

Introduction

Women's Literature: Vistas of Modern Tibetan Trauma

Janet Gyatso

Abstract: The introduction surveys the contributions to the anthology from a literary perspective. It asks questions about the relationship between narrator and characters, as well as the role of trauma, sorrow, longing, and wit in each case.

Keywords: homeland, nostalgia, trauma, Tibetan women writers

We have before us something rare and valuable. The reader will find in this short issue a rich display of the diversity—and array of brilliances—in Tibetan women's writings today. Some of the authors are writing from inside Tibet, some from the exile community in India, and some are abroad in the West. They write in Tibetan, English, and Chinese. An integral part of the growing modern literary scene among Tibetans world-wide, women writers have unfortunately received little attention. Hence the impulse for this issue, and the symposium at University of Virginia in April 2022 that occasioned it.

How shall we read these varied works? As examples that represent modern Tibetan literature? As sites for feminist analysis of women's distinctive ways of writing? As pieces of literature to enjoy? Of course, these approaches need not be mutually exclusive. But among the choices for focus, I prefer to read them first and foremost as literature. We can give ourselves license to zero in on the achievement

of the writer in her attempt to use her medium as art. That also means we can feel free to appreciate how that art speaks to us, the readers, who need not be limited to the author's intended audience but still can find resonance across cultural and geographical distances. We readers of literature are looking for insights and ways of being to appreciate and live our lives better. I recommend this approach not only out of hedonism or possibly even self-indulgence. I also think it is our responsibility, as readers and translators of Tibetan literature, to give these writings their due as art, and not merely as yielding information on Tibetaness, or woman's predicament, or some other construct of identity. To focus only on the latter would be to confine Tibetan literature, perhaps even to prevent it from really being literature after all. We owe it to these stories to read them for their creative efforts, for their contribution to being human (and/or animal).

Of course, that is not to say to ignore the particularities of context—of the author's background, social circumstances, literary influence, linguistic constraints and possibilities. The more we know of such things, the more we appreciate the accomplishment of each piece. And so even when we note their evident efforts to address the modern Tibetan predicament, we should not miss what makes these stories and essays literature and not mere documentary resources: we can appreciate how their skillful use of language and timing and nuance and intimation and irony enhances the punch of their story and its reception in the reader's heart and mind.

The short space of this introduction allows only a few scratches on the surface of what I just suggested. Given my past interest in autobiography in premodern Tibet, my own attention is drawn to the

emerging forms of self-figuration we find in these works. By that I mean the way that the author configures her characters and narrators—especially those that stand in for herself—in relation to the pressures of culture and society and politics and economics and colonialism all around her. And that is not to mention the deep emotional currents palpable in every piece.

On first encountering this collection I found it interesting to realize that Tse-drön Kyi's "Silent Dusk" is the only one not written in the first person (even Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's complex narrator uses the first person, among others, to refer to herself). I would add that Tse-drön Kyi's characters are also the purest and simplest in the collection, if perhaps the hardest to take in. The story offers no redeeming hope, just a totalizing predicament of a female protagonist who seems totally subject to the whims of two husbands, each unsatisfying in different ways. The heroine is immersed in a static double-bind, oppressed by her inability to please either of her men, one because he is unrelentingly drunk, jealous, and demanding, the other because of his education that the heroine can never share. Strikingly, she cannot even take refuge in the vast landscape of her homeland, a sight that many others might find inspiring. But no, even here "(i)n the sky, the moon had no brightness, and even the constellations did not shine." Can we presume that the author is at least offering her readers the consolation of the art of expression itself? We can only wonder if she is identifying with her character Metok Lhadzé. Or is she using her art of desolation to help herself—and the rest of us—to distance ourselves from her?

Like "Silent Dusk," Min Nangze's "Mother's Tsampa"

presents us with a mostly univocal, simple calculus. Recounted in the first person, “Mother's Tsampa” foregrounds absence, nostalgia and irreconcilable loss, an irreplaceable preciousness that was once in her hands. Interestingly, however, the first person perspective here manages to transcend itself. As already prefigured in the long tradition around eating this quintessential Tibetan food that her mother used to tell her family, the narrator appeals to the communitarian loyalties of her readers by proclaiming that all Tibetans raised in tents have had the same experience that she is reminiscing about here. Similarly, and despite singling herself out as the one who most appreciated her mom's tsampa in her entire family, the narrator realizes, in a dream of reuniting with her mother in that primal scene of feeding, that she cannot keep it all for her individual self. The image of her entire family holding out their hands to receive some of the treasured staple breaks open both the dream and the story itself.

In both “Silent Dusk” and “Mother's Tsampa” we see literature providing a place to register a complaint, about loss and lack of fulfillment, even though at least one of the stories seems to suggest a change of perspective that might somehow offer some deliverance from pained longing. Pema Lhadze's “Love Is a Pair of Unloosed Arrows” seems also to be about longing although the reader has to work harder to discern it. We are less clear about the narrator's positionality than we are about any of the other voices in this collection, but she is clearly fascinated with the lifestyle of two religious adepts who are also lovers. Apparently, they abandoned their homes in eastern Tibet to run away together and are now managing a nunnery at the famous Tibetan mountain retreat at Chimphu. The narrator/author ends up visiting them twice over the course of some years. But despite her own account of

herself as an obtrusive and nosy interviewer, she never really seems to get the full story of how and why the couple is living as they do, including the boldly inquisitive question around whether they are happy. The reader is left wondering as well. This is not an omniscient narrator, but as Liang and Taylor point out, she seems to read the minds of the couple, at least for their sorrows. What we do know by the end of the story is that her own heart is aching, as she bemoans her empty life.

Similar to Min Nangdze's "Mother's Tsampa," Nyima Tso's "My Father's Skills" is filled with nostalgic longing for the world of the past, idealizing her father's meticulous and ethical work as a tailor back in Tibet. However, various oppositional juxtapositions in her narrative carve out some space for movement, reflection, and perhaps deliverance. These include the discrepancy between being in exile versus being in her homeland, and the miserable miniature sewing machine she obtained in exile versus the beautiful device that was so productive in the hands of her father. Most of all, the distinction that the author keeps driving home between the character that she was in the past and the self-critical narrator she is now—both of them are "her," and yet they are at odds—achieves what some autobiography theorists have called a "duplex" self. For the narrator of Nyima Tso's story, her moral failures as a child may be uncomfortable and troubling, but it actually gives her adult self the space for critical distance and reevaluation. It allows her some redress of her former ungrateful self and perhaps even to recuperate a happier childhood than she had thought she was having in the past. The process returns her to the Tibetan identity she had scoffed off as a child, but any idealized nostalgia is chastened, replaced by a recognition that self-fulfillment is hard-won—and yet still achievable.

Chimé's tour de force piece, "Tales of Myself and Snow," transports herself—and her reader along with her—to a place of self-invention and transformation, through her astonishing powers of poetic vision. Grounded in the prosaic, if enchanting, event of a snowfall, the beauty of the moment serves to initiate a series of juxtapositions regarding the poet's homeland and corresponding images of paradise, female deities, and most of all the protectress whom she so earnestly seeks to encounter. This union is never entirely consummated. But we still witness an elevation of the poet. This comes not only via a virtual yogic breakthrough that partakes liberally of Buddhist meditative techniques, but perhaps even more so through the power of writing itself. This power is bestowed by none other than the very queen of poetry Sarasvatī with whom the poet seeks to unite. We begin to suspect that her verses have already effected the divine union that the poet seeks. This is so even if her "passionate expression" has only "barely evaded shamelessness." Indeed, such shamelessness (if it is that) is something for which the reader can only be grateful.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's free verse essay "Somewhere Else" offers a deeply complex portrait of Tibetan life in exile, with all of its attendant memory, mistrust, and unfulfilled desire. We don't quite know who is the "her," or "she," with whom the essay begins, although we suspect it is the narrator's mother. And yet, evocative of the transgenerational trauma that the refugee community shares, the pronouns of this essay are unreliable, with the narrator shifting from first to second person, and perhaps even to third, ever seeking the best container to hold her conflicting experiences. Even the Tibetan Buddhist teachings to which the narrator often turns don't provide

unambiguous hope, but rather serve as warnings: warnings about the proper vessel (or “pot”) with whom to share one’s story; injunctions both to remember words in proper sequence and to look beyond them; and allusions to karma, the deeds that we don’t remember, but which are like a “...seed no bigger than a sesame grain [that] grows into a tree.” The question of whether it is actually one’s own unremembered past actions which caused the bad fortune of exile must plague every refugee; it certainly did plague the entire Tibetan population when they lost their independence and their homeland, the land “at whose center a demoness was pinned to the ground.” Tsering Dhompa draws in her reader into this somber state of reflection, the reader who feels directly addressed even if she does not have access to any of the pronouns that the essayist embodies, and even if she might be the arbiter of who gets to escape refugee status and become human.

Painfully moving in different ways is the short but astonishingly candid reflections from the erudite Kelsang Lhamo, excerpted from her 1999 book *Dreaming at the Sage’s Abode: Biographical Sketches of Four Living Tibetan Nuns*. The author shares with her reader a gorgeous love poem actually written by a man, Gonpo, as an offering to her, and with whom she apparently had a deeply affective relationship. The relationship was never consummated, for reasons we are given to understand had to do with the fact that Kelsang Lhamo was a celibate nun at the time of the events depicted. Her description of Gonpo remains deeply observant and attuned to his depth of character, a depth that is amply exhibited in his letter to the author. His respectful discernment of her commitment to her vows is palpable and sensitive, just as is his cautious portrayal of her as a delicate deer. And yet he also detects the “warm vital blood” flowing beneath her demure demeanor.

Among other things, Kelsang Lhamo reveals with this exceptional self-portrait the deep human complexities of the emotional life of the renunciate, perhaps even more so when that devoted renunciate is a woman.

Finally, we have the pleasure of “The Lottery,” another sublimely crafted autobiographical essay. Tenzin Dickie seamlessly situates herself within Tibetan exile culture, even while using the affordances of literature to stray far beyond that. She and her community are keenly alert to the different values of white European-descent foreigners, or “Injis, ... a proud and narrow-minded people, we thought, who would take kindness for contempt.” But she spends most of “The Lottery” peering into the depths of her own childhood self. She freely exposes not only her shame as a childhood bed-wetter but also her own self-absorption (“They assumed I was miserable about my parents’ leaving for abroad. I was only thinking, how do I stop peeing in bed?”), thus boldly departing from expectations around Tibetan filial piety. Tenzin Dickie even questions the nature of autobiographical memory altogether, arriving at what we could label a “triplex” perspective on the self, one that knows not only the difference between the narrating self and the narrated one, but also the necessary distortions of narration altogether. Even as she tells her story as a child in exile with exuberance and wit, the reader gets the impression that she is not above questioning the entire project of focusing on herself to begin with, an anxiety far from unknown in world literature, not to mention the enormous reservoir of premodern Tibetan writing that all of our authors here are heiresses to, consciously or not.

I appreciate that the editors of this issue decided to provide

the first-language version of all of the stories, along with a translation into either English or Tibetan when these were not the original. This meant rendering the two Anglophone contributions, “The Lottery” and “Somewhere Else,” in Tibetan, a venture as challenging, if not more so, as is translating modern Tibetan or Chinese into English. We readers owe all of the translators much gratitude for wading into the very choppy waters of cultural contact, where terms, values, assumptions, implications, and intertextual echoes are set loose, at best finding uneasy landing spots in the target language that unavoidably make for new associations of their own. Our own literary imaginations have been set loose as well, but in the expert hands of these fine authors, translators, and editors we can feel free to take in the new vistas.