identities and memories on foreign lands to create new meanings of self, but also because it depicts how they assert their right to be concerned about what is happening in their homeland even though they are distanced from it,¹ and that for the displaced people, the negotiations of identity are no less complex in the homeland than it is in the host land. It emphasizes the criticality of how displaced people maintain their “long-distance relationship” with their homeland and their engagements in literary endeavors can be instrumental in this context. By writing about her journey back to her homeland, Dhompa invites the entire Tibetan community in exile to be one with her and share her experience of homecoming, even if it is a temporary one. The following interview with Dhompa reassesses her experiences and offers a new understanding of issues connected with the displacement and refugeedom of the Tibetan community.

A Skype conversation with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

Priyanka D’Rozario: The comprehension of the present and past depends on the meanings created by memories. You have inherited a homeland through the memories passed on to you from your mother. Similarly, the young Tibetans in exile rely on the memories of the elders to know their past as you say in your book *A Home in Tibet*:

“They carry their past in them as though safekeeping it for someone else.”

How do you think memory functions and informs identity formation in exile? How do you relate it to nostalgia?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: The political struggle of Tibet is the larger backdrop against which discussions on memory, exile, and nostalgia take place. It is the political condition of an occupied country that primarily forms the background for such ponderings. Many people comprehend nostalgia with a slightly negative definition. It is somehow tinged with an inferior connotation. For me, memory and nostalgia are not unrelated. Nostalgia is very often seen as a kind of looking back or longing for things that someone has experienced or remembers from a happier or maybe not necessarily happier, but nevertheless of particular emotions linked to certain events or memories. At the same time, it could be things that may not have been experienced directly. Nostalgia is not completely separate from memory. It might be something that is fleeting, that comes in every now and then. It is not a

¹Tibetan poet Buchung Sonam’s poem *Silent River* from the collection *Dandelions of Tibet* (2002) is another example.

permanent state. One's memory or ways of thinking about something can change. So, nostalgia is also something that could change. My views about a particular memory can shift over time from a more sentimental longing to something else. Those of course inform how we think about everything in our life whether it is in exile or not. So, I think it doesn't function any more differently than living a life in general but certainly, in the context of Tibetan exile, there are moments when I think more about the history and my identity and there are times when I don't think about it much. But central to all of this, of course, is how I remember and what I remember which changes over time. My attitude and feelings toward it, whether we call it nostalgia, also change over time.

Priyanka D'Rozario: The question of home is dominant in any discussion on exile and displacement. Here I would like to quote the following line from your book *A Home in Tibet*:

"Without a real home, any place is home-like."

What is your understanding of home? Is there an essential need to situate it within a boundary in the form of territory or is "being at home" primarily a state of mind?

"I can see why my mother could not forget the land. It is the land that surrounds us and nothing else; the mountains we climb with great effort, the rivers we cannot wade through during the summer months, the long winters that make the road so icy that it neglects its purpose and traps all living beings. It is the land that envelops us like a womb. And on this land there are sacred deities of mountains and rivers known by many names [.....]."

What is the relation between this "land" and home?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: The question of home is particularly important to those of us who have never had a chance to say "this is where my parents lived," something that seems so fundamental to so many people. I never had a chance to say "he is my grandfather, he is my uncle, these are my cousins" which are aspects of home, family, and belonging that are also rooted in geography as well as in a general state of mind. Over time, I have had to adapt to the idea of home because of the impossibility of having certain signs of a home that many people take for granted. Also, having been raised by a mother who had lost her entire home, geography as well as people, my understanding of home derived from contingency. My idea of home has changed over time and it has come to mean many things. When my mother was alive, where ever she was, was home. Her presence signified home. Since her death, I have had to figure out what home is. Having something as simple as her photograph with me wherever I go can ground me.

So, probably to some extent, it is what I make of it and what I am able to make of it. At the same time, I have this feeling of home as something imminent.

For me, it is hard to explain the relationship between land and home since I have not lived that experience. But what I know from having been with family members as well as people from my mother's nomadic area, is that the relationship between the land and the people who live on it is interdependent and close. The community of people, the tribe, or clan whatever we may call them, the people know each other, they depend on each other, and they can trace their relationship to each other over generations. That same relationship is extended to the land. So, for the nomads, the land and home probably mean the same thing. The love they feel for the land is very much rooted in the natural environment they live in. They know their land so well. They protect the land and the land protects them. That relationship is very different from the kind of relations we (those born in exile) have with our environment, living as we do in towns and cities and sort of in this automated world. The land of the nomads is grounded in everyday relations and that is why "homeland" or their regions are very important to understanding Tibetans, especially Eastern Tibetan nomads. They dream of the mountains, they think of the mountains, they think about the flowers. It is almost like an extension of their own selves.

Priyanka D'Rozario: You write in your book that Tibet has undergone a lot of change in these sixty years under the Chinese occupation. The culture and the landscape have to some extent changed from what it was when the first-generation Tibetans left Tibet. However, what has been passed on to the second- and third-generation Tibetans in exile is this memory of immaculate Tibet. It is to this Tibet that they hope to return. What is a homecoming to you? Do you think homecoming is a romanticized concept and there may be a conflict between reality and illusion?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: Such questions are never fair when it is posed to people who have been displaced. Perhaps a fairer question might be how can we make it right so that the people who are displaced have a chance to go back home regardless of whether it is a romanticized concept or not. Of course, there is going to be a conflict between reality and illusion. Even for us in our daily lives, we are constantly caught between the two. These questions are always posed in a way as though the people who have experienced displacement don't understand that there is a conflict. I think that conflict is something that one lives with anyway. The conflict between reality and illusion is there in every aspect of life and so this is no different. We have expectations in the simplest of things such as the meal we cook. Every morning I make my *chai* expecting it to be in a particular way but it never turns out to be that way. The desire to have a chance or the option of returning is probably the more important aspect of homecoming. Not having that option or chance is at the heart of the question of homecoming. Maybe, homecoming is a romanticized concept, but to those of us who never had that chance to think of a home, it is not important whether homecoming is romanticized or not. We will experience whatever we experience. It has to do with the justice of having the possibility of return, whether we take that return or not. That return is going to be very different for the first-, second-, and third-generation Tibetans. For the third-generation Tibetans, maybe it is just an idea of return. They don't have a fixed idea of what that means as they are far removed from their grandparent's experience. A lot of them who are born in the United States don't even have a chance to communicate with their grandparents because they speak different languages. All of these layers impact what Tibet means to the different generations but the idea of return is important as a right. It is just the hope of return that is vital, whether it is romanticized or not is not our first concern.

Priyanka D'Rozario: In your book, you have mentioned in numerous places that the people of Tibet are essentially tied to their land, and being removed from it has deprived them not only of their roots but also of their history and culture. How has exile deprived the Tibetans of the sustenance that comes from one's homeland? Do you feel the Tibetans inside Tibet too have been dissociated from such nourishment even though they are in Tibet?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: Certainly, Tibetans within Tibet living under conditions of colonization are deprived of the nourishment that comes from one's relation to history, land, and culture. This deprivation occurs when individuals don't have the freedom to live the life they would like to or would hope to. When they are not equal citizens as in the case of Tibetans who are not considered equal citizens under Chinese rule, they are marginalized and persecuted for attempting to live as they wish to, whether it is in terms of culture, religion, daily practices as nomads, and in using their language. These things inform our sense of belonging and I do think that occupation cuts you off in many terrible ways, in ways that those of us in exile might not experience or understand.

Priyanka D'Rozario: Buddhism is an integral aspect of Tibetan identity. I find your book *A Home in Tibet* extraordinary in the way it interweaves multiple aspects. It gives a comprehensive picture of Tibet's geography and environment, its history, culture and lifestyle, and the impact of the annexation of Tibet. On a deeper level, it puts forth the evocative memories of your mother along with the essential inquiries of homeland and identity. You have elaborately presented the steadfast faith of Tibetans in Buddhism and how it manifests in their thoughts and approach toward life. As such, fate and karma form the basis of the actions they take in their mundane life. How do you view the problem of exile in this context? The elders in Tibet primarily define freedom in terms of liberty to practice their faith. What kind of freedom do you seek for Tibet? The elders essentially believe in preserving their faith, tradition, and language in order to preserve "Tibetanness." Do you approve that it is sufficient?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: When I am talking about some of the ways in which the elders think about freedom, I am hesitant to say this is what they think and this is all they want. Those are also questions that I pose in order to understand. We define freedom in so many different ways. Our relationship to freedom is also shaped and defined perhaps by the kind of experiences we have had. My view in the book was that the many years of the cultural revolution, not being able to practice their own traditions and rituals, and the incarceration, torture, and death of Tibetans have to be kept in mind when defining freedom or attempting to understand ideas about freedom. If one has been colonized and never had a chance to be or dream or have access, then the conditions of freedom or the notions of freedom are shaped by that experience. That doesn't mean that they only want to practice their faith but it may be their definition or expression of freedom for a particular moment in time. Maybe the relationship to freedom comes slowly. What you get used to and what you think you want at the moment don't define everything. I imagine it is one step at a time. I am not saying this is all they want but I am saying that this is all they are saying they want at that particular moment given they have come out from a long period of the cultural revolution, where they were punished for maybe even dreaming. I haven't thought about what kind of freedom I want for my future Tibet. I think about my relatives and the kind of life or access to a particular kind of equality and democracy; something that China presents in its own version. They say it is an equal society. If that is really so, the kind of freedom I would want for my family in Tibet is equal citizenship and it is not to be second-class citizens; it is for them to be able to express what kind of freedom they want. For those of us in exile, I would want us to define together what kind of freedom we want and what kind of relationship or future we hope for Tibet. For me, I would want the freedom to think and decide whether I can go back, right now that is not even a possibility. Our terms and definitions of freedom can sometimes change over time but for those inside Tibet, it is important that they are given the rights of being citizens at the very least. Since human rights seem to be so closely aligned with being citizens, I think they should be treated as equal humans and also citizens.

Priyanka D'Rozario: The people who live around you essentially associate you with the qualities of compassion, kindness, and love since they understand Tibetans and Buddhists are synonymous. However, when you are in Tibet, you realize that you need to have more faith and resoluteness in your Buddhist beliefs to be more Tibetan as everybody around you in Tibet expects you to be. How do you perceive this difficulty of situating yourself in exile?

"I have lived my life defined as a refugee in Nepal and India, a resident alien and immigrant in the United States. At last, I am a Tibetan in Tibet, a Khampa in Kham, albeit as a tourist in my occupied and tethered country."

Please enlighten me with your thoughts on the fragmented and fractured identity that troubles the Tibetans in exile.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: Increasingly, in this sort of very mobile and nomadic life that we live, everyone is many parts. If I were growing up and living in just the nomadic area, there would be a certain containment of my relationships, experiences, and my understanding of place and history, but having moved around so much, being a part of so many different communities, being educated in so many different ways, having read so much, and having met so many people, I am very different from what I would have been had I just stayed in one place. Many exiled Tibetans are constantly shifting and there is nothing like a stable identity. There are some stable features we may observe but they are different. For me, and I speak for myself as a Tibetan, it could be that there are others who feel like I do or there may be others who don't feel as I do but as someone who was born in the early years of exile, who grew up within refugee community with very close ties to their memories in Tibet, there is always an aspect of my identity or consciousness or understanding of history that keeps me maybe a little bit closer to the kind of Tibet my mother dreamt of, and my mother spoke about and experienced. Her memories kept Tibet very much fixed because of her experiences and what she remembered. In some ways, they were fixed in my mind because they did not change until I traveled

there. What it means to be a Tibetan is very different for the different generations of Tibetans. We speak so many different languages. I grew up speaking the Nangchen dialect at home, and then if I were speaking to my neighbor I would speak in the central Tibetan or the hybrid Tibetan we speak in exile. If I stepped outside to a store, I might have spoken in Nepali and Hindi. All of these languages are also shaping how we think of ourselves. We are thinking in different languages and move between different languages, cultures, and customs and they are all aspects of ourselves. We are of many parts and sometimes we feel fractured and sometimes we don't feel fractured because this is us, this is all we know – being held together of many parts. Part of that fragmentedness and fracturedness again is linked to the separation from Tibet. Apart from the historical and cultural aspects of our community, our personal lives which are shaped by different experiences also add to the many-sidedness.

Priyanka D'Rozario: Before I put forward my next question, I would like to quote these lines:

"[...] every now and then I'm mistaken for a Chinese because I wear trousers and my skin is smoother and lighter than their burnished and leathery complexion. They know I'm not one of them. They say my walk gives me away. They say my clothes fit me differently and that the dialect does not flow effortlessly from my lips."

My study primarily focuses on the problem of in-betweenness or quandary that emerges in contemporary Tibetan writings in English. The above quotation also suggests that life in exile has put the Tibetans in a situation of dilemma where one has to decide between continuity in the present and memory of the past. The following lines also put forward the same suggestion:

"I am living my mother's past and my own present simultaneously"

How do you perceive this problem of dilemma in exile? The exiled Tibetans cannot be like their brothers and sisters in Tibet nor can they become completely assimilated into foreign lands. Do you think hybridity in exile is inevitable?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompā: Yeah, there is a sort of in-betweenness, I am neither here nor there physically also. I would like to be in Tibet or elsewhere but the conditions of my life are not entirely out of choice. Certain circumstances like exile are forced upon us. The very dilemma we are placed in is not what we embraced willingly or out of choice. That condition of in-betweenness is what we were born into. Having to speak in different languages also is a situation of in-betweenness. Some people grow up speaking a language that they can call their mother tongue. We never had the option to be in a place where the mother tongue is spoken outside of the house. This is also a kind of in-betweenness. We have to adapt to the dominant culture wherever we are. We never had the dominant culture know our lives, language, our customs, or desire. That is the beginning of in-betweenness that has to be put in the context of refugees and displaced people. The in-betweenness is a part of most people's lives but for us, there is a different dimension to it. It is not so much a dilemma; it is the circumstances. It is not something we can get out of; I don't have the option of resolving this in-betweenness by going somewhere. It has been the very condition by birth forced upon us.

Priyanka D'Rozario: The English language has played a major role in Contemporary Tibetan literature. The first generation of Tibetans who suffered exodus and experienced displacement found themselves alienated on foreign soil due to an unfamiliar environment, culture, and language. As such, linguistic barriers played a key role in their inability to express or represent themselves in exile. Due to the visionary effort of the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, in exile, education was no longer the privilege of the clergy. The second, as well as the third generations of Tibetans, received education in the Tibetan schools thus mastering the languages of the host land, which were Hindi and English in the case of exiled Tibetans in India. Like many Tibetan authors and poets in exile, you have also chosen English as a language to articulate your thoughts in creative writing. Do you

think English has empowered the Tibetan community in exile by providing them with a larger dais to represent Tibet and its struggle against oppression? You have written:

“I see the world around me through English. Everything is slower and newer when I try to think in Tibetan. Thoughts stumble and remain fragmented. Only in English can I make sense of it all.”

Is there any particular reason why you choose to write in English? Please share your thoughts on the Contemporary Tibetan literature in English which emerged after the 1950s.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompma: This question of “choosing a language” is more complex than it may seem on the surface from its appearance of Tibetans having a choice to “choose” between two languages. I choose to write in English because it is the only language I know well enough to be able to write in. One of the consequences of displacement is that often one’s own language is not accessible. I went to a school in India where Tibetan was not taught and the primary medium of education was English and I studied Hindi as a second language. I could never master the Hindi language adequately enough nor was I able to learn Tibetan sufficiently to be able to express myself. English, by default, became the primary language which was also presented as the language of the future in postcolonial India. Therefore, English becoming a primary language of exiled Tibetans is more a consequence of exile rather than a choice. I would love to be able to write in Tibetan and to communicate with Tibetans in our language because a large Tibetan population still doesn’t read English, especially my family, but I am not sure if I will ever be able to master my own language and write in Tibetan. That is why I personally write in English but for other Tibetans, I can say that life in exile itself is one of adaptation and compromises, and learning new languages is also adding to our experience of the world. But writing in English out of choice is not how I think of it since it is not a choice but a consequence.

For other Tibetan authors and poets who can write in Tibetan and English, but choose to write in English, yes there can be a possibility that they would like to reach a larger audience, particularly reaching out to those who do not speak, read, or understand the Tibetan language; however, there are many other factors as well which compels one to choose to write in English. For example, finding a publisher for a Tibetan book is much more difficult than finding one for a book written in English. It is in fact difficult for a Tibetan author to find a publisher even if he or she is writing in English. In my opinion, a majority of publishers do not think of the Tibetan narrative as lucrative except for those dealing with Buddhism. Therefore, there is no simple way to answer why Tibetans write in English as there are many aspects that shape the writing process and influence their decision whether to write or not to write in English.

As far as Contemporary Tibetan literature is concerned, it is still in the budding stage. It is from Jamyang Norbu’s generation, the first group of Tibetans, who were educated in India and had access to English, and who was writing in English. It’s a growing and emerging literature. Fiction is still a new genre for Tibetans but we will see more of it in the coming days. I wish that Contemporary Tibetan Literature blooms not just in the English language but in other languages as well since the Tibetans are now scattered all across the world. I would love to see Tibetans writing in all languages including Chinese as well as Tibetan.

In terms of empowerment, it makes a political statement when Tibetans write in the Tibetan language. It matters to be able to write in one’s own language, which has been denied or through the process of colonization has been eroded. I would say that writing in Tibetan would be much more empowering than writing in English. As a Tibetan in exile, for those of us who are still in the struggle of hoping for freedom, English is a practical tool that has been given to us, but if we are talking about prioritizing and empowerment, as a Tibetan, I will feel more empowered if I am able to express myself in my own language.

On one hand, I think I would love to be able to read and write in Tibetan well enough to produce works and reach people. I always feel a slight failure because I don’t write in Tibetan and don’t read well. Bhuchung D Sonam is someone I admire. He writes in Tibetan as well as English. I would love to

have that versatility. The fact is that I write in English because I know that language best. Most post-colonial writers are asked this question about the politics of writing in the English language, like African or Indian writers who write in English. What is Indian writing, is it one that focuses on aspects of culture, place, and experience recognized as Indian experiences regardless of any language, or is it writings that are in regional Indian languages? I think these questions are not easily resolved. When I write in English, I feel this is the best that I can do. I admire Tibetans writing in Tibetan language and I want Tibetans to write in all different languages not just to reach an audience but to show how Tibetans can dream and imagine the world in many diverse ways and languages.

Priyanka D'Rozario: The Tibetan literature of pre-incursion Tibet was largely focused on religion, philosophy, and spirituality. However, Contemporary Tibetan Literature deals primarily with exile, uprootedness, homelessness, and estrangement. Do you agree that the Contemporary Tibetan writings in English which emerged after the 1960s are a product of exile experience?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: The focus of contemporary Tibetan writings in exile is around the exile experience. The invasion and exodus in 1959 determined our experiences and our entry into the world outside Tibet. This moment in time informs and governs our thoughts and life. For example, I'll look at two writers in India who I also consider friends, Bhuchung D. Sonam and Tenzin Tsundue. Bhuchung D. Sonam was born in Tibet, and he came to India as a child. He has lived most of his adult life in exile and has never been able to see his parents and family since his departure from Tibet as a child. Tsundue was born in exile like I was. I have a family in Tibet that I cannot see, that I never had a chance to know as a child. Those are the conditions that shape our day to day lives. So, we are drawn to thinking about and writing about the everyday impact of Tibetan colonization such as exile, absence, and separation. At times I feel I should write about something completely different. Circling exile and the past in all my writings makes me feel redundant. But this thing is an unresolved condition that I live with every day. I don't even know how to escape that. I think younger Tibetan writers, the second- and third-generation Tibetans in exile are experimenting and creating radical works and I think they will be able to take writing in a different direction.

Priyanka D'Rozario: How do you see a Tibetan woman in exile as well as those nomad women who are in Tibet? You have acknowledged in your book the hardships these nomad women face and discussed the position of women in Tibetan society. Do you think that exile has brought a change in how a Tibetan woman has been perceived for long? How do you see yourself as a Tibetan woman?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: This question cannot be easily answered in the sense that even for Tibetans inside Tibet, there are so many different communities, ideas, attitudes, and practices shaping the position and experiences of Tibetan women. The experience of a nomadic Tibetan might be so different from someone in the farming community and from someone in the cities. In general, I do think that the religious framework influences the idea of women as inferior. For example, look who is in power: the lamas are mostly men, and the centers of power (in institutions) were usually male-oriented. But there are certain communities that are matriarchal.

In terms of exile, there were certainly changes not just in how Tibetan women behaved and thought about themselves but also maybe in how the larger host community thought and expected of them. For example, if you were raised in more conservative areas of India and Nepal, you may have adopted certain values and practices in order to fit in. Being in different societies has also affected what a Tibetan woman became in exile in addition to what the community came with. Indian customs and traditions also impacted Tibetans living in India. I cannot speak for other Tibetan women. As for me personally, I was raised by an independent Tibetan woman and I was shaped by her life experiences. I adhered to some expectations of what and how I might behave or think but seeing my mother as a respected member of society and as a leader shaped me. It was not easy for my mother, she was seen as a certain kind of woman because she was a single mother. Despite all obstacles, I saw that she was able to stand on her own feet and take care of herself and take care of me, and become a leader on

her own terms. She was my role model. When she died, many elders advised me to get married as I was all alone, but I felt I would be okay. I had an education and I had seen my mother live her life and it wasn't frightening to me. I didn't think I had to marry in order to lead my own life. Maybe someone else would have done something different had they been in my situation at 23 years old. But my mother paved the road for me to be independent. Of course, the class also needs to be taken into consideration as my mother was raised with privilege in Tibet, she had the privilege of education.

Priyanka D'Rozario: For a very long time, Tibet had occupied the popular imagination of western countries and names such as "Forbidden Land" and "Mystic Tibet" prevailed. I believe contemporary Tibetan literature, particularly the ones produced in exile, is helping to demystify the image of Tibet and compelling the world to perceive the problems of Tibetans in a realistic sense. What would you say about this process of demystification that you and your contemporaries have brought about? I wish to quote these lines from your book *A Home in Tibet*:

"The idea of Tibet is where fable and fantasy coalesce for some people. Tibet with its gentle monks, horse-riding warriors and reincarnate human divinities is fantastic and far away, so much so that many people often forget it is an occupied country."

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: Yeah, I think so. As Edward Said points out, Orientalism is to write about the orient from the western perspective without taking any input from the people who are being discussed. Very often we see those pictures of Tibetans and Tibet and we don't necessarily see ourselves in those images of levitating lamas or serenely happy people. Some of those ideas have also been accepted and reproduced by Tibetans in the early years of exile. The autobiographies and memoirs produced in the 1960s and 70s show Tibet as a peaceful and wonderful place where everyone was kind. That could be true for some people. Sometimes you are lucky to have kind people around you but it's untrue that kindness is an inherent quality in Tibetans. Reading such texts did shape my perception of Tibetans initially, but over time I was able to see the contradictions and problems within the community. The perception that Tibetans are inherently morally superior is harmful. The imposition of this idea that Tibetans are able to live through their difficulties because of their spirituality or that our current dispossession is due to our karma doesn't address the everyday injustice. The focus on spirituality or the moral Tibetan in a way ignores the politics of our condition. Exile is not an outcome of karma for me. I feel the mystification of Tibet and the focus on spirituality makes people forget that Tibetans are living under a colonized state. The politics of dispossession should be the focus of any discussion on Tibet.

Priyanka D'Rozario: The Prelude by Wordsworth and Coleridge talk about the growth of the mind. As a poet and writer, what kind of psychology did you have while writing *A Home in Tibet* and *In the Absent Everyday*? What kind of psychology do you think will develop in the readers after going through these texts?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: When I was writing *A Home in Tibet*, I wanted to write a book that younger Tibetans would be able to read about Tibet from a perspective of an exiled Tibetan. Instead of reading about a non-Tibetan's excursion or adventure in Tibet, I wanted them to have a book where a young Tibetan would think about Tibet – to know how do I think about a place I love that I have not been to, how do I see this place from an exile's perspective. So as far as psychology is concerned, I wanted to write as honestly as I could and to be aware of my own state of mind, to acknowledge my own prejudices, relationships, and ideas about Tibet which I wanted to be reflected in my book. I had to be honest as I was writing about my mother. It was about loss, love, and longing and that is what I had in my mind. Where *In the Absent Everyday* is concerned, or poetry in general, I am always very concerned about being honest about how I understand language and how I'm trying to understand what I'm writing about. I don't write for the sake of writing. I choose exercises and think about form but more than that I try to answer the questions in my head. Poetry is a way for me to understand the world and grapple with the questions I have. The poems may not necessarily answer

my questions or maybe sometimes even raise those questions but they are attempts to understand the world. I don't think about the psychology of the readers, I feel readers will come to the book on their own terms and accept the book on their own terms as the experience is different for each person. I have faith that they will meet my work and they will know that it is written in the spirit of honesty and generosity and that is what matters to me.

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