

CROSSING BORDERS: A STUDY OF REFUGEE DIASPORA IN SELECT POEMS OF TENZIN TSUNDUE

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Diaspora with its hybrid and heterogeneous character has long been the nucleus component of the universalist discourse that addresses all migrant concerns and also exemplifies the predicaments of the modern man. In fact, Edward Said in his *Reflections of Exile* points out the state of mankind in contemporary times as “just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsider' is the perilous territory of not- belonging. This is to where in primitive times people were banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons.” (140) Causes for these displacements have been myriad, be it the protracted conflicts and rampant human rights maltreat, political and ethnic exclusion or perhaps for educational and economic amelioration.

These reasons have propagated considerable overflow of refugees to neighbouring territories. The refugees confront dislocation both at the existential level and political level and can be considered transnational since they emanate in a land other than their own. Diasporic writings over the years have registered these conditions of the exiles of forced migration and discretionary migration. Just like any other exile writings, a central motif of refugee diasporic writings has been identity crisis and nostalgia. Reminiscence plays a consequential part in the writings of diasporic refugees for they dwell in imaginative construction and reconstruction of their original homeland. This act of establishing their imaginary home gives definition to the refugee's identities which have been fragmented by spatial displacement. Edward Said proclaims in *his Reflections of Exile* that the “Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth century state. The word 'refugee' has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance” (144) a status quo analogous to the Tibetan refugees.

Tibet, a glorious abode between India and China historically ruled by the Dalailamas was always a harmonious and independent state until the infringement of China in 1949. Tibet was brought under the control of Communist China after their revolt in Lhasa, Tibet's capital on March 1959, which led to the migration of their spiritual and political leader, the 14th Dalailama who with his thousands of Tibetans sought refuge in India. The Chinese transformed the powerful nation into refugee state and their intrusion paved way for Han Chinese immigration which agitated their individual culture and almost hundred thousand Tibetans left their land and were contrived to migrate to miscellaneous countries due to the poignant situation of the Tibetans in their own country. China colonized Tibet and tyrannically oppressed their culture, viciously denied their underlying rights and autonomy as they had no voice in governing of Tibet. Even today Tibet has no right of speech, religion or freedom of the press and a despotic political dissent continue. Tibetans are still ethnic minorities striving for distinctive significance within majority population as well as indigenous people endeavouring for the materialization of their globally recognized rights including self-determination and they toil for the same from within the boundaries of their homeland and as refugees, outside their home.

Tenzin Tsundue is an insurgent young Tibetan refugee poet born to refugee parents who followed the Dalailama to India to elude Chinese atrocities. His family came to India around 1960 after the Chinese subjection of Tibet, and earned their wages working as road construction labourers around Manali. He has authored four books of poetry and essays- *Crossing the Border* (1999), *Shemshook* (2007), *Tsengol* (2012) and *Kora* (2002). His works distils his experience both as a refugee and writer-activist, and is noted for its

direct confrontational attitude since his poems contend his own experience as an exile and proffers to vouchsafe what the migrants go through when they are incorporating themselves into an alien land. The poet promulgates his anguish towards the other nations who have blind folded themselves to the conditions of the Tibetan refugees, “Thirty-nine years in exile/ Yet no nation supports us. / Not a single bloody nation!” (13) He laments their plight of being shunted from horizon to horizon and from post to post. “At every check-post and office/ I am an “Indian Tibetan.” (13) The poet has been catechized with multiple identities whether he is a “Nepali?” “Thai?” “Japanese?”/ “Chinese?” “Naga?” Manipuri?”/ but never the question – Tibetan?” (13) his real identity. He disseminates the utter lost and pathetic state of the Tibetan refugees who had been forced to relinquish their homes and find sanctuary in other countries. The inquisition of 'where do they belong?' never has an answer but the poet is sanguine and dream of at least dying in his motherland. “Never been there/yet I dream of dying there.” (13)

The horrendous encounters of the refugees in the camp are divulged when the poet expounds his stay in Dharamsala, where the harrowing rain incite much havoc in his room. He tells how he had to persist along with the “mice, lizards and spiders,” (23) in the metal roofed room for home. He calls his room an “island-nation” not only because it is encompassed with rain water for the entire monsoon season, but it is also isolated from his far away country. The grievous experience that life has unleashed upon them is poignantly portrayed in the image of a small boy who lost his mother, running all over the town bare footed, proceeded behind by the image of a young girl, pregnant at the age of sixteen, estranged by her family, homeless in a park:

Pedro, Pedro
 Tell me what do you have in your flute?
 Is that a soft moaning
 Of a young girl, pregnant at 16
 Thrown out of her house
 Now living in the public park
 Behind the toilets?.....
 Or is that the breathing of the little boy
 Who is now tired and sleeping
 At the police station? (24)

The upheavals and turbulences in the refugee's life are expressed effectively when he explores their exasperation of relocation and alienation. They exert to get accustomed to the culture and language of the 'other'. Language acquisition or 'heteroglossia' as Mikhail Bakhtin puts forth becomes a significant principle in the process of acclimatisation and while assimilating the refugees venture to adapt to the culture that is not their own:

The Tibetan in Mumbai
 Abuses in Bambay Hindi,
 With a slight Tibetan accent
 And during vocabulary emergencies
 He naturally runs into Tibetan,
 That's when the Parsis laugh.....
 'Ching-Chong ping -pong.' (16)

But when he is ridiculed at his attempt the poet infuriates, and this catastrophe gets deeply entrenched in his heart, nevertheless finds solace dreaming about his country. He evokes images of nostalgia and dreams of living in his motherland, visualize the picturesque beauty of his home and garden filled with joy and merriment. Absence of home conjures a rich fecund of imagination for the refugees to contrive an imaginary home, as the disintegrated sets if imagery of the native land transcends their present

geographical boundaries while it is constructed by the progressive synergy of the past, present and future to gratify the social and individual demands. The poet while fantasizing is captivated by reality because, suddenly in his dreams he realises that in his garden “The fences have grown into a jungle,” (25) and no more the scene is pleasurable for he is reminded of his descendants and wonders “Now how can I tell my children/ where we came from?” (25).

He remembers an entire era of languished experiences and indicates his feelings are ambushed in the course of his struggle for freedom, where he ironically acknowledges that he his fighting for the country he has never seen before. The poet is strangled by undergoing forlorn pressure and torments, but he quickly reconciles with his feeling of struggle and reassures that his mission in life is to tussle for their freedom and is destined to strive and attend sovereignty. His mother and teacher have briefed him that "On your forehead/ between your eyebrows/ there is an R embossed"(14) which denotes 'refugee' but the poet identifies the 'R' as 'rangzen'(independence):

The R on my forehead
between my English and Hindi
the Tibetan tongue reads:
RANGZEN (14)

His battles for freedom have always been of a non-violent nature, potent force which he wields to help the cause of his beleaguered people everywhere. He says:

I too wanted to fight
But we are Buddhist
People say we should be
peaceful and non-violent
So, I forgave my enemy

Following the footsteps of his leaders, he wanted to bring radical changes through non-violence and is determined to strive and sacrifice until the walls of transgression have been finally vanquished by the battering rams of justice.

Tenzin Tsundue yearned to see his country, therefore crossed the Himalayas on foot, nevertheless was arrested by China's border police and was incarcerated in Lhasa for three months, eventually hurled back to India. The poet plays a cardinal role in Tibetan Youth Congress that champions 'Rangzen'. He deploys his poems as a formidable weapon in the contest to reclaim their historic right of self-determination. His poems painfully apprehend the quandary and trepidations that our Tibetan refugees constantly endure. The negation of their real identity leads to deep distress, since they have become the laughing stock and symbols of struggle. However, Tenzin Tsundue discerns that they are not susceptible to despair, frustration and humiliation and pursues his journey of struggle to reach his destination.

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