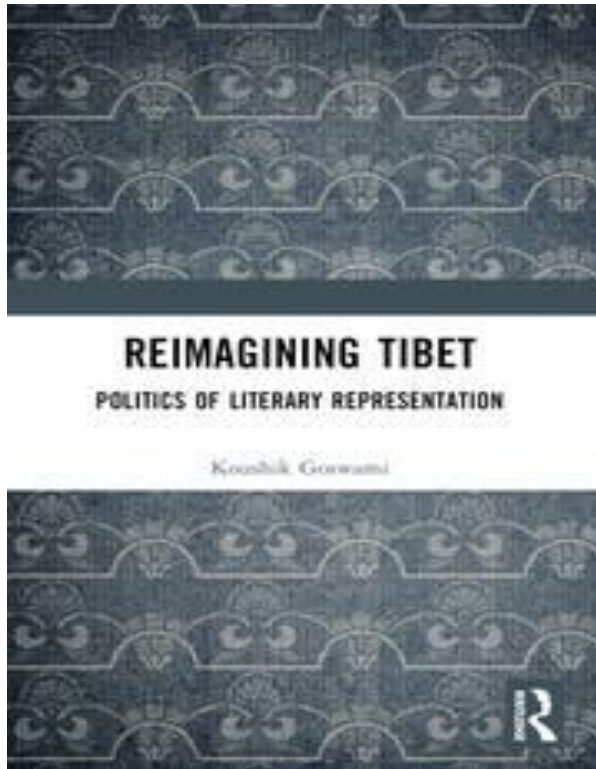


Koushik Goswami. (2023). *Reimagining Tibet: Politics of Literary Representation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. ix+216 pp. ISBN: 978-1-003-30077-9 (ebk)



Geographically located more or less at the intersection of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, Tibet is witness to the chequered developments that have occurred all around it and is also affected by them. These regions are crucibles of change wherein disparate realities coexist in a continuously evolving negotiation with each other. From the indentured labourers, babus, traders, and the educated elite of yesteryears to refugees, immigrant communities across the globe, and the common man on the street today, people in these regions have lived through invasions, imperialism, the opium trade, revolts, mutinies, wars, partition, religious movements, authoritarianism, ethnic strife, caste conflicts, and more recently, the pandemic, among numerous other incidents. Their lives reflect the negotiation of diverse realities – feudal and national/transnational, ‘authenticity’ and hybridity, individual and collective, ancient and modern, imperial and global,

among others. The realities of all these regions are interconnected in evident and latent ways. The volume under review reflects both the distinctiveness of the Tibetan experience as well as several commonalities across boundaries, its trajectory mirroring the arc of development of Asian realities at large.

The present volume explores Tibet(s) as conceived/represented in three fictional narratives that successively make manifest the dynamics of the Western imagination, its articulation from the Indian point of view, and how Tibetans themselves chronicle their land and portray its peoples, often writing back to these 'other' imaginings by non-Tibetans and in the process, reclaiming Tibet and Tibetans from the "[p]olitics of [r]epresentation" (1) that have led to the perpetuation of deeply entrenched stereotypes about the land and its people. The latter part of the book also delves into how Tibetans across the globe re-create the idea of a country that is now taken over by China.

The author frames the analyses of the complex trajectory of Tibetan history in terms of a well-argued theoretical framework. He traces the dominant perceptions about Tibet and Tibetans back to representational discourses rooted in ideology and power, and which determine identarian practices. Drawing on Stuart Hall's typology of representation and connecting it to the Foucauldian concept of discourse, Goswami goes on to underline the centrality of the 'gaze' in the process of representation, fleshing out the contours of the gaze by bringing together the ideas from Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, John Berger, Laura Mulvey, Marie-Louise Pratt, Edward Said, and others.

The articulation of Western ideas of Tibet is located within the larger tradition of Orientalist re-presentations of the Saidian "silent Other." The chapter on James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933) delves deep into the mythicisation of Tibet that the novel successfully accomplishes, in terms of both the complex negotiation of multiple Western positions of imperialist engagement as outlined in the novel, and in terms of its prolific intertextual afterlife. Strategies of Orientalist representation, ranging from imperial voyeurism to Tibet as a site of utopian transference to the negative portrayal of Tibetans are also critiqued, as is the ideological typecasting that they lead to: "eroticisation, infantilisation, gerontification and mediavalisation (pushing them back in time)" (7).

Goswami's analysis of Kaushik Barua's *Windhorse* (2013), which is discussed in the next chapter and which represents the Indian narrative of Tibet, shifts focus to another form of gaze – that of the outsider-insider. He perceptively points out that Barua's "politico-cultural location" (63) as an Indian and as an inhabitant of the state of Assam in Northeast India gives him two separate positions of looking at the same issue. On the one hand, he engages with Tibet as the citizen of a country that is sympathetic to the Tibetan cause and has

offered a refuge for beleaguered Tibetans. In addition, he also looks at it from the Indian viewpoint about China as an inconsistent neighbour state and irrational aggressor, its authoritarianism at odds with the democratic ethos that is central to the Indian polity. On the other hand, Barua also engages with Tibet as a resident of the Northeast. From this position, the context of the Tibetan struggle for independence resonates with his own subjectivity that is shaped by experiences of conflict, home, belonging and exile, both within Assam and in terms of the locational relationship of the Northeast with the Indian state. The juxtaposition of these two positions informs and influences his interactions with Tibetan refugees across the country (as well as their interactions with him) when Barua is researching for the novel. Offering insights into the Tibetan situation from both these positions, the novel narrates the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, detailing the Tibetan resistance movement, and the lives, loves and longings of people who live through those turbulent times as a tiny nation grapples ineffectually with the might of a behemoth. If *Lost Horizon* maps an imaginative colonial geography of Tibet, *Windhorse* locates it firmly within postcolonial cartographic specificity. Both are put in dialogue with each other in the next chapter, which fashions a counter-hegemonic “insider” gaze.

In the chapter on Jamyang Norbu’s fictional work *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes: The Adventures of the Great Detective in India and Tibet* (1999), Goswami seeks to successfully bring together the various arguments that he calls into play in the previous chapters, weaving all the strands into a comprehensive whole. He points out how the plot of the story teases out not just the story of Sherlock Holmes, but also writes back to imperialist designs and perceptions through the journey of its canonical protagonist. Through the process of writing into the interstices of Arthur Conan Doyle’s oeuvre, Norbu writes back to both British and Chinese designs on the region. Goswami also draws attention to the interventionist strategies used by Norbu to present the manuscript to the reader in a way that communicates the need for re(-)vision, thus writing back to the imperial gaze (and to the Indian gaze as well). Thematically too, the characters are appropriated into an indigenous scaffolding of meaning-making that is predominantly moral-philosophical. This is at a significant remove from the exclusive rationality from the perspective of which Holmes and Moriarty are canonically envisioned. Goswami’s incisive analysis does justice to the complex tapestry of this brilliant novel.

Recent Tibetan writing in English and its global and historical contexts are perceptively elucidated by Goswami. The rise of contemporary Anglophone Tibetan fictional writings is also problematised in a nuanced and subtle manner. Following the discussion of ‘author’-ity and the gaze, Goswami further observes

that most Tibetan writers have either been forced to leave the country or have not lived there at all. In a way then, partially or wholly, theirs too is a derivative idea of Tibet. Given that most of these writings are, as the author outlines, a conscious attempt to “counter the misinformed criticism and stereotyped representation” (3), attention is drawn to the emergence of an interesting problematic – the question of the authenticity and legitimacy of these “insider” narratives on Tibet.

By contextualising these writings in terms of the 1000-year-old Tibetan literary tradition that began in the Tibetan language, Goswami draws attention to the larger body of work within which these are sited. Tibetan being a written language for a very long time, this contemporary body of writing is not just a writing back, but also a carrying forward, a dialogue between a centuries-old tradition and its more contemporary voices articulated in language(s) other than Tibetan. The argument about the transition from Tibetan language literature dealing with its culture, folklore, art, philosophy, and religion to Anglophone Tibetan fictional writings that brings in issues of imperial history, global dynamics, and continental realities, as well as the issues of Tibetan independence and identitarian politics that go with it is a point well made.

The chapter which deals with contemporary activism of the Tibetan diaspora is conceived of as an extension of the preceding chapter, writing back to the mythicising and romanticising of Tibet in earlier times, as well as articulating the demand for a free Tibet. This link justifies the change in track from fiction as a genre to contemporary narrative forms, and the chapter design fits in to a large extent at the ideational level. The author also examines the changed dynamics of representation in contemporary times, as the information revolution and the rise of new media have brought up newer ways of shaping, engaging with, and influencing subjectivities. However, the transition from activist writings to political activism and subsequently to online political activism seems like a divergence from the larger design of the work.

This is, however, brought into perspective in an interesting conclusion, which points out how the Tibetans are an ‘imagined’ community of citizens belonging to an ‘imagined’ nation – a nation that has disappeared from the map of the world, but continues to exist as a virtual nation in the writings, real-time intervention, and online activism of Tibetans. Goswami argues that this writing back to realities is an ongoing process for Tibetans, albeit in changed ways. His personal interviews with Tibetan writers, which are part of the appendices, are an important corpus of such contemporary perspectives and are a valuable resource for further work in this area.

Goswami starts off by mentioning four different positions on Tibet – Western, Indian, Chinese, and that of Tibetans themselves – in terms of literary representation. While three representative works written from the Western, Indian, and Tibetan perspective are discussed at length, one feels that literary representations of the Chinese position, an important one at that, could have been incorporated. It would have added to the value of the work by presenting a comprehensive perspective and an interesting problematic. One also feels at times that the dissertation format interferes with the ease of reading at a few places and could have been further worked on. However, this slim volume packs a punch. Written in a lucid style, it delves into an emerging area of study and writes about an evolving reality on which nothing definitive is yet available, identifying both its historical antecedents and contemporary engagements with commendable assiduousness.

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