

Review Article

Rewriting Tibet in *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2019) by Tsering Namgyal Khortsa

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The Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1950 compelled a sizable number of Tibetans to leave their homeland. They were relocated to India, Nepal, Bhutan and different parts of the world as refugees. These displaced people do not want to forget their own history. Tibetan authors have taken upon themselves the responsibility of keeping alive the memory of the great exodus in which Dalai Lama was a participant and of what happened after that. The flame of patriotism and the desire for a return to the homeland filter through their literary works. These authors writing in English nurture a free Tibet in their national imaginary. As the Tibetans lack political and military power to overwhelm the might of the Chinese colonisers, the works of these writers of Tibetan origin are of paramount importance. Combining the functions of both creative authors and activists, they help sustain the Tibetan struggle for freedom, draw global attention to the plight of Tibetan refugees scattered all over the world and put pressure on the repressive Chinese regime in Tibet. They address issues related not only to their longing for their distant homeland, its culture and the political situation there but also to their own lived experience in the diaspora.

Tibetan literature written in English and produced in the exilic space is gradually emerging as a significant area in postcolonial and diaspora studies. The corpus is still small but it offers important contents for critical discussion. Tsewang Yishey Pemba's *Idols on the Path* (1966) was the first Tibetan English novel to be published. It was followed, among others, by fictional works such as Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), Thubten Samphel's *Falling through the Roof* (2008), and Pemba's *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War* (2017). All these Tibetan literary works mostly remained outside the purview of global critical attention. It is high time that we pay due attention now to this corpus of Tibetan 'national' literature. Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's debut novel *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2019) is the latest addition to this growing corpus.

Writing novels in English produces some generic problems for the Tibetan writers. However, some writers have accepted the challenge of writing novels in a foreign language in order to

express Tibetan exilic experiences. Writing in English does not historically fall within the experiential framework of the Tibetans who came in contact with English in a significant way only in their exile. Many readers and critics thus receive Tibetan writings in English with some amount of cynicism. Tsering Namgyal Khortsa faced such a problem at the time of writing *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel*. He observes, “The most common question that people ask me, with a tone of mild disbelief, when I say that I have written a novel is: ‘Is it in English?’ This perhaps shows that a novel – by which I mean a European novel – as a form is so new in the Tibetan context” (Khortsa 2020). Khortsa obviously uses a European form and the English language that are not his own. He further says, “To convince my readers, I show them the process of how it is being written, lock [sic] stock and barrel. Readers will see how the protagonist is not only reflecting on the dearth of Tibetan fiction but also learning how to write a so-called ‘Tibetan novel in English’ in the novel (it is a bit like an introduction or a user’s manual embedded in the very book they are reading)” (Khortsa 2020). Regarding the process of selecting a European style of writing a novel and its importance, he says, “Ideally, the themes of exile, diaspora, language, identity, and migration seem like perfect material for fiction. I even go so far as to question if traditional fiction – what Milan Kundera calls as the ‘European novel’ – is actually the right form to tell the story of Tibet at this moment” (Khortsa 2020). Khortsa obviously transforms the form of the European novel in order to suit his theme and style.

Born and brought up in India, Tsering Namgyal Khortsa is a Tibetan exilic writer writing in English. He completed his MA in journalism from the University of Iowa and also holds degrees from the National Taiwan University, and the University of Minnesota. Besides the novel under review, Khortsa has also written two important books: *Little Lhasa: Reflections on Exiled Tibet* (2006), and *His Holiness The 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje: A Biography* (2013). While the first one is variously described as a memoir, a collection of essays, a travelogue and a reportage, the latter, as its title indicates, is a biographical work.

An earlier e-book edition of *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* appeared in the United States in 2013. This remained largely unnoticed and Khortsa decided to publish a print edition of the book. He observes, “I had, however, underestimated the challenges of writing a full-length novel, especially one that is set in the Tibetan community, and the road to publication was not as smooth as I had expected” (Khortsa, 2020). He made significant changes in the print version. He, for instance, added an “an ending and a beginning to make the narrative more complete” (Khortsa, 2020). In a sense, he reshaped the earlier version of the narrative.

The novel is written in an epistolary form which reminds us of the old novelistic style of mid-18th century British novelist, Samuel Richardson. It is basically written as a series of letters and in the form of diary entries. Regarding the reason of choosing an epistolary form for his novel, Khortsa comments, “it was the best way of writing about long-distance relationships (in our case, often, long-distance nationalism). Secondly, I realized that writing letters to imaginary beings were, for better or worse, something I was quite good at” (Khortsa, 2020). Interestingly, in the above comment the author refers to the exilic condition which presupposes distances between individuals, and between individual(s) and the homeland, a condition in which exchanges of letters bridge the physical distance and maintain emotional bonding. In this context, epistolary mode serves as a very useful and functionally valid genre. Khortsa thus observes that “this style” served him well “in the context of the narrative of a diasporic community scattered around the world” and was appropriate particularly “for the material I was working with” (Khortsa, 2020). He considers this “discovery of the epistolary style” as “a major technical breakthrough” (Khortsa, 2020).

Interestingly, Khortsa added “The Editor’s Note” to the novel. Here he describes the history of the genesis of the book. He informs us that a person called Dawa once gave him a suitcase containing letters and documents and requested him to turn their content into a book. He requested Khortsa to publish the proposed book, thus produced, posthumously. Khortsa, after reading the letters and documents, decides, as mentioned earlier, to write the novel in an epistolary form. He contacted Iris Penington and Brent Rhinehart, Dawa’s real-life friends, and requested them to provide him with relevant information and documents. Khortsa also gathered copies of the magazines where Dawa’s works were published. He then organised all the materials and employed imaginary details to give birth to this epistolary novel. He worked with ‘notes and datelines’ and entered some entries, complicating the generic shape of the novel. The book is thus a product of real-life events and imaginary details. It is partially (auto)biographical and partially fictionalized. Khortsa is here both a fiction writer and an editor. Moreover, the novel contains several intertextual references such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Epic of the King Gesar*, *The Six Yogas of Naropa* and the like. Khortsa observes, “The Tibetan Suitcase [sic], which includes a variety of different texts, stands as a testament to the novel’s flexibility as a form” (Khortsa 2020). He is the first Tibetan writer in English to employ such complex stylistic tools and techniques. He himself informs us that many readers are “quite flabbergasted by my style because I broke so many rules. And the great thing about the novel as a form is that it pushes the author to break the rules so that it is ‘novel’ or new” (Khortsa, 2020).

This novel deals with the journey of Dawa Tashi, a Tibetan exilic character located in Dharamsala, India. From India, he decides to go to Appleton University, America, which is his dreamland, in order to become a creative writer. However, his deep sense of nostalgia and his longing for his Tibetan cultural roots force him to return to India, his ‘borrowed but beautiful homeland,’ where he becomes a creative writer. He starts writing Tibetan love stories, partly based on his complicated love relationship with Iris Penington, a girl from New York, pursuing her PhD in the Department of Religious Studies at Appleton, and publishing them in the *Himalayan Quarterly* magazine. While navigating this love story, Khortsa highlights several issues intimately connected with Tibetan exilic existence such as Chinese colonialism in Tibet, identity crisis and nostalgia of the Tibetan diasporic subjects, the role of Indian socio-cultural and political space in the lives of the Tibetan characters in exile, and the rising interest and popularity of Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan culture across the world. In the novel Khortsa brings together a host of characters such as the protagonist Dawa Tashi (a scholar and Tibetan exilic creative writer), Iris Penington (PhD scholar at Appleton and later a Professor at Stanford), Professor Khenchen Sangpo Rinpoche (a great Tibetan Scholar, writer), Pema (a Tibetan writer), Brent Rhinehart (Western character experimenting with photography related to Buddhism) and some other American students (Michael, Ella and others). Their interactions within the scope of the novel not only project the tales of personal love and longing but also the stories of the community divorced from the homeland and scattered across the world, bereft of the sources of sustaining homely desires.

Khortsa highlights the Tibetan identity problems through the voice of Dawa. In an application letter for admission to the Department of Creative Writing, Appleton University, Dawa refers to Tibet as a ‘de facto independent nation.’ He says, “Though I was born in India, I did not become an Indian citizen – only a very ‘welcomed and an honored guest’” (Khortsa, 2019, p. 28). This statement underscores the unhelpful attitude of Indian governments in so far as granting citizenship to the Tibetan refugees is concerned. Dawa critiques the way Tibet and Dharamsala (where the Tibetan diasporic communities and Tibetan government-in-exile are located) are

stereotyped as ‘Shangri-La.’ He does not want to live his life in a monastery as a monk or in ‘selling sweaters in the streets of Mumbai’ (p. 31). He says, “I do think that paradise is . . . in an American college campus” (p. 31). It appears that Dawa conceives America as a utopian nation of all happiness. It is nothing unusual that he should have his own version of the American dream as it has been historically a land of the displaced. Later, however, he loses interest in America and is proud of his Tibetan identity and roots. He asserts, “Rather than reading Western literature, and Western theories conjured up by dead white men, I am looking inwards into my own culture, my own roots” (pp. 48-49). While still in America, in a drunken brawl he told a white American bartender: “Fuck America, for doing nothing about Tibet!” (p. 53). After returning to India due to her mother’s illness, he considers India as his ‘home’ and Tibet as his ‘homeland.’ He says, “How interesting it is that I have to borrow a homeland so that we can at least have the pretence of returning?” (p. 59). When Iris comes to know that she was adopted by her American foster parents and that she was of Nepalese and Tibetan descent, she also decides to return to her cultural roots.

Khortsa also reflects on the picture of brutal Chinese colonialism through various fragmented narratives. After joining Appleton University as a professor, Khenchen Sangpo gets American citizenship. He visits China with some American students for some research work and to fulfil his dream of visiting his homeland. He hears of the tragic stories of Chinese atrocities, ‘mayhem’ and brutal killings. When Khenchen is invited to some households, he hears the story of how his own parents and his cousin were killed by the Chinese. In front of the whole community of Damkhang, his mother was shot. Hundreds of monasteries have been destroyed. For the safety of the Tibetans who would be left behind, Khenchen conducts a meeting secretly. However, he is arrested on the charges of espionage and later released.

This novel closes in an open-ended manner as the author refuses to bring a sense of closure. Many questions remain unanswered as Khortsa wanted to create a space for the reader to imagine the gaps in the story. He asserts, “And I also wanted to leave room for readers to imagine (or feel for themselves) what is not mentioned in the book, in deference to the Tibetan culture of reticence and taciturnity rather than turning myself into an all-knowing chatterbox” (p. 8). The use of the words ‘reticence’ (meaning ‘not volunteering anything more than necessary’) and ‘taciturnity’ (meaning ‘habitually reserved and uncommunicative’) is significant here because these Buddhist values are made to be part of the genre of the novel. It amounts to the transformation of the genre in the hands of a Tibetan writer.

Tsering Namgyal Khortsa’s debut novel, as we have discussed above, unboxes several important literary, socio-cultural and political issues which are revealed as one goes through its onion-layered style – stories after stories unfold in quick succession. The reader will get the taste of stylistic innovations as s/he would come across journal entries, ‘bricolage of letters’ (Khortsa 2020), application letters, and newspaper articles which render unique qualities to the work. Deriving its strength and sustenance from the unique cultural environment from the Himalayan base, the story moves to the United States only to make the protagonist conscious of his own cultural roots and value of his homeland. For these reasons and more, *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* is a significant contribution to the Tibetan Literature in English. It is a noteworthy arrival not only for the English-knowing readers based in South Asia but also for those scattered across the globe.

References

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