



A POST-COLONIAL STUDY OF SELECT SHORT STORIES FROM 'OLD DEMONS, NEW DEITIES'

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Abstract: Tibetan fiction is a new area in literature which has immense potential as to providing insights about the changing cultural patterns in the lives of Tibetans in various spaces such as those in Exile or those living under the Chinese regime. There has been no engagement with this literary form. This is due the fact that writing fiction was earlier seen as blasphemous by Tibetans. The anthology 'Old Demons, New Deities' edited by Tenzin Dickie is first of its kind. It brings together short stories written in English as well as those translated from different languages like Tibetan, Chinese and Nepali into English. The paper takes a Post-Colonial approach in understanding the Tibetan space through short fiction. Through the study, not only the layers of Tibetan consciousness are highlighted but it also is taken into account the fact that there is aggression. Hence, the need to consider Tibetan fiction as Post-Colonial and not just narratives from the Exile becomes necessary. This is significant as the literature from the Tibetan space has often been easily dismissed as belonging to the category of Exile which is not the case as there is a need to reconsider the space as Post-Colonial.

Keywords: Tibetan fiction, postcoloniality, Tenzin Dickie, exilic writing.

Modern Tibetan Literature has been read as reflecting the Tibetan people's, among other things, experiences of exile and refuge. Many contemporary Tibetan poets have recorded the emotional, psychological and cultural experiences of living in exile or under the Chinese rule. Buchung D Sonam's poem 'In Exile' records the loss of the homeland and experiences of

exile. Dandelions of Tibet equates separation from homeland to estrangement from the mother. Tenzin Tsundue's poems are more vibrant when it comes to taking up the Tibetan cause. Many of Tsundue's poems and articles touch on homelessness and belonging. Exile and refuge, therefore, form a major part of the existing perspectives when it comes to approaching Modern Tibetan Literature. The reason for this categorisation is the fact that after the imposed rule by the Chinese, The Tibetan culture has always been under the threat of being erased whether in diaspora or (more so) under the Chinese regime.

The domains of study available in analysing the Modern Tibetan Literature are limited and related to exile, diaspora and refuge that work across multiple genres. The genre of short stories in the modern Tibetan literature is one of the most widely used forms. However, Tibetan writers and critics feel that this is not known outside of the Tibetan circle. The anthology compiled by Tenzin Dickie brings together short stories by contemporary Tibetan writers from across the globe with a common theme of "tenuous belonging". In the Introduction to the Anthology 'Old Demons, New Deities', Tenzin Dickie traces in the historical, cultural and political contexts the reasons why the Tibetan Fiction took time to evolve. Along with religious orthodoxy, the Chinese invasion had delayed the already gradual evolution of Tibetan literary arts. Drawing from her own personal experience of cultural isolation from the Tibetan "literary past", Dickie gives voice to Tibetans in India who faced similar challenge, add to it the "infancy" of modern Tibetan literature. The anthology becomes monumental as it is the "coming-out of the Tibetan short-story" as Dickie calls it.

Tibetan short story is a new genre - or even more than that - in the Tibetan literary landscape. It is a new area that must be approached with new methodology. In an interesting analogy that compares the rise of the novel in the West to the evolution of Tibetan fiction, Dickie points out at the disillusionment with religion and government that mark the birth of this literary genre. To approach this area as a part of future learning it would be of great significance to reconsider it as a post-colonial text. Among the many functions these texts perform, the one discussed in this paper will be of undermining the Chinese "grand narrative" of Tibet as a part of China and by bringing in modernization and development the Chinese government's claim to uplift the backward Tibetan region. To consider China as a coloniser provides a new angle to our study of Modern Tibetan Literature. Literature in the past has provided a wealth of texts which substantiate the issues of exile, occupation and refuge. The

short stories in ‘Old Demons, New Deities’ not only take up the earlier issues but also work as post-colonial texts.

It is through literature and other arts that one can learn about the everyday struggles of the colonised peoples. The Introduction to *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* attempts to define the literatures that can be considered Post-colonial. Post-colonial literature is a broad term used “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”. Here, the colonization is a result of “European Imperial aggression”. A common characteristic of these ‘post-colonial literatures’ which include African, Indian, Australian, Caribbean literatures among others is “the experience of colonization” and the fact that they asserted “themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.”

China’s position has been argued as that of an aggressor across disciplines by various scholars and academicians. To consider the Modern Tibetan Literature as Post-colonial would lend a new angle to our study of these literatures and hopefully, include more works of Tibetans into the corpus of Post-colonial Literatures. In the article *‘The Waterfall and the Fragrant Flowers’* published on the *Tibet Writes*, Tsering Shakya emphasises on the need to examine Tibetan literature in the light of “fundamental changes” that have come to shape the literature coming out of the space¹. The literary freedom is something that these writers grapple with, especially since 1994 as the Party’s guidelines demand strict compliance. However, Shakya illustrates by giving instances of ambiguities in their engagement with religion, Mao, communism etc, that subversions can be seen if one looks closely. For the purpose of this paper, I will look at two short stories from the anthology ‘Old Demons, New Deities’ which include Pema Bhum’s *Wink* and Takbum Gyal’s *The New Road Controversy*.

In the story *Wink*, Pema Bhum looks at how the Chinese use language to subordinate the Tibetans. In post-colonialism, we have numerous texts examining the master’s cultural ideology thrust upon the slave by employing language as a tool for marginalisation. The story looks into the lives of a young couple whose life and death depend on the opinion of the Mao Government and its agents. This is not shocking given systematic manner in which the identification of Five Black Categories causes prosecution and policing of those blacklisted. Tenpa is categorised as belonging to the “bad elements” which makes him

vulnerable to violence by the State. Struggle sessions, re-education and victimizing were a part of the imperialist agenda of homogenising the masses in favour of what the centre wished to propagate. In narrating the tale that seems to be preoccupied with the growing concerns of the parents over an ill baby's health, Bhum makes it possible for the reader, especially one not acquainted with the Tibetan history, to be exposed to the supremacy of the Chinese centre of power.

The colonial project involves advocating certain texts as justifying their imperial agendas. *Quotations from Chairman Mao-Tse-tung* is a significant text conferred to a nearly holy status by the coloniser. Bhum's text questions this imposition through the character of Damar who is innocent and unaware of the implications of tearing out the picture of Chairman Mao and putting it into his mouth. The opportunistic preying nature of the Coloniser is highlighted with the episode of Chairman Keldo rewarding Damar's grieving² for Mao's death with a personal room in the hospital. Damar becomes a state symbol used to propagate its agenda.

Tibetan texts also reinforce the indigenous relationship between the self and the land as against the colonialist engagement by the Chinese. The short story *The New Road Controversy* from the anthology tells a story of people who protest against the Chinese administration's road building project. Any number of times post-colonial literatures bring up the issue of dispossession faced by the indigenous people as a result of Eurocentric or Neo-colonial profitable industrial ventures that go about in the name of development and urbanisation. Writers like Amitav Ghosh stress on the connection between the imperialistic practices with a view of expansion and hoarding wealth, disruption of indigenous ways of living and environmental crisis. In a similar vein, Takbum Gyal shows the plight of the indigenous community which becomes critical of the "opportunity" that would follow the road building project. To them the project means polluting their ancestral land and water. Gyal examines the gap between Tibetan people who believe that man has no right to take human life and the Chinese government's ruthless means to achieve their goals. The lines "They know no compassion" reflect the attitude of the government towards the villagers who do not want the road to be constructed. It would not be wrong to compare the position of the Chinese regime to the British railway and other development projects that were undertaken with the aim of improving the British Raj's transportation across the country to amass wealth by completely subordinating the "native" voices.

Gyal's story resists the rhetoric of the coloniser as it cleverly using farce to foreground the native wisdom and the Chinese government's domination and laws that make no sense to the indigenous people who share a spiritual connection with the land. Just as Darmar could not comprehend the Communist regime's working, the indigenous people cannot understand the Communist laws, and hence, make futile efforts to stop the commercial project in their native land.

In conclusion, Pema Bhum's text resists the imposition of the master's-imposed language and homogenous ideology by way of subtexts, questions and by the very fact, that Bhum writes in Tibetan to subvert the hegemony of the coloniser. The writer also distinguishes the Tibetan from the Chinese or the "normative code" In translating the text from Tibetan, Tenzin Dickie retains the Tibetan words which is innovative and assertive of a Tibetan consciousness.

Gyal's story questions the ethics of the Chinese regime by juxtaposing native's relationship with the land, just as Cesaire's *Une Tempete* questions the Coloniser's rule by showing the symbiotic relationship Caliban shares with the indigenous space.

Hence, the short story if read as post-colonial not only addresses the hegemony experienced by the Tibetans in China but also critiques the coloniser's sense of superiority that results in marginalising and silencing the Tibetan cultures. All of these texts become post-colonial resisting in their own ways the homogenised narrative of the Chinese regime. In today's world, one cannot claim to be unaffected by what is happening in the other nations in the world. There are other texts which challenge the cultural hegemony of the Chinese regime. The article *Tibet and China: the past in the present* by Tsering Shakya, calls the celebration of the Serf Liberation Day a "choreographed spectacle". China's inhumane practices as far as its citizens are concerned and the alleged imperialistic motives call for a probe on our part; as academicians, industrialists or as well-wishers of humanity living in a global world.

Notes

1. Space: By Space, I am referring to both Tibet under the Chinese regime and diasporic Tibetan populations i.e. Tibet-in-India, Tibetans living in the United States, Taiwan etc
2. Grieving: First, Darmar's illness is interpreted as premonition by an Officer who gives the black armband and white cloth flower to Tenpa and Lhamo. After this, the journalist

publishes the ill Darmar's photo on the newspaper, catching the Public Security Bureau official and Chairman Keldo's attention.

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