Rules of Language in *Rules of the House*: A Study of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's Tibetan English Poetry

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Abstract

The displacement of Tibetans from their homeland has also displaced the Tibetan language and culture among the generation who are born or educated in exile. However, there are new languages and forms of expression acquired in exile that enable the Tibetans to negotiate their culture, identity, and aspirations. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, the first Tibetan woman poet in English to be published in the West, is one of the representative voices of exiled Tibetans. Her first book of poems *Rules of the House* was a finalist for the Asian American Literary Awards in 2003. This paper is a thematic study of the philosophical and social aspects of language in the poems from *Rules of the House*.

[Keywords: Tibet, Exile, Language, Deconstruction, Displacement.]

The new generation Tibetans¹ in exile have just begun to articulate themselves using literary metaphors. Having inherited a ruptured identity from the history of their lost nation and living in the ambivalent post-modern times of globalization, the Tibetans-inexile have complex aspirations about their future. Exile that had meant a temporary arrangement for the elder generation has betrayed the hope of return to homeland in fifty long years of struggle, and the impasse of the Tibetan problem baffles the orientation of the new generation. Writing, as the Tibetan essayist and poet Bhuchung D. Sonam says, "serves as a primary pressure valve" to the contemporary Tibetan writers (72).

The acculturation in exile enables Tibetans with new languages, writings, and forms of expression, as much it disables to some extent the Tibetan identity of the past. In the social process of, what Stuart Hall calls, 'being' to 'becoming' of cultural identity through the corridors of past in land-locked Tibet to the present history of exile and diaspora (223-26), Tibetans are emerging with literature in English that addresses their complex modes of existence. Among the Tibetan English poets, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is a leading voice.

Dhompa's subject-position takes one to the history of her mother as much to the trajectory of the Tibetan community in exile. Her mother who had escaped to exile in 1959 was the daughter of a chieftain in eastern Tibet. She became the first woman member of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile. She gave birth to Dhompa on a train between Delhi to Chandigarh in 1969 as she was travelling to deliver her child in a hospital. Dhompa grew up in Nepal and India in the protection of parliamentarians and elderly monks, many of whom preserved their former reverence to their regional chieftains' descendants in exile. At the tender age of 24, Dhompa lost her single parent. Her mother was travelling from Delhi to Dharamsala to attend the winter assembly meeting after being re-elected when she met with an accident. Her mother's death, ironically on the same route where Dhompa was born, has since been the pivot of her life. She was urged to join Tibetan politics in her mother's place by her elders, but she chose poetry over politics- her poetics of talking Tibet in one's everyday experience.

Dhompa studied in English boarding school at a hill station in Mussorie, graduated from Lady Sri Ram College in Delhi, followed by a Masters in Creative Writing

URL of the article: http://rupkatha.com/V3/n2/04_Tsering_Wangmo_Dhompa_Tibetan_English_Poetry.pdf Kolkata, India. © www.rupkatha.com

from San Francisco. She has published three books of poems, *Rules of the House* (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2002), *In the Absent Everyday* (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2005) and *My Rice Tastes like the Lake* (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2011). Her non-fiction on Tibet *Imagined Country* is due for publication by Penguin India. She also wrote two chapbooks- *In Writing the Names* (Abacus, 2000) and *Recurring Gestures* (Tangram Press).

Rules of the House (ROTH) is an anthology of seventy poems, written in free verse, rendered as micro-stories. The poems function at two levels. At one level, they are stories- silly stories of a boy falling down or exiled Tibetans fighting mosquitoes, grave stories of a city becoming ashes or news of accidents or a daughter looking for death, children's stories told at bed-time or in a garden. At another level, these are stories with profound themes of exile, loss, memory, identity, and womanhood. What brings out a web of connections and meanings in these poem-stories is a crafty use of language by the poet. Dhompa uses language in its deconstructive mode where meanings are deferred as soon they are made, and these meanings are linked to the ambivalent state of the Tibetan identity in exile. This paper is a contrapuntal study of the philosophical and social aspects of language in poems from *ROTH*.

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The language in poems from *ROTH* invites attention to its character by the peculiar way of its usage. For example, in the poem 'She is', there is a threadbare image of words. Children observe the words carefully in the voice of M

We are tucked into bed and kissed a fleeting one. Through the curtains, her voice loosens like thread from an old blanket, row upon row. We watch her teeth in the dark and read her words. She speaks in perfect order, facing where the breeze can tug it toward canals stretching for sound (24)

In another poem 'Untitled Dance', the speaker foregrounds the elusive nature of language through a story about comprehension and incomprehension of certain traditions and gestures. The characters in the poem- M, S, and the speaker go out to watch a Lion Dance performed by Tibetan monks wearing masks. S, who belongs (in other poems such as 'On the way to the red city') to a different language tradition than that of M and the speaker, gets tired of trying to understand the dance. The speaker aids S's understanding by calling his attention to the way feet kick dust in the traditional lama dance: "You can unravel a complete story by the pressure of feet on shoes". As soon as the dance is over, the unmasked dancers are "themselves" and cannot be recognized. The speaker, perplexed with the shift in the focus from the masked Lion Dance to unrecognizable unmasked dancers, tries to "settle for words" (86).

Language too is a performance, and a masked one at that, especially in different contexts of its usage. One may try to fix meanings of language in particular cultural traditions such as that of the traditional lama dance or even in the literary tradition of the scansion of metaphor, meter, or rhythm ("watch their feet kick dust"), but language will elude meaning in another tradition and another context. In the poem, 'In the event of change', one cannot understand the speaker through what s/he is saying because what s/he is saying cannot be situated in one moment

I am saying primroses lined the pathway of toothless hedges.

I am saying the ocean shimmered like corrugated steel in the morning sun.

The context of my story changes when you enter. Then I am dung

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on the wall of the nomad's field. Then the everyday waking person. (15)

In the poem 'Untitled dance', the speaker (in an attempt to settle for words) observes M rubbing her chin after S "tells her he is unable to find significance in /bowing before idols" and understands that M is angry. M and S are incompatible in their understanding of the significance of each other's traditional rituals, which triggers in the speaker an urge to understand the difficult system of language and the meanings that it carries. She turns to trees in the garden and tries to decipher the language of trees. She observes how trees "send their branches to lean in one /direction." She then listens to the gardener's interpretation: "The gardener says predictions are made by the self opting for aberrations". For the gardener, meanings exist in relation to his vocation and, therefore, "aberrations" or the wild growth remind him his vocation of maintaining the garden. There is an alterity in the gardener's interpretation of the language of trees that "send their branches to lean in one/direction" (86). In the power structure between the gardener and trees, meanings are made in favour of the powerful- the one who is interpreting the language- rather than the powerless object whose existence is being interpreted. Also, there is at play language structures of multiple cultures that we live by or adopt. In another poem, 'Saying it again', for example, the cook and the speaker, who speak different dialects, have varying interpretations of the same story that the cook narrates

A love story, I say. He says no, I wasn't paying attention to details. It is a story about hunger. How it can change even a parrot. (89)

In yet another poem, 'On a way to the red city', the speaker says that she and S are "divided by two mother tongues. Both nomadic". Both the speaker and S are divided by two different languages, but they find comfort in at least one commonality they shareboth belong to nomadic languages rather than the metropolitan or the standardized language. Therefore, they could keep each other's company and assume to have reached an understanding: "He spread the word 'vast' between us" and she sees "the sky as he might have" (87).

In the poem, 'Untitled Dance', the speaker finds "possibilities in interpretation" rather than accepting truths as fixed. Finally, inspired by the dance of the moon that she witnesses, she settles with words that are at best un-worded

The moon labored over the hill, breaking the dark's code. When I turned to show him how a moon too can appear timid, it had moved.

The moon that throws light in the dark of the night symbolizes hope or meaning, but it too appears timid in illuminating fixed meanings. The moon's timidity is symbolic of the loose structures of language, meanings, and definitions. The last two lines of the poem further reinforce the idea that language and its meanings are relative. What remains for the speaker are ruins of the language, accentuated by the playful moon-light

The ruins complete in its light. No words pass between us. Vultures overhead were combing.

Finally, the speaker, from attempting to comprehend the lama dance, the identity of the "unmasked" dancers, S and M's mutual disagreements with each other's interpretations of the lama dance, the gesture of trees and the gardener's understanding of it, ends up settling with words (after seeing the moon play hide-and-seek) in a deconstructive

aporia- a state of impasse- as no words pass between her and S. It is as though there is a demise of definitions symbolized by "vultures combing overhead" (86). Thus, the 'dance of words' in the poem titled 'Untitled dance' cannot be ascribed fixed meanings and words are left open to multiple interpretations.

Many other poems in *ROTH* call attention to the philosophical aspect of the deconstructive mode of language, such as in another poem 'F's', the character F tries in vain to have control over his son with words that he thinks cannot be broken down (39). In an interview, Dhompa reveals that the deconstructive aspect of language comes into her poetry from the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence

For me, language stems from a desire to tell, to re-tell, and in a way get closer to that which I seek to know or comprehend. This is not entirely possible because language is a construction and comes with rules and expectations, whereas life and the emotional world is not predictable or containable. The Buddhist concept of impermanence is a tool that helps me from taking "my language" too seriously or to view it as being the only way of telling a story. How does one use language, which assumes or intends one meaning, to speak of experiences and life which happen simultaneously and where meaning is in the process of living. (Dhompa)

II

There is a crafty weaving of language in its deconstructive mode in the verses of *ROTH*, especially in the poems that deal with the social and political complexities of being a woman and an exile- both as states of existence run over by social essences.

The poems in *ROTH* work around a network of relationships, mainly that of a daughter in relation to others. The girl-child learns lessons about womanhood as she grows up, such as women getting accustomed to the speech of silence in the poem 'How Thubten sang his song' (43). She begins to evaluate adjectives that must or must not be used for women in 'Laying the Grounds' (47). She observes that women in certain cultures are expected to adapt to their husband's world-order beginning from the change in their surnames. But the girl character in Dhompa's poems also learns to use language in her own terms, mainly from her independent-minded mother. She pressingly declares in the poem 'Leh'

Here are people who cannot adapt to change. After marriage they are given a new name. But mothers continue to press old names. (58)

The same language that is structured to exclude woman carries within itself the potential to deny exclusion or subjugation

In the beginning we use family as lineage for there are places still where the longer you go back, the stronger is your bone. Sister. Sister, come wrap your wound in mine. We are framed for departures we are never prepared for. Walk here. Into this assemblage. Into this alley of slippery language. (52)

In the above lines from the poem 'Entry', the speaker's consciousness merges with the collective consciousness of women feminist writers, who seem to follow Virginia Woolf as they attempt to create a room of their own outside the male literary discourse.

Dhompa's voice transcends the feminist concerns and encompasses the social context of the subjugation of exiled Tibetans. The lines in the poem 'In the event of change' are telling

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The context of my story changes when you enter. Then I am dung on the nomad's field. Then the everyday waking person.

I am speaking your pace. Slippage of silk slippers.' (15)

The above lines could be interpreted for the post-colonial predicament where the subject's context changes from the native to the hybrid.² The post-colonial writers have expressed the anguish of the colonizer's imposition of a foreign language (through its colonial institutions) on the natives. For the African novelist, Ngugi wa Thiango, for example, to write in English would be "wearing false robes of identity" (22). Dhompa conjures up (in the above quoted lines) the same image in the befitting symbol of shoes for the refugees, who have no permanent shelter and are destined to walk from place to place. As one wears the other's shoes in his or her peculiar journey, one is likely to slip and fall. So even if the other's shoes are made up with the richness and glamour of silk, these are uncomfortable in one's feet. Similarly, native language cannot be replaced by the foreign when it comes to expressing one's emotions.

The displacement of Tibetans in exile inevitably threatens a displacement of their language and culture. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile makes efforts to preserve the same through cultural institutions, but the long-lasting exile of Tibetans has led to their inevitable assimilation into the culture and language of the host-countries. English, in particularly, envisioned as a language of international exchange and communication, is welcomed by the Tibetan community.³ Dhompa is multi-lingual as she has inherited the standardized Tibetan language of her exile community, the dialect of her region Nangchen from her mother and elders, English by virtue of her education in English medium institutions in India and America, and a functional familiarity with Nepali in Kathmandu and with Hindi in India. The different dialects and languages that the Tibetans live by in exile have implications on their identity and writings. The Tibetan English writings in India, such as by Sonam and Tenzin Tsundue, are embedded in 'Thinglish'- an exile mix of Tibetan, Hindi, and English. Dhompa hints at the inevitable problems faced by the displaced people during the intricate process of language acquisition; she renders the odd moment of translating the native emotions in a foreign language by a school boy in the poem 'Carried from here'

I translate letters for parents whose children are learning other things. Unpredictable in his allegiance to English, a Tibetan son send orange mountains of love to his mother (30)

The emotions are betrayed by words that belong to a system that is non-native. In the poem 'In Between'

The walls threaten to expose us, shadows pinch as we mutter jouissance, jouissance, while the university teacher said the use of the word was a considerable error. A most lamentable error, given half of us are illiterate and unattached. Think of words in their system of birth (27)

The poem, 'Preparing for the third lesson', brings out yet another aspect that pertains to the status and class attached to the language of the supposedly superior Occident. In this poem, when children play the burying of a broken tooth, they are unable to remember the traditional prayers offered at such ceremonies

S had just learned the "Lord's prayer" in school and took the occasion to show off.

Our protectors didn't speak English nor were we Christians. (46)

These lines suggest not only a symbolic baptism into English, but also the snobbery of glamour tagged with English language and its culture that S occasions to flaunt.

Dhompa also brings out the complexities in the very foundation of the sentiment of Tibetan nationalism through the issue of language. In the poem, 'Passage', S learns about patriotism through the vocabulary of another language (and thought) system

At the discovery of the word *patriotism*, S distends like sparkles on tin roofs. Tomorrow, and yet tomorrow, he says, he will march to liberate his country. (53)

Nationalism for Tibetans as such is what Partha Chatterjee calls a "derivate discourse" (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*). For Tibetans in old Tibet, who had strong regional identities than national, if nationalism were to mean something it would be (sectarian) religion and native culture (or ethnic identity) as practiced in respective Tibetan provinces. But in exile, there came a different set of meanings for nationalism- a civic nationalism- learnt and adopted from new languages and ideologies.⁴ After having lost sight of the country, what remains with oneself is a rhetoric in a "speech measured by what is within definition" (53); and definitions in another's language system might not always be congruent with the definitional markers in Tibetan language. Dhompa addresses the issues with languages for those Tibetans who are writing secular poetry in English:

Secular poetry is relatively new to Tibetans. As the first generation born into exile, we are just beginning to articulate our experience of being Tibetan outside Tibet. For this, we've chosen to write in English. We are entrusting a language different from our mother tongue to speak of the loss or the absence of a country. These are complex negotiations. ('Nostalgia in Contemporary Tibetan Poetics')

Dhompa's words echo the same concerns that the Indian novelist Raja Rao had expressed in the context of his double heritage- the Indian and the British- in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. (vi)

For Tibetan diaspora (especially in the East), English is a language of another culture, but not the language of the nation that colonizes them. Therefore, the implication of learning the English language is different for Tibetans-in-exile than what it had been for Indians or Africans. The implication of adopting English in exile is also different from that of the forceful feeding of the communist-ridden Chinese in the state-run schools inside Tibet. Tibetans do not regard English as a language with a hegemonic force of the colonial apparatus unlike their Indian counterparts; ⁵ they regard English as a potential language that has strategically enabled them with rhetoric to address their identity concerns to the world audience. Therefore, the new generation Tibetans-in-exile can be said to live in the "third space" as people between cultures- an "interstitial passage between fixed identification" which "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4). This "third space" is a congratulatory platform for the new generation of Tibetans writing in English.

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To conclude, language is used in its deconstructive mode in *Rules of the House* so that it is a metaphor to address the complex issues surrounding Tibetan culture and identity today. Dhompa's first book of poetry advocates a critical literacy among readers for understanding the challenges faced by a displaced community; it invites its readers to step into the exile-house of Tibetans and witness the complexities in their everyday lives.

Notes

1. An attempt to classify Tibetans as first or second generation in exile is fraught with complexity because many young and old Tibetans came to exile in the 1950s and the 1960s, and several came in the second wave of migration in the 1980s after China had liberalized its policies in Tibet, and some of them are born in exile. The new generation Tibetans-in-exile is used in this paper to refer to those who, regardless of whether they were born inside Tibet or in exile, have received their school or college education in exile.

2. Tibetans-in-exile are post-colonized in the sense of the geographical space if not the chronological time, or such is the suggestion that comes from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's autobiography's title *Freedom in Exile*.

3. In the first half of the twentieth century, many Tibetan aristocrats and traders sent their children to Darjeeling in India for modern British English schooling. After the political exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959, Tibetan monks began to learn English for the transmission of Buddhism to the West. At the same time in the 1960s, many Tibetans authored auto/biographies in English (with the help of sympathetic western friends) to introduce Tibet and its tragedy to the world. These auto/biographies may be called the beginning of Tibetan writings in English.

4. After reaching exile in 1959, HH the Dalai Lama announced the re-founding of the Ganden Phodrang (the traditional government of Tibet) to counter the Chinese announcement of the Liberation of Tibet. Later, the Ganden Phodrang adopted the Indian model of democracy.

5. Although English is a potential language for exiled Tibetans, but it is not absolutely free of forces of essentialization. The Anglo-phone narratives on Tibet have essentialized Tibet either as a 'forbidden land' or a utopian *ShangriLa*. For more, see Jamyang Norbu's "Dances with Yaks: Tibet in Film, Fiction, and Fantasy of the West."

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