



The Question of Belonging: Postcolonial Predilections in Tibetan Diaspora

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Abstract

The Tibetan diaspora began fifty six years ago when the 14th Dalai Lama fled Lhasa and took refuge in Mcleodganj, Dharamshala, in Himachal Pradesh, India. Since then these exiles have kept their stateless refugee status in India and other parts of the world as a reminder to themselves and the world that Tibet is under Chinese occupation and that they are committed to returning someday. They have established a Government-in-Exile for safeguarding the interests of all Tibetans living in India and abroad. Living in exile, these people have been incessantly striving for the independence of their country from the clutches of the Dragon. Ironically, Tibet receives overwhelming sympathy and concern from individuals, organizations and many

countries of the world, nevertheless, the Tibetan political struggle remains marginalised and on the periphery of the international political agenda.

However, the myth of ‘Shangri-la’ and silence of the world super powers question the very idea of Tibet. The present paper seeks to study as how do we understand Tibet and Tibetans’s identity when we view them through the lens of postcolonial theory? And more significantly, are Tibet and Tibetans an Orientalist construct? If the focus of postcolonialism is predominantly on the West—non-West relations, where does Tibet fit in?

Key words- postcolonialism, Orientalist, marginalised, periphery.

Tibetans Diaspora around the world and especially in India is an unusual case of inbetweenness of the human beings on earth. Although the Tibetans after their forced exile in 1959, along with their spiritual and temporal leader, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama alias Tenzin Gyatso, have been provided some safe places viz. Mysore, Dehradun, Ladakh and Dharamshala to live in India and in other parts of the world (Nepal, Bhutan, the US, Japan, and 8 more countries); since then they are scattered in every part of the globe without any identity, if identity is identified with notions like having a place to call their own. Today the Tibetans remain refugees and there are very few signs to indicate a possible return for approximately 3, 00, 000 Tibetans living in India, and little hope for gaining either autonomy or independence. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile vis-a-vis Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), and the residence of the Dalai Lama is located in McLeodGanj, Dharamsala, in the North Indian state of Himachal

Pradesh. Living in diaspora and in a disparaged world, theirs is a perpetual struggle for survival, independence, nationality, and identity. However, their struggle for a physical and imagined place is continuously transformed due to heavy ideological pressures from every corner of the world.

So, how do we understand Tibet and Tibetans's identity when we view them through the lens of postcolonial theory? And more significantly, are Tibet and Tibetans an Orientalist construct? If the focus of postcolonialism is predominantly on the West—non-West relations, where does Tibet fit in?

Although Tibet was under British imperial influence during the first half of twentieth century, it was never formally colonised. Ironically, it was 'colonised' by China, a nation identified as both post-colonial and neo-colonial, at a time when the rest of the world was witnessing movements for political decolonisation. Different Parts of China were colonized by Britain, France and Japan (1937-1945), and even by the Mongols and Manchus (for 300 years), but, being a big nation, it was never wholly colonised. It is strange that a postcolonial nation has become neo-colonial in victimizing another postcolonial nation. This also hints that colonialism and postcolonialism are not East versus West constructs but they may even be between East and East. These concepts are no longer space specific or what Edward Said calls between occidental and oriental societies.

Tibet complicates the category 'postcolonial' and warns against any naïve assumptions about postcolonialism. The case of Tibet is not only about the West versus the non-West, but it raises uncomfortable questions for the postcolonial enterprise, questions that underline the argument for at best a resistant appropriation of ideas. Putting Tibetanness under a postcolonial scrutiny implies not an abandonment of the subject but a re-conceptualization that refuses to

privilege certainty over doubt, identity over difference. Tibetanness helps many Tibetans make sense of their migrant experience, while at the same time being a product/process of identity politics oriented toward the goal of reclaiming the homeland.

Postcolonialism is not only about, what Michael Foucault calls “repressive power relations having coercion and restrictions but also productive and generative” (16). Hence, all discourses, including Tibetan diaspora, construct subject positions from which they can address the issues of representations and identity.

The power of representation and discourse is also critical for understanding the Tibet question and Tibetanness. As postcolonial works drawing upon Foucauldian ideas have argued, this power not only constrains and contains, but is also productive of certain identities (Edward Said as qtd. in Chowdhry 216). The very idea of Tibet and what it means to be Tibetan is constructed and contested within the matrix of identity and representation discourses, thus making it an integral part of the Tibet question. Representations have productive influence over the discourses of Tibetanness (Tibetan identity) since the Tibetans, especially those living in the diaspora, self-reflexively appropriate these images as a part of their own identity.

The identity of the Tibetans living in exile and even in Tibet is a postcolonial conundrum. Tibetans living in exile are trying to frame their identity while the ones living in Tibet cannot assert themselves because Tibet has become China and also due to lack of political liberties within Tibet. Tibetan Diaspora has to frame their identity by breaking the myth of Tibet vis-a-vis ‘Shangri-la’ which according to the Westerners is: “A placeless utopia, in which happy and peaceful people devoted to the practice of Buddhism whose remote and ecologically enlightened land, ruled by a god-king, was invaded by the forces of evil” (Shakya n.p.). In this, Tibet and Tibetans seem to be performing the role of a service society existing for the self-gratification of

the West (Bishop 216). This also implies that Tibet as a conventional nation did not exist before the exile in 1959 and 'Tibetanness' is a constructed notion rather than existing in reality.

The notion of 'Shangri la' has thus damaged Tibetans' strife for an independent country, and has left their identity what Homi Bhabha calls "ambivalent" in which they are trying to, as William Safran says, "reconstitute a lost homeland and maintaining an endangered culture". (85) Their identity is then as Malkki states: "always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera. It is a creolized aggregate composed through bricolage" (37).

Hence, the Tibetan identity in diaspora stands questioned because it demonstrates something imaginary, constructed, and teleological. However, since knowledge about Tibet is produced not only in the West but in China, India, and Nepal as well, Tibetans have to negotiate their identity discourses at different levels, depending upon the kind of representational regime in which they have been operating.

In the beginning of their exile, even in India, the government of India called them Tibetan guests and the people consider them refugees. But the Dalai Lama has become an iconic figure in the entire world owing to the philosophy of Buddhism and his humanitarian outlook.

Diasporic identity is itself a matter of hybridity. Cultural crossovers can be empowering rather than uprooting, and that experiences of loss and discrimination should be turned into opportunities for acceptance and respect. In India and other parts of the world, Tibetans get changed by a mixture of political, religious and philosophical ideas, combination of flavours and creolisation of languages. In Tibetan diaspora we see this by looking at how human rights/ values have influenced Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan food blends with Indian spices and Tibetan colloquial language has both been standardized in exile and mixed with Hindi and English.

Tibetans have been able to retain their culture even in their exile; however they stand exposed to the culture of other countries in which they are residing. The influence of foreign culture has made them integrate into the alien culture. The glare of capitalism and modernity in certain countries of the world has amazed them. They are trying to assimilate and integrate into the culture of India and the world. The Dalai Lama himself admits that Mahatma Gandhi has a great influence over his philosophy of non-violence. He could be heard commenting on the Indian social and political system on many forums. Even people living in Tibet, have largely assimilated into Chinese culture as the final word for all things political and cultural comes from the government of the Peoples' Republic of China.

Once living peacefully in the high hills of Himalayas and on a large area of Tibetans have now been pushed to the margins and are reduced to very small portions of land in their exile. Their movement from one part to other parts of the world have made them both refugees as well as nomads. The Dalai Lama himself has become an eternal wanderer who travels from one country to another to acquaint the world about ethics based religion, and in turn to seek help from them for the freedom of his country. As a forced exile, the survival of the Tibetan diaspora is not an end in itself, but a means to an end to return to their mother country and to fulfil the mission to improve the spiritual condition of people around the world.

For the 'diasporas', especially forced exiles, nostalgic feelings about the homeland necessitates a desire to relocate their home. In their country of refuge, home becomes both a metaphor and fact for which they crave persistently. Tibetan diasporas have re-built a mini Tibet in McLeodganj, Dharamshala, which is now commonly known as Little Lhasa. The establishment of Tibetan Government-in-Exile led by the Dalai Lama, shows a complete control of their people in exile and at home. The exile government also conducts its own worldwide

elections for Tibetan People's Deputies and Kashag (cabinet) ministers. Since 1959, the Tibetan communities in exile have grown in size and developed remarkably in scope, purpose, and institutional organization. They have established agricultural settlements, agro-industry centres, handicraft centers, and more than eighty schools. Organizations, such as the Tibetan Youth Congress, the Tibetan Women's Association, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archive, have not only maintained traditional Tibetan culture outside of Tibet, but have allowed for the formulation of new cultural and political manifestations. In perhaps the most enterprising case, the Arnnye Machen Institute (AMI), Tibetan Centre for Advanced Studies, was formed in Dharamshala in 1992 (with the support of the Dalai Lama) in order to address what the Institute's founders see as serious deficiencies in Tibetan culture.

Though numerous odds are stacked against the Tibetans in the real world, at least in the virtual world it is a radically different situation. An overwhelming number of websites on Tibet are pro-Tibetan. To a certain extent, Tibet Online, which claims to serve as a virtual community space for the Tibet movement, succeeds in its aim of levelling the playing field by leveraging the Internet's ability to harness grassroots support for Tibet's survival (Tibet Online 2001). Though there is a substantial gap between success in the virtual world and success in the real world; however, with the virtual world increasingly governing the real, there may be a glimmer of hope for the Tibetan cause.

Tibetan people have faced alienation for many years in exile. They have used non-violent means to bring firmness to their struggle. They struggled not only for the independence of their motherland but also for the preservation of their culture, religion and identity. But, fifty-six year long Chinese occupation of Tibet has resulted only in the deaths of hundreds of thousands and

has produced a refugee flow that continues today. The Dalai Lama is a man who presides over a residing culture of thousands of years, and realizes that it has a problematic future. His philosophy for the solution of human problems is reflected by the following quote: “Because we all share this small planet earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. That is not just a dream, but a necessity.” (The Dalai Lama, Acceptance Speech)

In order to locate themselves in history, class, religion, and ideology, exiles pose resistance. Resistance discourse has a socio-political context but at heart it is humanistic. It recognizes the essence of man as a need for freedom and it questions the legitimacy of monolithic power structures. Postcolonial literature uncovers oppression, and constitutes a form of resistance. It is, as Edward Said has said, “the political necessity of taking a stand, of strategically essentializing a position from the perspective of those who were and are victimized and continue to suffer in various ways from an unequal, capitalist, patriarchal, and neocolonial world order” (Chowdhry 281). In her book, *Theorising Resistance*, Jasbir Jain says, “Literary resistance is not necessarily a militant voice: it functions through literary modes such as humour and farce, emotions such as anguish and despair and narrative strategies like interiorisation and contrapuntal expositions.” (26) The Dalai Lama, both a witness and an interrogator, is working with myth and language in order to locate his people in history, class, religion, and ideology; and contests the injustice of his times through his writings and discourses. His writings are concerned with the acts of resistance telling the world about the condition of the Tibetans.

Writing autobiographies and other forms of literature has posed a form a resistance to the PRC. Rewriting and recording of their history and the situations and conditions of exile is a politics to show the atrocities inflicted on these peace loving people by the perpetrator. The Dalai Lama has written almost 88 books on Tibetans history and spirituality including his two

autobiographies, *My Land, My People* and *Freedom in Exile*. Many other writers too have written on this theme. Some notable authors and their books include: Jamyang Norbu's *Warriors of Tibet* (1986); Zhaxi Dawa's story "A Starless Night" (1995); Tsering Shakya's and Herbert J. Batt's *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels & Wind Horses*; etc.

Chinese represent Tibetans as essentially backward, primitive, and barbaric (oriental) while justifying its control over Tibet in terms of its modernizing role, its overthrow of the feudalism existing in pre-1959 Tibet, and its liberation of serfs and women. Zhang Zhiwei, vice-chairman of the *Literature and Art Association of the Tibetan Autonomous Region*, points out that "Tibet is undeniably a part of China, and Tibetan culture is an indispensable part of the vast treasure trove of Chinese culture" (6). The Chinese state makes historical arguments to buttress its claim of sovereignty over Tibet; on the other, Tibetan exiles and their supporters make counter-claims and assert that Tibet was for all practical purposes independent from China. The Dalai Lama has been incessantly trying to muster strength and gather support for the independence of his country, but the PRC view it as a threat to the integrity of the motherland. Paradoxically, Tibet receives overwhelming sympathy and concern from individuals, organizations and many countries of the world, nevertheless, the Tibetan political struggle remains marginalised and on the periphery of the international political agenda. The world superpowers like the USA, the UK, and France etc. look at Tibet in terms of its role in Sino-Western relations or Sino-Indian border disputes, denying subjectivity to the Tibetans. This neglect reflects a web of strategic interests of the major world powers who consider the Tibetans question as an 'internal matter of China'. Hence, from many countries of the world, including UNO, Tibet receives far greater support against human rights violations than for independence. The numerous cases of self-immolations in Tibet by Tibetans is a concern for everyone and

everywhere but no one voices for their cause. However, the Tibetan Diaspora view themselves as essentially Tibetans; and as Tibetans, they have a responsibility towards all beings.

Tibetan government in exile is not so acknowledged in the world politics as it is neither legitimate nor acceptable as it is, what could be said ‘a government within a government and a country inside a country.’ For this, even a layman can question its authenticity. It is strange that the people who themselves are either refugees or may be called nomads, are running a government in exile. Their presence as a government in Dharamashala makes India the only country in the world that has two governments, which means that there is a government within government.

It remains a fact that Tibetans in India are not recognised as refugees, nor do they have the rights of citizens to own property and can seek employment within the public sector. They are basically living on leased land, to be returned in about 50 years from now. Even if huge monasteries and well functioning welfare offices, schools and old peoples’ homes are running smoothly, life in exile for Tibetans seems to be a rather scattered existence.

To conclude, the People’s Republic of China has been able to colonize the Tibetans physically by usurping their homeland; however, the Tibetans being most peaceful and highly spiritual people, it could not catch hold of them psychologically. The resistance of the Tibetan Diaspora politically as well as spiritually in the guidance of their supreme leader, the Dalai Lama, shows their commitment towards having a home, identity and nation. The Dalai Lama’s rhetoric on universal responsibility based spirituality on many forums of the world has relocated the mythical, mysterious yet real home of the Tibetans. His books and divine speeches have conveyed to the world their angst about their homeland that has been seized by the Dragon. The

creation of a virtual Tibet in the highlands of Dharamshala, in India, and registering a powerful presence in media and internet show their powerful yet desperate effort to gain autonomy or independence for their country. However, their efforts signal a very slight chance of their return to their long aspired homeland. Reincoart aptly describes Tibet and Tibetans as:

Real Tibet transcends politics and economics; it is invisible, beyond sense perception, beyond intellect. It is the mysterious land of the psyche, of what lies beyond death, a universe to which some Tibetans have the key and which their subtle soul seems to have explored as thoroughly as Western scientists have explored our physical universe” (262).

Hence, Tibet exists virtually if not in reality for the Tibetan Diasporas across the world.

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