

# New Tibetan writing stares down the hard truths of exile

Sunday 10 September 2023, by [MULMI Amish Raj](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2023).

**A generation of Tibetan writers, many working in English, are laying claim to the voice of exile and pushing back against the fetishisation of Tibet by the West**

At one point in the Tibetan writer-in-exile Tsering Yangzom Lama's evocative debut novel *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*, the protagonist, Dolma, says, "People find our culture beautiful ... But not our suffering." She has stolen a *ku* – a statue – of a nameless saint from the vault of a rich white Canadian collector, an artefact that has time and again found a way to emerge whenever her family is in need of protection. Her birth-father, Samphel, who sold the statue to foreigners, tells her it was her mother, Lhamo, who gave it to him. "What I do know is that survival is an ugly game, and our objects are all the world really values of our people," Samphel says. "Our objects and our ideas. But not us, and not our lives."

Scattered like ants across the face of the earth as a Tibetan prophecy foretold, the world's 130,000 Tibetans in exile have been rendered invisible for the most part. Their histories have been subsumed within the "Tibet issue", meaning individual stories of dislocation and suffering are typically framed within the questions of politics, territory and sovereignty that followed the Chinese government's annexation of the Tibetan plateau in the 1950s.

Now, a new generation of Tibetan writers, working in English, is laying claim to the voice of exile through literature that consciously emphasises the trauma of displacement, counters prevailing narratives about Tibet, and shifts the discourse away from the hard politics of the Tibet issue. Born out of the dislocation of the thousands who came before them and crossed the icy passes of the Himalaya into alien lands, contemporary Tibetan writing rebels against the traditional fetishisation of Tibet and its culture by the West. Yet, inescapably, being a displaced person also means being performative. As the writer and translator Tenzin Dickie writes in the introduction to the groundbreaking anthology *The Penguin Book of Modern Tibetan Essays*, "[I]n exile, sometimes it can feel as if we say too much; we are always trying to shout, trying to underscore our exile, our oppression. If Tibetan writing from the inside can often feel like code, the writing from the outside can sometimes feel like caricature. They have to conceal, and we have to perform."

In the last few years, a spate of new Tibetan writing in English has appeared. Besides Lama's novel and Dickie's edited anthology of essays, the Dharamsala-based Blackneck Books, an imprint of the collective TibetWrites, has published several original works as well as a Tibetan-language translation of John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. Dickie also edited *Old Demons, New Deities: Contemporary Stories from Tibet*, published in 2017. This exuberant production of literature embodies a conscious shift away from the analogous Western focus on Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet, as well as a reclaiming of a Tibetan identity that has been forged in exile – an identity, which inside Tibet, is shaped by China's attempts to incorporate the Tibetan people into its homogenous nation-project. As Dickie writes in her introduction, "To speak as Tibetans, and to write as Tibetans, is to continually recreate the Tibetan nation."

More than sixty years since the Dalai Lama left Tibet for India and thousands of Tibetans followed him into exile, the loss of a nation is now accompanied by despondency. “The fences have grown into a jungle, now how can I tell my children where we came from?” the Tibetan freedom activist Tenzin Tsundue writes in his poem ‘Exile House’. The promise and hope of a return to Tibet has begun to dissipate. Displacement and dissonance mark the new literature, where families are separated by immutable borders and recalcitrant governments, and where the Tibetan identity must be brought to the fore by conscious means in new lands. As Bhuchung D Sonam writes in the essay ‘Unhealed’, “My mother did not cry on the day I left Tibet. She took out a fist-sized lump of crystal sugar and said, ‘Keep chewing on it and you won’t get tired.’ For years in exile, I held on to her voice, her face, and the taste of that rock sugar ... It has been over three decades since I saw my mother.”

This, then, is the heart of contemporary Tibetan writing, its snying po, or essence: a feeling of loss, of old separations and new anxieties, of a nation and identity slipping away even as new ones take their place. The poetic grace of Lama’s words in *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies* underscores the troubled histories of the Tibetan people – as, for instance, when Dolma’s grandmother and Lhamo’s mother, Ama-la, tell Lhamo before she passes, “This is what you will do: Carry your sister on your back, as though she were a part of your body ... She will travel farther than any of us. And one day, she will throw a rope across the oceans.” As Ama-la passes away, Lhamo muses, “Suddenly, Ama’s limbs begin to soften at their edges and fade like a sand mandala. This is a dream, I tell myself, but as soon as the thought leaves my mind, Ama dissolves. As if she had been nothing but an idea.”

Lama’s fiction and Sonam’s essay, like so much new Tibetan writing, sketch out the edges of an open wound made of countless estrangements and the loss of a way of being. Reading contemporary Tibetan literature feels like a dagger to the soul, a gut punch to those who have a place they can feel at home.

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*We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies* spans the world of Tibetan exiles. It begins with Lhamo’s escape in the 1960s into Mustang, across the Nepal border, after Ama-la, who is also an oracle, decides to leave Tibet. Thereafter, the novel shifts in time and space between Nepal and Canada, alternating between Lhamo; her sister Tenkyi, who moves to Canada to live with Dolma, her niece; and Samphel, Lhamo’s lover and Dolma’s father – and the man who sells the nameless saint’s ku to foreigners.

(Warning: Spoilers ahead, till the end of the section.)

It is the women characters who make *We Measure the Earth* so poignant. Moving between the refugee camps of Pokhara and the tiny apartments of Toronto, it is a novel about mothers, daughters and sisters. Trauma shapes its characters – whether that of exile and separation, or of death. The damp concrete walls of the refugee camp in Pokhara stand in contrast to the well-lit streets of Toronto, but neither feels like home for the book’s protagonists. Dolma is an object on display in a soiree of Western Tibet experts – “Sitting in Henri’s chair, I had felt washed in shame, imagining that this was our image in the West” – until she pushes back against “a man who treats knowledge as acquisition, understanding as control.” It is at this same soiree that Dolma discovers the ku, wrapped in plastic inside a wooden box, the “latest acquisition”. “You have no idea how difficult it was to negotiate [with the dealer in Nepal], with the power cuts and labor strikes,” Elise tells Dolma. “Everything took twice as long. But so worth it. There’s so little coming out of Tibet these days.”

Back in the refugee camp in Pokhara, Tenkyi finds American sponsors who will pay for her education in Delhi. Lhamo begins preparations for the journey that will take her sister away from her, feeling

“the ground shake as my sister drives away” to a new life far away from the squalor of the camps. “Go and live, Little Sister ... For this freedom, our parents laid their bodies on the mountain paths.” Although Lhamo pines for Samphel, she ends up marrying Tashi, but the men in her life cannot take away what is only hers: “With a kerosene lamp, I walk like a ghost, a light floating in the hills. I am the feared and derided oracle. I am one of her lovers. No man can have what’s mine.”

For Tenkyi, too, life is a series of interruptions. “I cannot go back to how things were in Delhi. The days of no future. When everyone could see just what I was – nothing but a lonely insect.” Working as a cleaner in Toronto with her friend Palzom, Tenkyi finds herself in a new land where “tall men and women rush by in their suits” and she feels like “a mailbox or a fire hydrant, not even worth a glance.” This, too, is the life of a refugee – an ordeal of insignificance and invisibility.

After Lhamo’s death, father and daughter come together in grief, and make a plan to take Lhamo’s ashes “home”. In Mustang, at the Nepal-China border, where “flat land stretches for hundreds of kilometers in every direction” and where clouds are everywhere, hovering “just above the mountains, casting wide shadows,” Dolma muses, “So this must be it, this elevated earth. The Land of Snows ... It’s hard to believe that I have somehow reached my ancestors’ land. All my life, even reaching its very edges seemed impossible. Now I don’t feel ready.” And as they rush back before Chinese border guards appear, ripping the bag open and letting Lhamo’s ashes fly into the ether, Samphel tells her, “In another life, you and I will cross this border.”

“But not now,” Dolma replies, encapsulating the grim reality of Tibetan exiles today.

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If contemporary Tibetan fiction recreates the pain of exile in microcosmic form, *The Book of Modern Tibetan Essays* builds on contemporary realities about exile, Tibetan identity and nationhood. “[T]he essay has a long affinity with exile, with distance and loss,” Dickie writes in the introduction, before opening the floor to Tibetan writers from across the world. Several essays recollect both the act of going into exile and the lived experience of exile. Longing, separation and the dissonance that comes with displacement are ever-present, but, more notably, so are reflections on what it means to be Tibetan in a more secular sense – both inside and outside Tibet – than the widespread fixation on Tibetan religion usually allows.

Thus, in ‘Love Letters’, Topden Tsering writes of his adolescence in the Tibetan Children’s Village school in Dharamsala, where he and his friends write paeans of love to their crushes while negotiating growth pangs and regrettable fashion choices. “Love had worn him down, and for love, he was fighting back.” In ‘Nation of Two’, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa writes of her mother’s decision to give up a potential job in France and move to Boudha, in Kathmandu, after she learnt that her siblings were alive in Tibet. “Nepal is closer to our family in Tibet” is her logic, but Dhompa discovers that Tibetans in Nepal are “both in-between and not-yet people” because of the country’s tenuous relationship with exiles. Living in a room in a monastery whose walls “turned splotchy with charcoal,” she writes, “[t]here were no rules in my mother’s house, probably because we were always in each other’s view ... We guarded each other’s happiness. We put the other first. We didn’t have to make many decisions because we had few options. Our love, like our mobility, had a relationship with precarity.”

Mobility is a perpetual feature of Tibetan lives in exile. It begins right from the decision to leave Tibet, braving not just the Himalaya but also the vigilance of Chinese and Nepali security forces to cross over – a rare thing especially in the last decade, when the numbers of escapees have shrunk precipitously. In ‘Dram’, by Gedun Rabsal, translated by Dhondup T Rekjong and Catherine Tsuji, a group decides to cross over via a Chinese border town. “I began to pray to my Dharma protectors

and followed Datak, making up my mind to have absolutely no fear of death.” In ‘The Journey’, Pema Tsewang Shastri relives a childhood memory from the passage to Nepal, when an old acquaintance robbed his family of his mother’s silver amulet and deserted Shastri – a child of about eight or nine – in a Nepali village. Dhondup T Rekjong writes in ‘A Day in Exile’ of the journey from Xining in Amdo, in northeastern Tibet, to Dharamsala: a three-day bus ride to Lhasa, followed by an eighteen-day walk from Tingri to Jiri in Nepal. “We finally made it to Dharamsala twenty-eight days after our departure from Tibet.”

Rekjong’s essay is also a musing on the Central Tibetan Administration’s mission to unify people from Tibet’s three constituent regions – U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham – under a single broad Tibetan identity, which maps on to how the anthology defines “Tibetanness”. Upon learning that he has to give up his Amdo dialect in favour of the U-Tsang dialect of Tibetan, Rekjong writes, “Exile is a political project that requires rebuilding everything from scratch. That is why unity has been the primary goal ... In prioritizing that goal, sometimes diversity was lost, unfortunately. But while exile is a matter of being out of place, it is also a flexible space to create new meanings.”

The diversity Rekjong alludes to is further emphasised in Mila Samdub’s ‘Oral Traditions’, where a family picnic in a Tennessee park becomes a cause for musing over his Kumbum identity. Kumbum, in Siling (sinicised to Xining), was historically a borderland between Tibet and China, “ruled not from Lhasa or Beijing but by a Hui warlord in Siling.” Rekjong explains the conscious decision by his grandfather to give up using Chinese and his native language of Siling kye in favour of Tibetan, his transformation “an act of the will”. And yet, “[e]ven now, when it is clearly a land under colonial Chinese rule, I don’t know that a state ruled from Lhasa would be any solution here. Kumbum is a place all of its own, with ties in many directions.”

A similar struggle with navigating the histories of Kumbum emerges in the filmmaker Tenzing Sonam’s essay ‘A Stranger in My Native Land: Kumbum’. In a lament against the sinicisation of local cultures, Sonam writes, “My relatives, like most Tibetans in the Kumbum region, are literally clinging to the last shreds of their cultural identity.” Sonam’s second essay in the anthology, ‘A Child’s Losar in Darjeeling’, takes a more historical route, explaining how his parents’ home in Darjeeling was filled with “Lhasawas and Silingpas”. His father, Lhamo Tsering, played a crucial role in Chushi Gangdruk, a guerrilla force that fought the Chinese in Tibet starting in the mid 1950s, and was arrested by Nepali forces to be used as a bargaining chip during the 1974 surrender of the Tibetan guerrilla strongholds in Mustang. “And that is how I found out that my father had an entirely different side to his life.”

The “migratory instincts of the exile to find a better life”, as Sonam writes of Tibetan exiles’ moves to the United States, is another theme in the anthology. While Mila Samdub writes of how his grandmother sought familiarity in Kumbum cuisine in Tennessee, Topden Tsering’s second essay, ‘In the Embrace of Letting Go’, earlier published in *Himal*, builds on grief. Tsering learns of the death of his aunt – who was born on the “other side of history”, before China annexed Tibet – while he is in California, and on a flight back to Delhi, “squeezed between the two – rendered immobile, insular – I felt like an island. Grief was its only inhabitant.” In ‘The Lottery’, Dickie writes about the 1990 US Immigration Act, which allowed a thousand Tibetans entry into the United States. “With America came the possibility of living outside these settlements, the possibility of unsettling. With America, the future split infinitely.”

A personal favourite for me is the poet and activist Tsering Wooser’s essay ‘Garpon La’s Offerings’, translated by Dechen Pemba and Fiona Sze-Lorrain, which builds on the life of Garpon Pasang Dhondup, a master of the Gar music that was traditionally composed for the Dalai Lamas and performed only during high ceremonies and celebrations. Wooser finds a photograph in an old book with 58 scores and lyrics for Gar performances that once belonged to her father. In the photo,

Garpon La sits on a chair holding a Tibetan *suna*, akin to the oboe, at the People's Stadium in Lhasa, "where tens of thousands of people gathered for political assemblies" from the 1950s onwards. In the short biography of Garpon La in the old book, however, 22 years of his life are missing. Woesser discovers he was sent to a labour camp, and Gar music was itself "swept into the dustbin of history by the Cultural Revolution." Although he survived the labour camps, Garpon La refused to reinstate Gar music despite the insistence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government who sought to ameliorate the excesses of the Cultural Revolution after the death of Mao. "Because the 're-education through labour' I received at Gormo was so thorough, I've completely forgotten Gar," he reportedly told the authorities, who were too embarrassed to continue bothering him thereafter.

In the 1980s, when talks began between the Dalai Lama's representatives and the CCP, Garpon La was granted a passport and went to Dharamsala to meet the Dalai Lama. There, in front of the Dalai Lama, Garpon La burst into tears and asked to perform Gar as an offering. "People say that when Garpon La started tapping the damma drum and singing with his desolate voice, the sounds of crying and weeping filled the house, enclosing the air of a foreign country but smelling of the incense of Lhasa." Having been granted this last wish, Garpon La said he would only perform Gar in the heavens now, "even if it meant allowing Gar to disappear from the earth." But the Dalai Lama insisted otherwise. He asked Garpon La to return to Lhasa, accept the authorities' request to restore Gar and transform it into a public ceremony, and to teach younger Tibetans his art. "In short, no matter the obstacles, you must not let Gar disappear." Garpon La could not reject the entreaty, and went on to revive Gar inside Tibet.

Woesser's moving biography stands out because of Garpon La's devotion to the Dalai Lama, but it also suggests an important point for the future of both Tibetan exiles and Tibet-China relations. Despite China's attempts to present an alternative narrative on Tibet focusing on its economic progress and branding the Dalai Lama as a separatist, Tibetans continue to hold both the office of the Dalai Lama and the individual who occupies it in the highest regard. Now, as China finds itself beset by multiple issues, both external and internal, the example of Garpon La's devotion may provide a way for China to resolve one of the world's most contentious issues.

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"All literature carries exile within it," the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño once wrote, "whether the writer has had to pick up and go at the age of twenty or has never left home." For King Gesar of the Ling Kingdom, the epic Tibetan hero banished into the desert with his mother by his uncle, exile is momentary, a rite of passage that sets up his eventual victory over his enemies, as writer Douglas J Penick's rendition of the epic narrates:

And even though our life seems now harsh and poor,  
Sun, moon and starlight bless us with unfailing light.  
We are sustained by rain and snow,  
Nourished by wild cattle, the grass and the earth.  
We live in a splendid place the gods themselves admire:  
Gleaming snow mountains are our palace walls,  
And this vast, green plain is our reception hall.  
Mother, do not fear a life of poverty  
When we are so well provided for.

Literature formed in exile swings between the dichotomy of hope and despair, as is evident in

Lama's novel and the essay collection, and also in *Under the Blue Skies*, another volume of contemporary Tibetan writing. This volume is edited by Bhuchung D Sonam, who writes in the introduction, "Who else experiences what we experience? Who feels what we feel? Out of these tortuous realities and outcomes, we strive to form a new reality." An anthology of fiction, nonfiction and poetry, some of it previously published elsewhere, *Under the Blue Skies* makes for a great introduction to the corpus of contemporary Tibetan writing. In Tsering Yangzom Lama's essay 'A Wire Fence', she recollects the moment she arrived at the Kora La border in Mustang. "At age twenty-six, I saw my country for the first time. For fifteen minutes, I stood on its edge." This could well be said to be a prelude to her novel's concluding act – an instance of nonfiction inspiring fiction.

In 'Letter for Love', a fictional story by Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, Pema's budding affair with an American is both a promise of escape to the United States from Nepal's Tibetan settlements – "I know the world through neatly marked cans and bottles in the shop" – and a chance for Tsering, her friend, to break free from the ennui of her own life: "The idea of happiness existed all on its own and outside of me." Topden Tsering builds further on the life of his aunt in the essay 'My Ani' (earlier published in this magazine), but, sitting far away in California, he's constantly worried about her. In exile, memory is a crutch to hold on to, a tether both to a previous life and to families separated by oceans and mountains.

The ghosts of the past, however, are never far away. They hover like wraiths over the words, and do not let go even in new places. In Dickie's story 'Winter in Patlikuhl', the narrator has questions for Momo Pasang – "She was older than anyone else at Patlikuhl and if she had family before, now all she had were memories" – but the insolence of the young cannot be helped. When the narrator and her friend drop firecrackers into a fire, Momo starts to scream, "The Chinese are coming! The Chinese are coming!" If this wasn't enough, the narrator hammers her cruelty home: "She looked so ridiculous, this old woman in a discolored and tattered chupa losing her mind over a firecracker."

In Tsering Woesser's story 'Nyima Tsering's Tears', translated by Jampa, Bhuchung D Sonam, Tenzin Tsundue and Jane Perkins, a monk is whisked off to Norway to defend China's human-rights record, but is instead met by hundreds of protesting Tibetans who call him a collaborator. When a woman asks him to not return to Tibet, he says, "If we all leave, to whom will Tibet be left?" – a pithy statement that carries in it overwhelming courage.

Together, these books – and the wave of new Tibetan writing that has burst forth in recent years – form a larger tapestry, one that feels continuous in design yet interrupted by history and memory. Contemporary Tibetan writing is built on resistance, born out of both displacement and life under autocracy, and incontrovertibly asks to be read not as a treatise on how Tibet is to be imagined. There are moments where such literature can be said to be performative, especially when it comes to addressing temporal issues, but this is to be expected. Nonetheless, these moments do not take away from the corpus of new Tibetan writing. As Dickie writes in her poem 'Yuthok Lane', included in *Under the Blue Skies*:

This is how it will be:  
we will take a walk on concrete, not blue tiles,  
and you will pretend to be disappointed.  
This will have the quality of a ritual.

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