

Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works

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Abstract

Diasporic movements from the tiny Himalayan nations (including Tibet) are not new but these have not been in the limelight in critical discussions. The corpus of Nepalese, Bhutanese and Tibetan diasporic literary output in English is also not as much visible as those of other South Asian countries. The literary endeavours of these diasporas are in fact in a nascent stage. Nevertheless, some powerful writers have in the meantime emerged to write about their lived experience from exilic-diasporic perspectives, mostly focussing on the nations they left behind. Mention may be made of Kunzang Choden of Bhutanese origin, Bhuchung D. Sonam of Tibetan origin, Manjushree Thapa of Nepalese descent and Prajwal Parajuly of mixed origin. Their movements to the neighbouring countries or to the West pose cultural challenges and create crises regarding civilisational norms. The nations of their origin and their cultures have been the constant reference points in their writings for either emotional reasons or for activist causes. In the process, the issues of nationalism and modernity occur on different occasions. Subtle arguments of absence of “coeval time,” in the sense Johannes Fabian uses the phrase in his book *Time and Other*, surface in the literary texts and as a result issues related to cultural “authenticity”/Western modernity make their presence felt. This article will explore these issues as represented by some of the writers from the Himalayan region, particularly the Tibetan and Nepalese ones. In doing so, attempts will be made to explore the differences in the types of diaspora originating from this particular geographical area.

Keywords

Diaspora, exile, nation, coeval, primitivism, modernity

Introduction

Indians call me ‘ching chong,’ the Chinese arrested me when I walked into Tibet, beat me up in jail and threw me out and said ‘Get out of here, you bloody Indian.’

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Who am I? I am born and brought up in India and speak four Indian languages, love Bollywood, have more Indian friends than those of my own tribe. Who am I? (Tenzin Tsundue, "Room for Hope" 47)

Diasporic movements from the tiny Himalayan nations like Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet are not new but these have not been in the limelight in critical discussions. The corpus of diasporic literary output from the Himalayan belt is also not as much visible as those of most other South Asian countries. The literary endeavours resulting from these diasporas are in fact in a nascent stage. Nevertheless, some powerful writers have in the meantime emerged to write about their lived experience from diasporic perspectives. Mention may be made of the Bhutanese writer Kunzang Choden's war novel *The Circle of Karma* (2005), Nepalese writer Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* (2010) and Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee* (2014). Many of them focus on the nations they left behind, but some also script the experience they encounter in the diasporic space. The pattern of their movements across modern nation states is a bit different because of the age-old practice of uninhibited movement across the Himalayan spaces and the ancestral memory of "borderlessness" of the region. The first novel written in English by Kunzang Choden, *The Circle of Karma*, for example, projects a female protagonist Tsono who has been on a religious journey in mid-1950s throughout the region – Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and India – countries which are bound together by Buddhism. The same happens to some characters in Prajwal Parajuly's *Gurkha's Daughter* or *Land Where I Flee*. Such movements into the territorial spaces of other countries had been quite in practice among the people. The sense of radical disruption does not always accompany the movements and settlements into the new places. Individuals, even mass of people, often pour into neighbouring regions which appear to them as a continuous run of mother earth populated by neighbours of similar cultural-religious orientations. There is a substantial presence of Nepalese, and some presence of Bhutanese or Tibetan population (belonging to different generations) in India, particularly concentrated in some territorial zones in the country. India may legitimately be called a diasporic space for them. It is in this sense that Tibetan diasporic situation in India or Bhutan or Bangladesh may be discussed from within the framework of South Asian experience.

South Asia: Critiquing the Nomenclature

Tibet is located in the Himalayan region which is the focal area of this article. Tibet is not usually considered as part of South Asia.² However, considering its

² Most of the nations in the Himalayan region fall within the category of South Asia which conventionally includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The "Call for Paper" for this issue of *Asiatic* includes Afghanistan in the category. A *Telegraph* editorial also does the same. It argues that the "term 'South Asia' makes geography prevail over

proximity to the artificially constructed territorial zone called “South Asia,” its close cultural-religious links with its neighbours, particularly Bhutan, and the history of state sympathy and support for the Tibetan cause, Tibetan diaspora, may legitimately demand its space in the present discussion. One may have to reorient one’s idea of “South Asia” in that case. The reconfiguration of the South Asian political map by the British colonisers is mostly anomalous, and even an anathema, to the people in the Himalayan range. They have an ancestral memory of old maps, old routes of movements and old ethnic and inter-ethnic ties. Such a context often interrogates the whole cartographic endeavours of modern times. Instances of fresh re-mapping in recent history – China’s occupation of Tibet in 1950, Sikkim’s inclusion into India in 1975 and the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation in 1971, to cite some recent examples – have further complicated the history of human memory. Chinese appropriation of Tibet and secession of what is now Bangladesh from Pakistan have been accompanied by violence and trauma, and have triggered displacement of their people of an unprecedented nature. India is the major recipient of the exilic mass from these countries. It is the country which has morally supported the Tibetan freedom movement and even helped the Bangladesh liberation war by intervening militarily. It has provided a base for the official functioning of the Tibetan Government in exile which is located in the hilly region of Dharamsala in North India.

To discuss the diaspora from the Himalayan region is thus a problematic task. The memory of free movements has its lingering traces in the memory of the people of the region. In the works of Nepalese or Bhutanese writers we see characters frequently visiting India for education, or for professional and economic reasons and some never go back home. Diaspora in such cases does not necessarily mean journeys to far-off Western countries and relocation to different landscapes or radically alien cultural environments. It does not, however, mean that no migration to the West has taken place. On the contrary, as I have pointed out earlier, there is a growing body of literary works from the Western diasporic spaces. I shall try to deal with the nature of two specific diasporas from the region – Tibetan and Nepalese – as evident in select texts. Tibetan writings in general represent the exilic elements and express the desire of return to the “mythic” homeland while in the Nepalese writings the desire for settling down in a diasporic location is very strong. I shall take up some extracts

history and culture” and that “geography cannot determine the culture of a region.” It mentions a recent controversy in California over the issue of labelling India as South Asia in the school syllabi. It traces the history of the term as “a fallout of the process of the withdrawal of the British Empire from the Indian subcontinent.” “Not satisfied with the division of India, British academics coined the term, “South Asia,” into which they lumped together India, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and, after 1971, Bangladesh. A large geographical space that had for many centuries been part of similar civilizational contents and influences was broken up and disaggregated in an attempt to give them distinct regional characteristics. They were then aggregated to form South Asia, to bring them under another new academic label – area studies” (“Civilizations of India”).

from the poetic works of Tibetan diasporic writers to show how the desire for a return to the “lost” nation constitutes the main thrust of their literary works and consider Manjushree Thapa’s novel *Seasons of Flight* to demonstrate the desire of some Nepalese characters to settle down in diaspora.

Before taking up the texts for discussion we need to probe into the term “South Asia” itself. Nomenclatures like “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia” are constricted for discursive exploration of cultural products and cultural traditions which overflow the territorial borders in terms of action, theme, characters and cultural intonations. We inevitably impose limits on the scope of discussion because of the conventional territorial implications designated by the terms. But human relationships defy such claustrophobic closure and the literary developments often cover regions both inside and outside the boundary. Bibhash Choudhury, in his book *Beyond Cartography: The Contemporary South Asian Novel in English* (2011), raises the issue of such disjunctures created by the new cartography. He believes that creation of strict boundaries ignores the fact of historical continuities and argues that the space called “South Asia” should be considered “in terms of cultural and historical thread which bound the people in a common situational logic” (10). He quotes David Ludden who asserts that “we must escape the confines of modern boundaries that enclose and separate civilizations” (qtd. in Choudhury 10). Ludden also feels that it should be “most appropriate to study South Asia as a huge open geographical space in southern Eurasia, rather than imagining it to be a fixed historical region with a single territorial definition” (qtd. in Choudhury 10). One way of reading South Asian situation that will make sense is to access the region from the point of view of a “collective” and through “certain common registers such as food, dress, customs, rituals, and faith” (Choudhury 11). This, according to Choudhury, will be a “more accommodating format” (11).

The above approach will be more pragmatic because it does not erase the differences but can build up a solid foundation for approaching the literature and culture of a region, like the Himalayan belt which, historically and culturally, form a continuous run of a space inhabited by people of similar cultural and religious practices, and therefore can be imagined as a “collective.” It is in this context that one may accept Choudhury’s advocacy of “the question of beyond” (13) which forms part of his book’s title and by which he means a more flexible scope for border crossing in discourses. Interestingly, he refers to Afghanistan and Tibet as having strong ties with their two neighbouring countries: Pakistan with Afghanistan, and Bhutan with Tibet, but he observes that “[t]wo landscapes – Afghanistan and Tibet – are generally excluded in the overreaching narratives of South Asian history” (13-14). He “sought to depart from the tradition of this cartographic bracket, choosing to go ‘beyond’ by bringing Khaled Hosseini within my discursive purview” (14). He mentions Feryal Ali Gauhar’s *No Space for Further Burials* (2007) as a novel that explores the “common cultural matrix that

draws in the peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan in some crucial matters” (14). By the same logic the Tibetan experience of diaspora can be brought under the purview of the discourse pursued in this article. It is more so because India, for the Tibetan refugees, remains the diasporic space and the occupied Tibet is the distant “homeland” to which they want to return. Thus, Tibet figures prominently in the literary imaginary of the Tibetan writers in exile. A strong motif of activism also characterises their writings. Although Choudhury finds the “interface between the Tibetan version of Buddhism and its prevalence in Bhutanese society,” he does not discuss any Tibetan work like Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999). He just refers to it in his introduction (14). I, however, acknowledge the importance of his discussion of this lacuna.

Tibetan Diaspora: Poems of Bhuchung D. Sonam

Tibetan diaspora is spread all over the world, but the epicentre of their activities is in Dharamasala in India. Tibetan people in exile envisage Tibet to be their nation and dream of returning to the Free Tibet in future. Tibet is the constant reference point in their discourses and a pan-Tibetan identity has developed in the context of their sufferings in their home country as well as in the diasporic space. In their political movements, discourses and cultural representations, they project Tibet as the national space to return to. From the points of view of cartography and demography, they claim that Tibet has a defined geographical boundary and a permanent population, features considered as pre-requisites for both a state and a nation. Dawa Norbu, a social scientist, asserts that “[e]lite consciousness of Tibetan territoriality was evident as early as 8th Century AD, when a Sino-Tibetan treaty declared, ‘Tibetans are happy in Tibet and Chinese in China; and neither should trespass the other’s territory... (10). Such territoriality, according to Anderson, gives a “limitedness” to the nation because “even the largest of them [nations]... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (7). Members of the expatriate community, who bank on such a historical perception and who are also keen to use a Western rhetoric of statehood and nationhood to draw the attention of the world, claim that Tibet is a state as well as a nation. Åshild Kolås, whose article “Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion” deals at length with this aspect, observes,

In order to gain recognition and support, they [Tibetan elite expatriates] would have to convince the world that Tibet had in fact been a ‘state’ according to the legitimate definition, with a permanent population, a defined territory, government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. *Closely related to the concept of ‘permanent population’ is the concept of ‘nationhood’.* (59; emphasis added)

The concept of Tibet as a “state” and a “nation” is, however, unique in the sense that religion plays an important role here – it is “a particular territorial unit

identified with and integrated by the Buddhist doctrine” (Kolås 53). Western concepts of the “political” and the “national” preclude the coexistence of the secular and the religious. Critics like Ernest Gellner think of “nation” and “nationalism” in terms of industrialism and secularism (as opposed to agrarian principles closely related to feudalism and religion). Modernity constitutes an important part of their argument. “If nationalism as a political ideology is incompatible with religion by definition, nationalism inevitably becomes a matter of secular politics, defined by its secular nature as such” (Kolås 63). In such a case, as Kolås points out, “Tibetan ‘nationalism’ may prove to be an aberration” (52). His argument is:

Religion (*chos*) comprises the main idiom of Tibetan identity; the source of unity between all Tibetans. Religion as a source of identity seems to be especially important to the uneducated, the elderly and recent arrivals from Tibet. On the other hand, the secular concept of Tibet (*bod*) is now being established as the primary idiom of identity, mainly as an elite project. (Kolås 64)

The highly respected figure of Dalai Lama, who is believed to be the “reincarnate protector deity of Tibet [Chenrezig]” (Kolås 64) embodies both the political/secular system and the religious order.³ This non-Western concept of nationhood gained intensity after the Chinese take-over of Tibet in 1950. As Dawa Norbu, who argues that traditional, and not just “modern,” elements also contribute to the concept of a nation, particularly in non-Western contexts, points out, “With the appearance of the generalised ‘other’ [the Han or the Chinese population in Tibet] since 1950, sectarian and regional identities have assumed a passive, secondary role in Tibet. In their place, a vaguely-felt pan-Tibetan identity has arisen, particularly in the main towns” (11). The people “are inevitably driven to the various Tibetan traditions of Buddhism as the ultimate source of their pan-Tibetan identity, reinforced by other shared commonalities such as written language, territoriality and lifestyle” (Norbu 10). This pan-Tibetan (trans)-national individual is both modern and traditional, political and religious. Such an identity is firmly embedded in the members of the Tibetan community spread all over the world.

As part of the attempt to preserve this pan-Tibetan identity, the refugee population in India try to inculcate their traditional knowledge in their children who learn the Tibetan language and culture in schools established in the settlements, perform cultural practices and at the same time sustain activist efforts

³ Kolås points out the role Buddhism plays in matters related to politics: “In the case of Tibet, the crucial status of the Dalai Lama epitomized the political system. The Tibetan state continued the universal Buddhist paradigm of statehood, but collapsed the two functions of patron of religion and head of religion into one – the role of Dalai Lama” (53).

to influence world opinion about the Free Tibet Movement. The refugees are also actively involved in creative arts/performances. In an article titled “Vibrant Arts” Bernstorff comments:

Among the thousands of refugees, who reached India in 1959 there were many actors, musicians and dancers. Sensing the danger of their dispersal in all directions Dalai Lama encouraged the formation of the ‘Dance and Drama Society’ where the artists could reassemble, pool their instruments and practice their music, their dance and *lhamo*, the Tibetan opera. ‘The lively daylong operas brought colour, laughter and a reminder of home into the otherwise hopeless and dreary lives of the newly bereft refugees.’ (295-96)

Their creative writings in English, particularly novels, so far are, however, very limited. Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), Thubten Samphel’s *Falling through the Roof* (2008) and Tsering Namgyal Khortsa’s *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2013) are a few notable works of fiction. While Norbu’s novel is about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, the celebrated detective created by Arthur Conan Doyle, in Tibet during the “missing years,” the two other works, to a certain extent, deal with the exilic experience of the Tibetans. But, as Tsering Namgyal observes in a book review, the stories in *Falling through the Roof* “are set in what can be dubbed as ‘spiritual Tibet’ – India, Nepal and Tibet – as distinct from geographical or political Tibet” (emphasis added). In Khortsa’s novel too, the stories found in the suitcase which belong to Dawa Tashi, a major figure in the work, evoke “a rarefied [world], the world of academia, an ivory tower that has little of the smell of sweat and the sound of the groan of daily struggle of refugees eking out a living in a grounding world” (Samphel, “Tibetan Rage”). By contrast, *Windhorse* (2013) is more directly related to the Tibetan cause; it dwells on the theme of Tibetan resistance movement. The author, Kaushik Barua, an Indian diasporic writer, conceives in the novel an interesting narrative of how a small group of Tibetan rebels – Lhasang, born and brought up at Kham in Tibet, Norbu, the son of an affluent Tibetan expatriate in India, and others, including a former Buddhist monk – are drawn into an armed struggle against the Chinese. *Windhorse* is deeply involved with the Tibetan struggle and the mockery made of their fight by the short-termed military aid given by international powers and the play of international politics in the Himalayan region. But Barua does not strictly qualify as a writer from the Himalayan region, hence the novel is not being discussed here. There are, however, some poems, short stories and essays which focus more directly on Tibet as the “lost” nation and are, therefore, more suitable for our purpose. Some of these will be discussed here.

There is a strong sense of nationalism evident in some Tibetan poems written in exilic locations. These convey a deep sense of loss, nostalgia and identity crisis. The epigraph of this article points to the depth of Tenzin Tsundue’s identity crisis which is representative of that of his community members. His *Tsen-Göl*:

Stories and Poems of Resistance (2012) speaks exclusively of the activism of the Tibetan people who organise march to Tibet during the Beijing Olympic and stresses the need for India's proactive stance towards the Tibet question and offer a picture of the sufferings, hardship and nostalgia of his people. The book was published by TibetWrites, a small press which has dedicated itself to writerly and journalistic activism. Such "print media" (which operate from the Western locations and with the help of donations from well-wishers like the Dutch poet Gerard Beentjes, also participate in what Anderson calls "print capitalism") in an age of fast communication and virtual reality helps create the sense of an "imagined community."⁴ Print capitalism, according to Anderson, "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36). The members of the "imagined" Tibetan community, thus created, retain their belief in the history of Tibet and in the figure of Dalai Lama as the protective and guiding spirit of the people located both in Tibet and in the diaspora. The combination of both "modern" and "traditional" ways of nationalism creates a unique situation of memory and hope among the Tibetans.

TibetWrites publishes works written by the sympathisers of the Tibetan cause. They belong to different countries of the world. Bhuchung D. Sonam, who is the soul of this press, has dedicated to Tsundue a poem entitled "Red Forehead" which is a tribute to the sacrifice of a nationalist activist. In a note given at the end of the same poem, Sonam introduces Tsundue as "a poet whose forehead displays a red bandana which he pledged never to remove until Tibet wins independence from the Communist Chinese occupation" ("Red Forehead" 21). The poem builds up a contrast between Tenzin Tsundue, the activist writer, and the poet Sonam himself, pinpointing the basic quantitative differences that they have in regard to their responses to the Tibet question. The poet is asked two basic questions by the collective "they" (which represents the common mass of the Tibetan people in exile) as to Tsundue's extreme sensitivity to the nationalist issue: "Why is his blood so hot?" ("Red Forehead" 20) and "Why is his voice so intense?" ("Red Forehead" 20). In the four-stanza poem the poet responds to the questions, drawing attention to his own inadequacies and those of the common mass. He addresses them by saying that "you" were "orphaned" (which carries the sense of loss of the nation) "when red guns boomed across our silent

⁴ In his article "Virtual Tibet: The Media," Thubten Samphel gives a detailed description of the activities of both virtual and print media in the context of the Tibetan issue. He describes how "Tibetans in exile are embracing the internet just as they did Buddhism more than 1,300 years ago" (167). This new "religion" has created a "cohesive community" and a "virtual Tibet" (167). There are an estimated "250 Tibet-related websites, in English, Hindi, Chinese, Tibetan, French, Japanese, Korean and other languages" (167). The power of the modern information technology carries all Tibet-related news even to the generally "cyber-shy" Chinese authorities and to the ordinary Chinese people some of whom respond to the Tibet issue with concern and sympathy. For details of web and print journalism related to Tibet, see Samphel's article.

hills/you were deserted by the mountains/when our wooden bowls were turned upside down” (“Red Forehead” 20) – thereby tracing the loss to the moment of the Chinese aggression on the motherland. With reference to the first question, he mentions his own reaction in the following lines: “my blood boils too/But it does not turn my forehead red/nor does it drive my passion mad/yet the same blood that runs in you/Runs in me/Our blood stamped with snow flakes/singing the mountain winds/moving with ancient warriors” (“Red Forehead” 20). These lines evoke the territoriality, the natural environment and the warrior tradition of the nation.

To the second question, he observes in a similar fashion: “my voice rises too/But it does not turn my forehead red/Yet the same voice that calls you/Calls me/Invoke the mountain gods/To tell the warriors’ tales/To be a bit more like you” (“Red Forehead” 21). The voice that calls the people across the national boundary creates a pan-Tibetan imagined community sharing cultural and religious beliefs. This reinforces the nostalgia and invites the arousal of a warrior’s spirit not only in him but also in the members of the collective “you” who are now largely inactive, and even insensitive, to the call from the distant mountain. Another poem “A Song from a Distance” in the same volume is addressed to Woesser, “a Tibetan author, poet, blogger and public intellectual, [who] was expelled from her editorial job in Lhasa by the Chinese Government because of her writing. She now lives in Beijing, a forced exile, from her homeland, Tibet” (“A Song from a Distance” 6). He feels a sense of strong bonding for her and sings from the distance: “Here in exile, my wrinkles deepen./The leaves fall from the trees./You will sharpen your pen in that city/Where each of your words are measured,/Each breath checked, each step followed./But your pen dances with tales/Which came to me in another tongue” (“A Song from a Distance” 6). Two individuals divided by three national spaces are brought together. Internet plays an important role here as the speaker gathers information through the modern information technology [“Everyday when I open the internet/My heart fears that there will be news/Of your disappearance” (“A Song from a Distance” 5)] which is used extensively by the supporters of Free Tibet movement to gather and spread news.

In the poem “She is in Boston,” with the United States of America as the background, Sonam offers a close-up of an old Tibetan woman with wrinkled face, knitting wools, vending her wares like gloves, mittens, mufflers and monkey hats in front of Davis Square T-station in Boston, bestowing her smile on the passers-by. Her English is limited to “Good” and “Thank You” which she has learnt from her granddaughter. The implication is that the family, now located in America, comprises three generations. The trajectory of her journey to the new space is mentioned: she had been to Kathmandu, Nepal where on the path around Boudhnath stupa she sold *tsampa*, *chura* and tea bricks; she had been to Dharamsala where, near the temple gate, she peddled *laphing*, *momo* and *aloo khatsa*;

later in Delhi she sold sweaters, jackets and T-shirts in Connaught Place. Now in Boston she sits seven days a week between the exit door of the station and a bench in the corner selling her wares. She is not tired of the journey around the world but the “waiting is too long” (11). She prays to “Yeshe Norbu, The Precious One” for her return to the homeland: “Driven by the karmic wind/To the white man’s land/.../May the wishes of Tenzin Gyatso come true/May I can go back to my home/So that I can die in peace” (11). For the individual speaker here, the two religious figures of Yeshe Norbu, supposed to be the reincarnation of a great Buddhist master who died in a Chinese prison, and Tenzin Gyatso, the religious name of the XIVth Dalai Lama, who wanted to free the occupied Tibet, hold the key to the possibility of her return to the nation. At the core of her imagination of Tibet as a political unit lies these religious figures, thus underscoring the role of the traditional Buddhist religion in the “modern” concept of a nation.

In another poem “New York! New York!” the speaker identifies himself as “a greenhorn in your streets/Coming from the cold mountains” and feels that “Your streets are full and your hearts empty/My hands are empty but my heart is full” (18). “We all came here to find our identity/Do you have a name for us?” (19).

I am a refugee, I am a prisoner of conscience
 I am a revolutionary, I am a student activist
 I am an underground writer, I am a whistle-blower
 I am a wanted man, I am a deposed leader
 We all ran away from despots and tyrants
 Will you have time to nurture our strengths? (19)

The above extract which speaks of different kinds of diasporic Tibetans, all connected by the images of forcible displacement, colonial oppression, popular uprising and a hope for American “nourishment” in the form of political help for the nation which is tugged in a corner of the Himalayas. The Tibetans of various professions and activities are ultimately merged in an imagined collective “we” because, to use Anderson’s words, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each [community], the nation is always conceived as a *deep, horizontal comradeship*” (7; emphasis added). But this “we” is an exclusive group comprising Tibetans only who look backwards to Tibet as homeland, and look forward to its freedom, never amnesic of their own genesis.

Nepalese Diaspora: Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight

In Manjushree Thapa’s work, however, we find a contrasting picture. Her characters are, mostly, discontent with the situations in Nepal. Despite idealist elements who want to purge the country of its ills, the overall impression is one of unacceptability and there is a strong urge for emigration to the West. In the

story “Friends” included in *Tilled Earth*, for instance, Kamal Malla, a computer programmer born and brought up in Nepal feels claustrophobic in his country and wants to leave Nepal but cannot do so because of his “responsibilities” towards the members of his family as well as of the machinations of his neighbours. Hrishikesh Pandey, who comes from abroad with an idealistic vision to serve his country, has to leave Nepal ultimately because he finds it impossible to negotiate the negative social environment and unfriendly attitudes of his colleagues. By juxtaposing the two characters – Kamal and Hrishikesh – who move, or want to move, from opposite locations and to opposite directions – the United States of America and Nepal – Thapa foregrounds, from two different perspectives, the depressing state in which the country and its people are deeply immersed.

Similarly, in her novel *Seasons of Flight* (2010) Thapa depicts a picture of a “war”-torn Nepal and shows how innocent people are caught in the cross-fire. The rise of Maoist insurgency poses serious challenges to the state power and eventually plunges the country into darkness. Thapa portrays sensitively how incidents of human rights violations occur on an unprecedented level and affect the lives of common people while “middlemen” and corrupt elements reap personal advantages out of them.

The most important manifestation of this motif of human rights violation is communicated through the incident involving Kancha, the owner of a computer centre, who was instrumental in Prema’s obtaining her visa to the US and who was beaten mercilessly by the army which suspected him to have been in collusion with the Maoists and whom they took away, never to be seen again. It is this violent situation that apparently forces Prema, the female protagonist of the novel, to leave her country and settle in the United States. While in the US, Prema constantly draws parallels with “war”-torn countries like Guatemala in particular and other countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. She reads a lot on Guatemalan history and compares herself with the immigrants from there. She has an affair with Luis Reyes, whose father left Guatemala to settle down in the United States. This affair in fact offers her scope to access the history of Guatemala and other countries embroiled in political turmoil. However, the immediate reason for Prema’s departure from Nepal is her chance winning of a lottery – “American green card lottery” – which enables her to migrate to the US. Migration in the text is usually a norm among the educated young persons: “As college had drawn to an end, Prema’s friends had hatched elaborate schemes to migrate to India, or farther to Australia, Europe, Canada, America. There was so little in Nepal, everyone just wanted to leave” (6). Yet, as in the story – “Friends” – mentioned earlier, Prema’s centrifugal movement is juxtaposed with her sister Bijaya’s “inward” movement deeper into the country. Bijaya joins the Maoist movement and goes underground. Her introvert nature suggests her capacity to reflect on the problems her country has been facing. Prema remembered what Bijaya said

as a girl, “I hate where we’re from” (210), a statement which underscores the depth of her disgust with the prevailing situation in the country. When Prema reminds her of this after the Civil war in Nepal ends and democracy is apparently established, she retorts:

‘But I love my country,’ Bijaya’s eyes glittered fiercely. ‘Everything I’ve done – I do – is for my country, for the liberation of my country, my people. How can anyone hate where they’re from?’ she said, spitting out her words. ‘It’s like hating your mother,’ she said. (212)

Bijaya’s aggression reflects her deep involvement with her country and her strong pro-activist inclination. Perhaps it also reflects a sense of satisfaction after the fulfilment of her dream of a transformed country in the act of which she has played a small role. Thapa thus creates a sense of tension as the characters veer between the two ethical choices: staying in the country which supposedly amounts to “patriotism,” and leaving the country for a diasporic zone which apparently amounts to an act of “betrayal.” This choice between the nation and the diaspora is a serious concern in Thapa’s work and the guilt of not being there in the nation creates an anxiety in the mind of the characters. It is perhaps because of this dilemma that Thapa introduces the narrative device of winning a “lottery” which implies obtaining a green card. It renders her entry into the United States as “accidental” rather than deliberate. It is like the “unintentional” act of Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist in *Jasmine* to venture into the same country as an illegal immigrant to symbolically burn the American dresses of her deceased husband on the campus of the educational institutions where he had obtained admission before his death. This is rather a flimsy ground for immigration. Prema’s “excuse” is a bit more sophisticated but “accidental” and flimsy nevertheless.

Split between the two ethical choices, Prema seems to harbour a sense of guilt for which she temporarily severs her link with everything that reminds her of her “belonging” to Nepal – her family, her boyfriend back home, her colleagues, her acquaintances and so on. While she appears to be heading towards what Freud calls “mourning,” a process in which an individual’s sense of loss is assimilated into his or her psyche, deep down in her mind she has been in a state of “melancholia,” a state of mind where the loss of near ones or things one loves (e.g. one’s own country) do not register and the presence of the absent thing continues. In refusing to remember what is deep-set in her psyche, Prema attempts a kind of re-orientation of the self in the in-between period which is one of uncertain flotsam situation.⁵

⁵ In this movement there is an unmistakable similarity with the female protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine*. Like Prema who considers herself “just not – normal” (175), Jasmine calls herself a “freak.” The sentence “Prema had wanted to reinvent herself in America” (3) sounds very much like Jasmine’s claim of having reinvented herself. Jasmine stayed temporarily in a

In certain moments and situations Nepal, however, resurfaces with all her affective capacity. Nepali, for instance, is called “the language of her sorrows” as she speaks to a compatriot in the “Little Nepal” in the United States “[f]or the first time in years” (167) – thus conceptualising Nepal as a land of sorrows and indirectly justifying her decision to leave it. She again refers to “some primitive superstition” of Nepal (194). The lack of development in Nepal is put in contrast with the high level of American achievement in the field of science and technology. The impression one gets in the representation is that Nepal is a backward country, lagging behind in terms of the Western concept of development – a country and its people which are essentially “elemental” in nature to the Western gaze. Hence, Nepal is pushed back in time although in reality it belongs to the same time. This is what Fabian, an anthropologist, calls “allochronism” or a “denial of coevalness.” The novel contains enough evidence of this “denial of coevalness” which I am going to discuss in the next paragraph.

In an initial phase of their acquaintance, Luis refers to Prema as “elemental”: “There’s something so *elemental* about you” (84; emphasis original). Perhaps the word in emphasis refers to the “exotic” qualities in her. The word refers to the person’s proximity to nature as opposed to culture, an euphemism for “backwardness,” something lacking in terms of values of “civilisation.” In her turn, she furnishes him with some more information about her own background which would take her further back in terms of time and modernity: “She told him that when she was growing up there was no electricity in her village; there was no radio, no television, no diversion” (84). This again is dubbed by Luis as “so *elemental*”: “No electricity, huh. God, I can’t even imagine. See what I mean? That’s so *elemental*” (85; emphasis original). Prema’s comment that there is electricity *now* in the village does not really ameliorate his original impression, and the fact that there is a “telephone office” *now* really appears “amazing” to him. The absence of personal mobile phones is surprising to the inhabitant of the Western world and the concept of a public “telephone office” from where to access the rest of the world creates a lack of temporal symmetry. Out of sympathy, he even offers his own mobile phone for Prema’s use. This “newness” in the Nepalese village (which is applied metonymically to the entire country) falls far behind the “nowness” of the American world in terms of science and technology. Interestingly, in the whole course of the novel this Western perception is not contested, rather in a way Prema participates in the discourse of Nepal’s otherness.

In terms of anthropology this “temporal distancing,” this “denial of coevalness” is “*a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in*

Punjabi ghetto in the US; like her, Prema too stayed in the “Little Nepal” in America. Like Jasmine who moves from place to place (and from man to man) in pursuit of her own identity, Prema too changes her locations in search of “true America” which will contribute to her own re-making. Both of them are in the process of being born anew, in an ever-continuing process of flux.

a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (Fabian 31; emphasis original). He argues that “Time” is employed ideologically as “a key category with which we conceptualize relationships between us (or our theoretical constructs) and our objects (the Other)” (28). Such knowledge production is conducted “under the conditions of colonialism, imperialism and oppression” (32). In Thapa’s text, which is produced under the conditions of neo-imperialism, this temporal asymmetry is evident in the discourse that the characters enter into. It is also evident in the investments and subtle involvement of the NGOs in Nepal (Prema worked in one). Prema and Trailokya, her colleague, were engaged by an NGO to “offset the carbon footprint of a British corporation” and to teach the poor and ignorant villagers about how not to use firewood and thus cooperate in the conservation works (6). The epistemological gap and the leadership of the West in the conservation efforts are quite evident here.

Most immigrants from Asia approach the West with a sense of awe mainly because of the asymmetry of economy and unequal power relations. Luis’s employment of temporal distancing may not be surprising, given the general lack of knowledge among the Americans about Nepal’s location or its culture⁶ but what is surprising is Prema’s contribution to this “denial of coevalness.” Many other South Asian fiction writers willingly participate in the Western strategy which reduces the immigrants from the region as backward, primitive and even savage. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* or *Wife* is a case in point. They do not make any attempt, to use Fabian’s words, to invade “the temporal fortress of the West” with the help of “the Time of the Other” (35).

In the scheme of the novel *America*, a site of development and Western modernity, is projected as a concept, as an “unfolding” idea, rather than just a territory. The novel is therefore a narrative of escape from the violent, war-torn, less evolved Nepal, immersed in poverty, to a technologically advanced and economically “progressive” America. Prema is in search of this “concept.” She wants to reach “real” America through layers of experiences. The first step towards this progress is the arrival in America and living in the “Little Nepal,” a ghetto, where she worked in a restaurant. This temporary stay in the Nepalese ghetto is necessary for a breathing space. It is a space from where she wants to feel the pulse of “real” America which is her destination. It provides her scope to survey both the Nepalese immigrants, static and traditional in their views, and the wide expanse of the American world waiting to be explored. In her epistemological search for the idea, she leaves “Little Nepal,” much to the consternation of her Nepalese “compatriots,” and hops on to another space, a

⁶ Most American people are blissfully unaware of Nepal’s geographical location, and those who know are emphatic about its touristic potentiality and its association with spirituality. What is disturbing for Prema, and also constitutes an important issue in the discourses on the nomenclature “South Asia,” Nepal is known in association with its bigger, more powerful, and hence more visible, neighbour India (See, for example, the first chapter of Thapa’s novel and pp. 94-95).

working girl's house described as a "rickety" structure. This is a multicultural space where she gets familiarised with Americans, American usage of English, American culture, the habit of living alone and fending for herself without the protection of the guardians. This space provides her a wider scope to not only meet American people of flesh and blood but also to explore America conceptually. She applies for jobs, works temporarily in a shop owned by a Korean, and then moves on to work as a care-giver to an old white American woman. As part of her assignments, she has to take the old lady to a hospital for regular medical check-ups. Here she meets an open-hearted male employee Luis, a divorcee. Luis is of mixed origin. They develop a warm relationship and start living together in Luis's flat. Luis is interested in Nepal and the spirituality it represents for him, and Prema embodies this "elementality" to him. Thapa has included descriptions of sexual scenes in a highly sensual way. Uninhibited sexuality with a mate of one's own choice seems to have been taken as a sign of modernity that seems to initiate an immigrant, particularly a woman, into the "true" America. Prema is represented as "not – normal" (175) in this respect. Going against traditional norms, she was involved in sexual relations with Rajan, her boyfriend, in Nepal. This "ab-normality" makes her potentially an eligible adventurer to unknown lands. Her sexual involvement with Luis and others before him is shown as an act of individual agency that pulls her away from the values of traditional Nepal. She rejects the idea of a stable home, a traditional family, a fixed job. That is why, she leaves Luis all of a sudden. He revisits the places where she had lived earlier, not to renew his old contacts but to draw a map of how far she has moved forward in her search for the concept of America and reinvented herself. There is a "Not here" motif while visiting the places. She even goes back to Nepal in order to make sense of the cartography of her journey. Even though Nepal is a changed place now, she does not decide to settle there. On the contrary, she is constantly haunted by Luis's apparition, in airports particularly, which seems to suggest that Luis is perhaps the nearest image of true America available to her at that point of time. Their mutual interest in each other seems to be full of promise. It is because of this, perhaps, that she renews her contact with him. The novel ends open-endedly with suggestions of Prema being quite at ease with her American surroundings.

Conclusion

The analysis of the texts mentioned above brings out the vital differences between the Tibetan diaspora and the Nepalese diaspora. The consciousness of being subjected to a colonial situation that caused the victim diaspora to take place makes the Tibetan writings nostalgic and oriented towards activism. The nation is remembered and the Freudian "mourning" never takes place. The Nepalese diasporic writings, on the contrary, are less nostalgic and look forward to the "promises" of the diasporic existence. The nation left behind appears only

as a reference point, as a space of origin. The search is for a modern location furnished with modern amenities. The possibilities of a return to the original nation seem remote. The nation is “mourned” and the sense of “loss,” as the textual evidence shows, is likely to be assimilated during the course of an individual’s journey.

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