

ILLUSION OF TIBET VS. REALITY IN ACROSS MANY MOUNTAINS

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavours to provide an understanding of the evolving concepts of identity and nationalism among the current generation of Tibetan writers, while considering the underlying factors that drive this transformation. The study will primarily focus on Yangzom Brauen's memoir, "Across Many Mountains," as a means to trace the profound changes within the Tibetan community. These changes reflect a shift from their historical identity as an agrarian, seemingly primitive ethnic group in the not-so-distant past, to a contemporary, self-reliant, and forward-thinking diasporic community.

Keywords: *Refugee, Primitive Ethnic Group, Diasporic Community, Self-Reliant, Population Movement.*

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 triggered a massive population movement, with thousands of people fleeing to the newly designated regions based on their religious identity. This upheaval resulted in the tragic loss of hundreds of lives and those affected by this tumultuous event are still commonly referred to as **refugees**. A similar tragic story unfolded in the case of Tibet, India's neighbouring region. In 1959, the Tibetan people were compelled to abandon their homeland and seek refuge under the protection of the Indian government. Since then, the label of "refugee" has been inextricably linked to them. Despite this forced uprooting, the Tibetan people have displayed remarkable resilience, demonstrating a strong determination to survive despite the challenges of alienation and hardship. They have diligently worked to preserve their religion, culture, language, faith, and, above all, their unique identity.

Diasporic communities often lead a dual existence, navigating between two distinct worlds: their country of origin and their adopted homeland. This demographic displacement can result in a sense of rootlessness, alienation, fragmentation, nostalgia, and estrangement, compelling individuals to continually strive to adjust and assimilate. When expatriates enter a foreign land, they encounter a multitude of challenges, with identity crisis being one of the most significant. They bring with them a socio-cultural baggage, which includes memories of their motherland manifested in various forms such as language, art, music, paintings, rituals, festivals, religious practices, traditional attire, and cuisine. Simultaneously, diasporic individuals endeavour to adapt and integrate themselves into the host culture, ultimately giving rise to complex, hybrid identities.

Homi Bhabha contends that in a globalised world, it is imperative to relinquish exclusive affiliation to a single class, gender, religion, language, or nationality. Instead, one should embrace the diversity of race, gender, religion, language, ethnicity and nationality as a means of establishing oneself in the postmodern world. However, after more than half a century in exile, the Tibetan ethnic community, particularly those living in the West, grapple with the looming fear of cultural erosion. The allure of the Western world beckons Tibetan youth, making it relatively easy for them to integrate and assimilate into the mainstream of their host societies. Consequently, the risk they face extends beyond the potential loss of language, culture, or religion; it encompasses the entire identity of the Tibetan diaspora, which is at stake.

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Paradoxically, Tibet does not hold official recognition in the diplomatic world. However, Tibetan nationalism is very much alive and flourishing within the hearts and lives of the Tibetan people. Tibetan literature often explores recurring themes such as the longing for their lost homeland, the pangs of nostalgia, the experience of exile, feelings of alienation in their new surroundings, the ongoing struggle for freedom, and lingering uncertainties about their future as an independent ethnic community. In 1950, the People's Republic of China (PRC) incorporated Tibet and laid down the Seventeen Point Agreement. Tibet was given autonomy but under China's sovereign power. The Dalai Lama still remained the religious and spiritual head but the actual political power was vested in China. Due to this strategic political move, there was huge unrest in Tibet. After a failed uprising in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled to India; since then Tibetans have been living in India and other European countries as refugees. In India, the Dalai Lama operates a parallel Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh. Together with other Tibetan refugees, they have worked diligently to preserve Tibetan culture and traditions, which have been at risk of extinction for various reasons.

The Tibetan people did not embark on a journey to a promised land; instead, they faced a multitude of hardships. Upon their arrival in India they encountered multiple challenges. Despite these obstacles, the Tibetan community has managed to integrate and establish themselves in various regions of India, including Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Delhi, Karnataka, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttaranchal. Living on the fringes of a nation different from and sometimes indifferent to them, they have made a substantial impact on the socio-political and economic landscape. This resilient community has not only found new homes in India but has also resettled in countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. However, they find themselves in a state of global nomadism. While their dispersal across the globe presents significant challenges to the preservation of their ethnicity and language, Tibetans continue to persevere in their efforts to conserve their cultural heritage, language and distinct identity in an increasingly globalised world.

Refugees experience profound disruptions in their lives, affecting them physically, mentally and culturally as they navigate existence in two worlds. For the subsequent generations, this entails growing up within two distinct cultures, with dual frames of mind and exposure to two different systems. In the process of adaptation, a displaced community often finds itself reluctantly embracing the host culture while endeavouring not to lose touch with its cultural roots. The most challenging phase in the diasporic journey is faced by the first-generation immigrants who must adapt to their new homeland while retaining a deep connection to their motherland. As the process of assimilation unfolds, the image of their homeland can become a frozen, static memory that gradually fades, though it never truly dies. In the case of Tibetans, they work tirelessly to keep the memory of their homeland fresh and alive. They do so by commemorating March 10 every year as Tibetan Uprising Day, a day to honour the Tibetan rebellion against what the 14th Dalai Lama describes as China's unlawful and inhumane "rape of Tibet." This annual commemoration helps Tibetans preserve their cultural heritage and identity while living in exile. Bhuchung D. Sonam writes

"Our strong traditional heritage and spiritual ethics guide us through the tangled web of political chaos, physical dislocation and existential uncertainty. Our struggle to re-root ourselves under thorny circumstances is a variegated canvas."

Across Many Mountains is a true account of three generations of Tibetan women – the grandmother Kunsang, the mother Sonam and the granddaughter. This memoir eloquently portrays the interconnected yet distinct experiences of these three women, each born in different times and placed in varying circumstances. They confront similar and sometimes different challenges, possess unique perspectives and are separated by time and space. However, they remain bound together by the delicate thread of love, care and a profound sense of responsibility towards one another. Their story reflects the remarkable capacity to respect each other's individual journeys while remaining deeply connected and united through their shared experiences. The memoir provides a comprehensive account of Yangzom's family life as well as the broader experiences of numerous Tibetan refugees. Its narrative serves as a historical document that sheds light on the history of Tibet and the plight of Tibetan refugees. The plot delves into the lives of Tibetans who are constantly on the move, living a state of homelessness. They go through cycles of settling, unsettling and resettling in different parts of the world in their quest for a "home." However, their search yields no permanent or enduring results as their true home remains in Tibet. This yearning is as unattainable to them now as it was 54 years ago, creating a poignant and everlasting sense of displacement and longing for their homeland.

Yangzom's writing style is characterised by its clarity and directness. She offers a candid account of the refugee experience. The memoir is critical of the traditional Tibetan society, highlighting the gender discrimination that prevails, where women are often treated as inferior to men. This discrimination is a subject of scrutiny and critique. Additionally, the memoir underscores the distinctions between Tibetan and European ways of life. It portrays the cultural shock experienced by women of the first and second generations, such as Kunsang and Sonam, when they encounter new technologies and encounter the European mannerisms and lifestyle providing an interesting perspective on the clash and adaptation of cultures. Yangzom skilfully employs her narrative to draw juxtaposition between Buddhist and European faiths, highlighting their distinct approaches to various aspects of life, including life and death, materialism and spirituality. This comparison provides a rich exploration of the clash and harmony between these belief systems. Furthermore, Yangzom doesn't shy away from critiquing the changes she observes within the Tibetan community in India. She expresses strong disapproval of certain aspects, as illustrated in the passage you provided. The text highlights Sonam's disapproval of the affluent Tibetans in Dharamshala who exploit their Indian servants and employees. She also condemns the child labour she witnesses in Tibetan-owned hotels and restaurants while those Tibetan families send their own children to private schools. This criticism underscores the complexities and contradictions within the Tibetan diaspora community, reflecting a tension between preserving cultural values and adapting to new circumstances. Though she feels that the Tibetan freedom struggle has two approaches - one ideological, the other realist, and she herself is a realist, she says, "This [Tibetan] culture will always be a part of us. Regardless of the fact that we don't know the Tibetan national anthem by heart, have many gaps in our language and can't read or write Tibetan perfectly, the essence of the culture is firmly anchored in our hearts" (p-279). Yangzom's perspective reveals a bitter truth that many Tibetans and refugees must confront. She emphasises that the Tibet the Tibetans are fighting to reclaim exists only as a utopia, a vision that resides in the memories of the first generation of refugees and exiles. In reality, the old Tibet, as they remember it, no longer exists. This perspective underscores the challenging and often painful process of coming to terms with the loss of their homeland.

Yangzom's viewpoint suggests that it may be more beneficial to move forward, rather than clinging to the memories of what has been lost. While the past and the memories associated with it are essential, they can also impede progress and adaptation to new circumstances. This notion underscores the importance of balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the need to adapt and create a sustainable future in their new homes. Many Tibetans have indeed demonstrated a strong resistance to permanent diasporisation and have held onto the hope of returning to Tibet. This sentiment is particularly pronounced among some South Asian Tibetan refugees, who, even after four generations in exile have not obtained formal immigration status in their host countries. Their commitment to preserving their Tibetan identity and the dream of returning to their homeland has been a driving force in their lives. In the case of Bhutan, some Tibetans were offered Bhutanese citizenship if they renounced the right to return to Tibet. However, many declined this offer because they held onto the hope of eventually returning to Tibet, even though this possibility appears distant in the current political landscape. This determination to maintain their connection to their homeland despite the challenges of exile is a testament to the deep-rooted cultural and historical ties that bind Tibetans to their heritage and homeland.

After more than five decades in exile, one of the greatest concerns for the Tibetan community is the fear of cultural erosion, with a particular emphasis on the potential loss of their language. Tibetan youth, growing up in foreign countries, often find themselves drawn to the host culture and tend to assimilate into the mainstream life of their host country quite readily. This assimilation process is particularly noticeable among the Tibetan diaspora in Western countries, where they have integrated into the mainstream society with relative ease. The challenge of cultural and linguistic preservation looms large for countless diasporic communities striving to maintain their distinct identity and heritage while adapting to new surroundings.

Striking the right balance between assimilation and the conservation of cultural legacies remains an enduring preoccupation for Tibetan exiles, who are unwavering in their commitment to protect their cultural heritage in the face of generational changes and shifts in geographical locations. This reflects a universal struggle experienced by displaced communities as they grapple with the complexities of sustaining their cultural heritage in a world that is constantly evolving. Tibetan refugees, residing in various communities across Europe and America, have established weekend language and cultural schools with the aim of maintaining their connection to their native culture. Most Tibetans, who previously had limited exposure to modernity, have impressively adapted to Western ways of life while preserving their cultural identity. These refugees have transitioned from a nomadic, agrarian society to a

predominantly postmodern, globalised expatriate population. Simultaneously, it is common for Tibetans in the West to send their children to India for short periods to ensure they remain proficient in their native language and culture.

Like many immigrant groups, Tibetans have absorbed unique aspects of their host culture. In India, these cultural adaptations, which range from an affinity for Indi-pop music and films to the embrace of Gandhian principles of non-violence, have developed gradually but consistently enough to minimize intercultural and intergenerational conflicts. This demonstrates the capacity of the Tibetan diaspora to adapt to new surroundings while retaining their core cultural values. The Tibetan diaspora indeed grapples with a complex web of political, socio-cultural and identity challenges. They often find themselves on the fringes of two distinct societies, navigating the fine line between preserving their heritage and adapting to new surroundings.

However, amidst these challenges, they hold a unique advantage in leading a dual existence that allows them to enjoy a two-fold life. Tibetan exiles become well-versed in the cultures, attitudes, and ideologies of two worlds: their host country and their native homeland. This means straddling the line between a frozen past and a dynamic present, while embracing both their parent land and their foster nation. While the experience of migration and exile can be painful and emotionally taxing, it also offers a sense of liberation and enlightenment. It broadens their perspective and empowers them with a rich, multifaceted worldview that bridges the gap between multiple cultures and opens up new horizons.

The evolution of Tibetan refugee literature is discernible across generations, with notable changes in the works produced by the second and particularly the third generation of Tibetan refugees. The first generation of expatriate writers primarily focused on chronicling their lost land's glory, the nostalgia deeply rooted in their connection to Tibet and their unrelenting struggle for independence. They vividly depicted their arduous journey from Tibet to India, recounting the ordeals they endured, including the torture inflicted by Chinese troops upon their capture and the inhumane treatment they experienced in prison. The central theme of these first-generation writers was often eulogising their motherland and poignantly conveying their yearning for the homeland they had lost. Over time, the writers from the second and now the third generation of Tibetan refugees have undergone a perceptible shift in their outlook. While Tibet remains a central theme in their writings, the concept of freedom has evolved. Many of these writers are currently residing in Western countries and have embraced the Western way of life. They no longer yearn to return to Tibet, the land that holds profound cultural significance for them but one they have never personally experienced. Instead, they aspire to be recognised as individuals with a hybrid identity, blending elements of Tibetan and Western cultures. This fusion has influenced their nationalist identity, leading to a transformation in their perspective. These writers and poets have also become critical of their fellow Tibetans, not hesitating to point out their perceived shortcomings, which reflect the complex interplay of their experiences in the diaspora and their evolving sense of identity.

The writings of these Tibetan refugees are not intended to be intellectual discourses or scholarly insights, nor are they primarily created for aesthetic pleasure. Instead, they serve as the voices of a people in exile. Their works offer a poignant reflection of their deepest doubts, hopes, opinions, aspirations, and protests. These writings provide an avenue for these individuals to articulate and express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, offering a medium through which they can communicate their unique perspective as members of the Tibetan diaspora. These narratives serve as a means of personal and collective expression, giving voice to their lived experiences and the complex realities of their lives in exile.

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