Refractions: Poems Through the Prism of Proscription

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Refractions: Poems through the Prism of Proscription

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“Prayer Flag” outside of the Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts
I take refuge in the wireless
   Click and chat
The realization comes on my screen
   In a sky full of information
   I am still an idiot
I fail to connect the dots
The reality is somewhere between the
Beer cans, thick smoke and heavy sleep
We facebook ourselves into numbness
   Perception is perfect
My windhorse is a screensaver
Between mount fuji and jomolangma
   Burger struggle
   Pizza match
Tsampa revolution
   Dal chawal
   Pay
   Pray
   Life
   Strife
Mickey Mouse is to me what yak was to my grandfather…
   It’s cute
The ghost that I dreamt last night looked like malformed Ben Ten
Watching film on giant screen shrinks our thoughts to nothingness

- Anonymous words from a
   “Prayer Flag” hanging outside the
   Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts
Aims

The chief aim of this study is to establish a working knowledge of contemporary Tibetan poetry and attain a sense of its development both chronologically and through displacement via diaspora. This is achieved by a brief analytical comparison between traditional and modern forms of Tibetan poetry on the basis of structure, language, content, themes, functions and uses. The frustration between the desire for cultural preservation and the desire for innovation within the Tibetan exile community is also explored. Ultimately this coalesces in a collection of original poetry that reflects the elements of contemporary Tibetan poetry and the pain of life in exile as related to and observed by me.

Methods

The methodology employed comprised of background research on traditional genres of Tibetan poetry, which included the works of the sixth Dalai Lama Tsang-yang Gyatso and Milarepa. Contemporary works of poetry and music such as those by Tenzin Tsundue, Bhuchung D. Sonam, Lhasang Tsering and Tamding were also explored and analyzed. Follow-up interviews were conducted with these artists about the intentions, language choices, structure choices and proposed functions of their work. I also conducted interviews with and analyzed the works of local unpublished poets, such as Tashi Sangye. In addition, observations were conducted at the Tibetan Children’s Village where many poets in exile seem to get their start. I also interviewed the head mistress, Tsering Yangkyr, about education and curriculum. Tenzin Jigdal, program coordinator of Students for a Free Tibet was also an invaluable resource in the explanation of uses of culture, poetry and music as political resistance. Furthermore, Tibetan English speaking exile youth culture was surveyed through participation, observation and conversation. This information was then analyzed under an anthropological and linguistic anthropological lens. What follows is an academic discussion of my findings and a subsequent creative expression of them.

Resources and Discussion

Tradition and History of Tibetan Poetry

When discussing modern Tibetan poetry, it is important to establish an understanding of its evolution from traditional Tibetan poetry and to distinguish the stylistic and thematic elements that differentiate each form. In traditional Tibetan poetry there are three main genres, which include songs (glu), ornate poetry (snyan ngag) and poetical songs (mgur). Mgur, which is essentially a hybrid of glu and snyan ngag, is characterized by orally transmitted verses that express the suffering and spiritual awakening of significant spiritual and historical figures in Tibetan culture. This genre was popularized by the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso. As demonstrated in the poems below, his songs were typified by simple, clear and expressive language, as well as a lack of flowery metaphor and rigid didactism:

Sweetheart awaiting me in my bed
Yielding tenderly her sweet soft body,
Has she come to cheat me
And disrobe me of my virtues?
White crane!
Lend me your wings
I will not fly far
From Lithang, I shall return

The first poem centers around the human experience and conflicts involved in young love, whilst the second poem is a source of inspiration that is now often used in Tibetan exile communities to reflect their plight and the power of their belief that they will return home. The autobiographical nature of *mgur* and thematic focus upon the author’s experiences rather than abstract aspects of Buddhist philosophy seem to provide a link between traditional and contemporary Tibetan poetry.

Dondrup Gyel, who is considered the father of modern Tibetan poetry, composed the first free verse poem in Tibet. In response to China’s suppression of Tibetan language and culture, he founded this new genre by immersing himself in the Tibetan literary tradition and then revamping and revaluing it to increase its relevance within current times. Gyel’s poetry incited unity and political consciousness in Tibetan youth and served as encouragement for resistance against Chinese oppression.

This spirit was carried into exile by young Tibetan refugees in the 1980’s who had followed the rich and new literary happenings in their homeland. Arriving after the establishment of governmental, educational and social institutions within the exile community of Dharamsala, new Tibetan refugees had the luxury to begin focusing on the promotion of literature.

**Evolution of Tibetan Poetry**

Although traditional Tibetan poetry influenced new or free verse poetry (*rang mos snyan sngag*), there are key areas of distinction between the two forms. These differences reflect a stylistic shift from collective, formal and institutionalized structures, languages and themes to those of a more individualistic, casual and humanistic flavor.

In terms of structure, contemporary poetry uses composition as a tool for clarifying or expressing the living mind, therefore composition follows the mind. However, traditional poetry favors adherence to preconceived structures over the communication or development of meaning. This jilts the intensification and evolution of feelings as experienced in real life and therefore stunts

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the fulfillment of their expression. As exhibited by the poem, “When was I Born?” by Bhuchung D. Sonam modern Tibetan poetry works to undo this:

You were born when people disappeared one after another

When was that?
That was the year they wrote the big red slogans on the walls
‘Heads that stick out will be hammered down’
You were born when the sun shied away from our sky

When was that?
That was the year when your father… your father…

Here Sonam strays from traditional forms of poetry which require certain strict rhythmic and rhyming patterns, such as the structure of the songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama in which each line is comprised of six syllables. Instead Sonam opts for a question and answer format that mimics a realistic conversation. This structure emphasizes the differences between traditional and modern Tibetan poetry. Whereas traditional forms focus upon the ideal human experience through exploration of the enlightened or awakened mind, contemporary forms aim to reflect and represent everyday human experience by openly exploring the nature of the human mind.

Use of images that actually appear in the author’s environment also exemplifies an aspect of modern poetry that strays from traditional forms. Rather than the archetypal images and symbols of traditional poetry, such as the lotus or the crane, Sonam employs images of propaganda in the form of “big red slogans on the walls.” The use of more secular objects and the use of religious objects for secular purposes or messages is a key element of modern poetry that further highlights the intention of contemporary poets to imbue their works with realism.

Another contributing factor to this realism is the nature of the language utilized. Rather than highly formal diction and phrasing as is characteristic of traditional poetry, Sonam uses casual and natural speech. The choice of language that mirrors everyday dialogue increases the reader’s accessibility to and understanding of the poem. It is the speech through which the reader navigates the world and it facilitates the manifestation of the truth of human experience within the poem.

Cultural Preservation versus the Creation of New Forms

Although innovation and creativity are viewed positively in most communities, for exile populations the threat of the loss of culture creates fear and some resistance towards creative endeavors. This fear is materialized in institutions such as the Norbulingka Institute and the

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5 Sonam, Bhuchung D. Songs from a Distance (Dharamshala: TibetWrites, 2009)


Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts (TIPA), which are committed to cultural preservation. Though these establishments are pivotal in maintaining Tibetan culture in exile, they also stunt artistic growth. As writer and activist, Tenzin Tsundue claims organizations such as TIPA who uphold orthodoxy and act as standards of culture create apprehension in straying from traditional forms, this in turn “didn’t allow a natural process of evolution” in Tibetan art, music and writing.8

Other organizations, such as the Amnye Machen Institute have aims to counter this centralization of the arts by merely providing an outlet for any and all creative expression. Amnye Machen operates under the belief that, “In exile Tibetans have struggled to preserve their ancient culture and religion, skill and conservatism has lead to a closing-in of the national mind from further investigation, discussion and movement towards cultural and intellectual changes necessary to making Tibetan institutions and ideas viable in a rapidly changing world.”9 Rather than solely focusing on the preservation of Tibetan culture, their aim is to develop it as well.

One artist who has been frustrated by the conservative attitude towards art in the Tibetan exile community is tattoo activist and musician, Tamding. Through his art and music he strives to differentiate himself from others and create something wholly his own. A demonstration of this is his song about self immolation, which is the first Tibetan heavy metal song. According to Tamding, there are plenty of sad songs expressing the pain of exile and martyrdom, however he wanted to “make people feel something else, feel encouraged and inspired to do something, to wake up.”10 Although performing the song was hard at first due to ill reception of the new form by audiences, Tamding asserts that people have grown to like it.

Another fear for those in exile is cultural homogenization. With the advent of new technologies and the increasing accessibility to media, as well as the increasing geographic mobility of people, new political and artistic ideologies are being spread and shared faster than ever. Anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai does not view this cultural permeability as a necessarily negative phenomena, as he terms it globalization rather than cultural homogenization. According to his him, “globalization is an ongoing effort between sameness and difference to kill each other out, creating a global culture somewhere in between.”11 Even though Tamding’s use of a Western genre of music, such as heavy metal, could be viewed as a sign of cultural homogenization it seems to provide an example of Appadurai’s globalization. Tamding does not submit wholly to Western ideas or culture through his use of heavy metal, rather he tweaks the genre and employs it for a very Tibetan purpose – the rousing of national consciousness and generation of solidarity for a free Tibet.


9 Amnye Machen Institute Pamphlet


The work of poet and activist, Lhasang Tsering is another example of this cultural and artistic incorporation into Tibetan forms. In his book, *Tomorrow and Other Poems*, he sets many of his poems that are composed originally in Tibetan to the tune of Western rock songs. Inspired by Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” and John Lennon’s “Imagine,” he appeals to the Tibetan community to believe in the power within themselves and to inspire them to take action in the struggle for self-determination.\(^\text{12}\)

Rather than viewing Lhasang Tsering and Tibetans in exile as passive victims of homogenization, anthropologist Keila Diehl argues that foreign practices and products, such as Western music, are purposefully chosen, used and made meaningful locally.\(^\text{13}\) While music provides Tibetans with a means for historical and cultural reinforcement, such as enacted by TIPA, there are still tensions between origins and originality, as well as authenticity and universal appeal. As Diehl states, Tibetans in exile must “keep their sponsors and themselves satisfied that they are succeeding in staying the same but at the same time achieving the kind of accessibility necessary to attract aid and sympathy requires great acts of accommodation and change.”\(^\text{14}\)

*Language, Identity and Function*

One area of concern as related to the frustration between cultural preservation and the creation of new forms of expression is language. Although local schools in exile, such as the Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) put an emphasis on Tibetan language and literacy, students are also encouraged to gain proficiency in English. Seeing as TCV operates under the belief that “today’s child is tomorrow’s hero,” it is no surprise that they produce most writer activists living in exile.\(^\text{15}\)

According to poet, Tashi Sangye, Tibetan youth in exile have extremely poor Tibetan and many do not have the ability to write or compose poetry in Tibetan. He is critical of poets such as Tenzin Tsundue and Bhuchung D. Sonam and claims that they are “not Tibetan poets” because they write in English.\(^\text{16}\)

Sangye’s fear for the loss of the richness of his culture and language may be valid. Lhasang Tsering claims that he does not write in Tibetan because he has an “inadequate knowledge of written Tibetan.” The few poems he composed in Tibetan were written through dictation and he

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repeatedly asserts that he was not the “author of these poems, but rather the medium through which they were expressed.”

According to Tenzin Jigdal, program coordinator of Students for a Free Tibet, culture and language are a new form of resistance that “anyone can participate in and that does not require a high level of courage.” This is exemplified by campaigns, such as the Lhakor movement, which involves the amplification of Tibetan culture, clothing, food and language through practice and participation every Wednesday. Although Jigdal upholds the use of culture and language as protest, he does not view use of the English language as a threat to Tibetan culture. Instead he sees English as a channel of expression that augments the assertion of Tibetan identity and increases outreach to people.

Bhuchung D. Sonam states that when writing poetry, “he automatically knows what language to write in.” He stresses the importance of the English language as the “hook upon which survival and the re-rooting in exile hung.” According to him, the bulk of material written about Tibet is written by Westerners, which distorts the reality of Tibetan’s in exile into someone else’s interpretation. To Sonam, English is an invaluable tool in reclaiming the Tibetan narrative and ensuring that the Tibetan voice is not silenced.

If viewed as a speech act, poetry and music influences the choice of language for writers depending upon the setting, participants, ends, acts, key, instruments, norms and genre. Writers such as Tashi Sangye and Tamding choose to write in Tibetan when the subject matter relates to the political struggle for a free Tibet. However, when writing about topics, such as love as experienced by them and others in the exile community of McLeod Ganj, they prefer to write in English. This is partially due to the different audiences they are writing for. Many Tibetan youths in exile experience short love affairs with the foreigners who pass through on vacation, this would obviously influence their choice to write in a mutual language such as English that their lovers can understand.

This fluidity and movement between languages represents a sort of double-consciousness and double identity as both a Tibetan and a member of their country of exile. In everyday speech and in poems espousing Tibetan solidarity it is more comfortable and natural to use Tibetan, which further establishes a sense of community. However, as asserted by Sonam, it is also

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important to master English so that the Tibetan struggle can be communicated and shared with the global community.

Tenzin Tsundue, who uses his poetry as a form of political protest writes only in English in order to appeal to the human consciousness of a larger population of people. At times he has difficulty articulating the struggle of Tibetans and does not know what language to use. In regards to self immolation, he laments:

“If self immolation is a violent act, then what English word is left for you to describe Osama’s attack or Bush’s attack in Iraq? Is English so poor that it is only left with the word ‘violence’? If a woman is being raped and she is only left with her physical body for defense. If she injures the rapist, is this violence? Is the rapist also violent? Are they equal? You cause injustice by equalizing this action.”

For Tenzin Tsundue, how the Tibetan community explains self immolation and other aspects of the fight for a free Tibet, matters greatly as it effects the quality and strength of international support.

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“The transitory state of exile. Here now gone tomorrow, living as if everything was a series of momentary images” – Bhuchung D. Sonam²⁴

Dalai Lama’s Temple, McLeod Ganj
Threads

Somewhere,
a monk’s robes are
dragging along a dusty road
as a red string holds
an old woman’s glasses
in place.

Somewhere,
red Reebok clad
feet shuffle kora
as a woman braids
bracelets made of yarn.

Somewhere,
a man thumbs his mala
as he waits for someone
to purchase his red
yak wool shawls.

Somewhere,
a prayer flag
fades and unravels
as a young man dons
a red bandana.

Somewhere,
a Tibetan flag sits folded
on a store room shelf.
Dalai Lama’s Temple, McLeod Ganj
Untitled

I thought I might have
a poem in me.
a way to give language
to the sadness you
parcel in wicker
with your tongue
and pass to me in dark corners
when you think
no one else is looking.
But I’m choking
on your
stream of consciousness
and instead of words
there are only splinters.
Orchid Garden, Kalimpong
Tsum Valley

And when the clouds and mountains
fade into two dimension,
your sighs reverberate in my ears
with cohesive tension,
collecting in stalactite pauses
reflected in your eyes
irises deafening the throbbing
to the clock hand’s cries.

As sunshine turns shelter
into yolky womb,
luminescent preparation
begins for ecstatic moon.
Your butterfly kisses
spasm gradient earthquakes
down my spine
and as heavy lids
signal curtain call
I realize that you
were never mine
The Leaky Faucet Blues

We live to the tune of
the leaky faucet.
Singing uncertainty in
free falling spheres,
giving birth to
overtures of
Tashi Delek.
Breath held
in suspension
between eighth notes
is exhaled in staccato splashes
that echo
RANGZEN.
Temple Road, McLeod Ganj
Broadcast

A megaphone is a prism refracting a voice into fuzzy rays that pierce like pins and needles and nudge sleeping limbs.

Social media is an outlet generating buzz and throbbing neuron firing signals across wires to perspire electric dissidence.

Newspapers are multifunctional. Embracing samosas and becoming spiraled on sidewalks trampled by oblivious feet.
Patan, Nepal
Day-tripper

This love story begins
on a dance floor
under the pulse of
a strobe light.
It is consummated
on the highest table
in McLeod Ganj and
it climbs the stairs
to eat lunch on
a roof top terrace.
It circumambulates
the main square
on a motorbike and
it converses in
kisses on a
guest house balcony.
It smolders and is
shared like a joint.
It is exhaled in
waves of steam
spiraling from
a cappuccino
and it ends
at a bus station,
with me waving
goodbye
and you content to
have another addition to
your scrapbook.
Namo Buddha, Nepal
Capture

Political power grows
out of the barrel of
a camera lens.

Foreground
Background
Frame
Zoom
Focus
Fire!
This is the generation
of Point and Shoot.

Process
Negative
Positive
Develop
Stop
Fix
Filter
Expose
Contact
Print!
I love the smell of
celluloid in the morning.

Crop
Enlarge
Contrast
Saturate
Retouch!
This is the age
of Dodge and Burn.

Pinhole
Aperture
Don’t shutter!
Grit your teeth
and bare it.
Dalai Lama’s Temple, McLeod Ganj
Breakfast with Mao

The prongs of his fork create quiet explosions resulting in yolky streams that soak into his burnt toast and rape his potatoes.

As he wipes eggy dribble from his chin and rubs his belly with satisfaction, he muses -

Time is stretched like melted cheese and these days every bite burns the tongue.
Dharamkot
Mandala

There is a Buddha-land
in Bohemia
for the enlightened
and confused.
It is accessed by
Four gates –
Women
Beer
Motorbikes and
Leather jackets.
Here the universe depends
on a pair of tennis shoes
balancing on a curb outside
of a café.
Refuge comes in the
form of cappuccinos
and there is a man
in the corner
meditating on the
impermanence of a
cigarette
as the smoke obscures
a secret teaching
that seeps out of a tea bag
and into a bodhisattva’s cup.
Tongue Tied

Displacement has left a lesion in Broca’s area.

The past punctuates the present and although theory of mind gives me a view to the other I can’t find myself. The syntax is right, but the semantics are wrong.

Recursivity is spinning webs of socialization resulting in pidgins.

My identity is on the tip of my tongue, but expressive aphasia prevents articulation.
Difficulties Encountered

The obstacle that contributed to the most prominent gap in my research was the absence of the voice of the female poet or songwriter in exile. Whether this was due to a lack of female writers, cultural norms of timidity, or further exodus and immigration, I was unable to make contact with a single female poet.

Another difficulty I faced was due to the stupidly raw and romantic nature of the poet’s heart. Many interviewees and acquaintances threw themselves into bouts of lovesickness over idealized images of me. This made it very difficult to get to genuinely know people, or perhaps it made it too easy. Either way, it discouraged me from pursuing further interviews or conversations with them and slightly stunted my research.

Living in McLeod Ganj proved to be emotionally exhausting as well. The trauma and pain of exile was very real and was transferred to me every day through observation and interactions with people who I grew to care about very much.

Additionally, my ambition and inclination to follow any and all possible research leads resulted in an overwhelming amount of material. All the information I collected seemed to overlap and be interdependent, which made it extremely difficult to organize my thoughts and form an argument. It would have been helpful if I had formulated a succinct concrete question or focus earlier and stuck strictly to it rather than approaching everyone and every moment as a potential resource for research.

The author in her domain.

Mandala Café, McLeod Ganj
Recommendations for Future Study

Future research could take the form of case studies of modern Tibetan poets and lyricists living in exile. Focus upon an individual or a few artists would create feasible and manageable research settings and the opportunity for in depth exploration. Another area of relevant research to be tackled is the intentions, motivations and unique voice of female poets. Whether contemporary poetry or traditional forms such as the dohas, research on the female perspective of Tibetan literature needs to be augmented. One more proposed endeavor is the practice and production of poetry in the vein of the genres characteristic of traditional Tibetan poetry or songs.
References


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Interviews


