

Tsewang Yishey Pemba, *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2017. 468 pp. ISBN 978-93-85285-62-2.

Tibetan English literature has been gradually emerging as a strong contender in the sphere of world literature written in English. Although only a few Tibetan novels have been published so far, they are quite innovative. This is evident in the fictional works like 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). Informed by a strong sense of history, the corpus presents a new geography with its wild, rugged landscape, strange flora and fauna, flowing mountain rivers and an "exotic" culture. All these had remained largely under-represented. It is only very recently that the corpus of creative writings in English, like those mentioned earlier, has been making the rugged landscape, its valiant people, their culture and the complex history of the nation very much visible. Most of the fictional works tend to foreground the history of Tibet's complex past and juxtaposes both spiritualism and violence that jostle with each other in the textual space. The book under review is no exception. It unearths the region as one of peace and tranquillity but at the same time a veritable zone of internecine rivalries and mind-boggling cruelties.

It is a little-known fact that Tsewang Yishey Pemba (1932-2011), who wrote *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War* (1917), is the first Tibetan novelist to write in English. He weaved in *Idols on the Path* (1966), his first novel -- a largely autobiographical one -- the Tibetan spirit and lifestyle in the "secular" genre of novel. It speaks of the plight of the Tibetan refugees in India in the aftermath of Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959. As Shelly Bhoil points out in her short but very useful introduction to the book under review, "the traditional corpus of Tibetan literature mainly comprises scriptural canon, treasure texts, devotional verses, and biographies of monks besides the epics Gesar Ling and poems of the sixth Dalai Lama" (9). From this perspective, as Bhoil asserts, Pemba has no predecessors and his oeuvre "is marked by... historical significance" (9). Pemba also wrote his autobiography, *Young Days in Tibet* (1957). The present book marks another landmark in the history of Tibetan literature in English.

A posthumous fiction, *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings* (2017) is a historical narrative. It begins in 1924 and ends after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. It begins in San Francisco in the United States of America and ends at the same place, the intervening period encompassing the experience of Pastor John Martin Stevens and his wife Mary in the most difficult terrain in Tibet -- Nyarong valley

in Kham province of Eastern Tibet. They sailed from San Francisco to the Tibetan valley to spread Christianity. A scholarly person, well-versed in Sanskrit, Stevens, with the help of his wife Mary, established a Christian mission and won friends and enemies there. An intimate picture of how the missionaries used to work in distant lands and spread their network is given in the work. Pemba brings out the dedication and arrogance, strategies they employed and sufferings they underwent, the humanitarian works they undertook and the selfish visions they often adopted for conversion with wonderful skill. What ultimately emerges from the encounter of two different civilisations is that an effective bond of friendship can be achieved even out of “clashes.” Pemba’s own medical background helps him portray in vivid details the missionary couple’s social works in the remote region of Nyarong valley. Helping Kham women deliver babies and curing/containing diseases (like epilepsy) win them appreciation and admiration of the local people. The people of the Kham valley are variously portrayed -- they are people ignorant of modern science and civilisation, they are innocent even to the extent of naivety, they are cunning, cruel and unforgiving. These sometimes border on stereotypes. Told from the perspective of an outsider, the Tibetans are represented as fierce, warring tribes, disturbed by internecine conflicts. The advent of Christianity brings further division within the communities. While families like the Dragotsangs admire the Christian missionary works, those like Rithangtsangs smell a rat in their activities. Some were overtly inimical to the “intolerance” of Stephen Murwell who came to the valley to inspect the missionary works of the Stevens. His intolerance and arrogance ignited the anger of some influential people who burn the mission house. But Stevens’ indefatigable energy and dedication revive the mission. The Christian mission remain largely unrealised, mainly because of the invasion of the People’s Liberation Army of China who torture the Tibetans and crush their cultural and spiritual aspirations. The Tibetans with all their rifts and differences are not prepared for the impending doom. The traditional valour and spiritual belief cannot withstand the modern military expertise of the Chinese.

What is interesting in the fiction is the deep sympathy and mutual respect the Stevens family and some Tibetan religious leaders show for each other. It paves the way for a syncretic culture. Pemba introduces the generation aspect to foreground the possibilities of coming together of diverse opinions and cultures. Paul, the son of the Stevens, considers Tibet as his own land and subscribes to its culture. This takes place in the Tibetan context and is thus a refreshing aspect of the book. Usually syncretism is represented in the Western space, heavily leaning on the Western cultural planks. Miscegenation is the most visible form of this attitude. From this point of view *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings* represents a welcome departure in literary works written in English. The Pastor’s son Paul

marries Khadro Tsomo who is proud of her Tibetan culture and spiritual and cultural traditions. Paul, born and brought up in Tibet, is more a Tibetan than an American. He imbibes the values of loyalty and oaths. He now decides to return to Tibet to join the liberation movement in which his friends are deeply engaged. He wants to be part of the Tibetan nationalist struggle against the imperialist designs of China till Nyarong (his birthplace in Tibet) becomes their province again. This “return” motif is deeply embedded in the title of the novel. In the epilogue, Paul’s wife Khadro refers to the rich cultural tradition of Lithang, her province. In a nostalgic mood, she speaks of a romantic poem written by the Sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, who fell in love with a Lithang girl and wanted to marry her. But the Tibetan government was opposed to this as the Dalai Lama, it believed, must remain celibate. The girl was banished to Lithang for life. The heart-broken, pining Lama wrote the poem, the translation of which reads: “White Crane, lend me your wings/ I do not go far/ To Lithang/ And then back” (461). This return motif in Dalai Lama’s poem has a great impact on Paul who now pines for Tibet, his nation. Born of American parents, his yearning represents love of, and respect for, the native land of thousands of Tibetan refugees scattered all over the world.

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