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Concentric memories, circular encounters, and post-Buddhist imaginations: contesting Dharamsala as 'Little Lhasa'

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses representations of Dharamsala, Tibetan capital in exile or capital of exiled Tibet, as a pool of signifiers for Tibetan exilic construction. Like Tibetan exile itself, Dharamsala carries the archival claim of preserving everything constructed as authentic about old Tibet. On the other hand, Dharamsala is also regarded as an avant-garde of Tibetan modernity. By focusing on Tenzin Tsundue's short story 'Kora. Full Circle' (2002) and Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam's film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), I explore various representational trends that expose the inner paradoxes and ambivalences of Tibetan exilic identities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Following Anand's model of deconstructing and analysing the etymological possibilities of the word *Dharamshala*, I look at the Tibetan exiled capital as a disputed centre, hosting both nostalgic narratives of reproduction and their very opposite: attempts to reformulate Tibetanness in innovative and disruptive ways.

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When representing Dharamsala, Indo-Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry articulates his gaze as two superimposed concentric circles:

Descending the temple road, we saw several monks, prayerbeads in hand, walking a circular path around the complex. They were simulating the Lingkor, the Holy Walk circumscribing the Potala, the Dalai Lama's palace in Tibet. Round and round they walked, praying, perhaps for a time when he would be back in his palace, and they treading the original Lingkor. Inside: the woman, making a mandala of her prostrations around the temple. Outside: the monks creating circles of prayer around their beloved leader's residence. Circles within circles. The Wheel of Time. (Mistry, quoted in in Namgyal 2006, 4)

Even though Mistry observes Dharamsala as an outsider, his concentric description is not just the witty and fanciful recreation of the passing writer. The rhetoric of entwining Dharamsala and Lhasa as analogous sets of concentric rings is one that has widely been engaged by both Tibetans and non-Tibetans. The circularity of this image can be said to fulfil a double purpose: to reproduce Buddhist rituals (*khorra*) and the way they shaped space in old Tibet (Lhasa's three concentric rings) but also to provide a narrative for interpreting exile.

It is not only that since the 1960s the Tibetan exile administration has tried to reconstruct the structure of Lhasa in its new seat or that the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Board advertises McLeod Gunj-Dharamsala as ‘little Lhasa in India’ (Anand 2002, 18), but also that Dharamsala has come to ‘play [...] a very crucial role in acting as a symbolic nerve centre from which articulations of Tibetan-ness emerge’ (Anand 2002, 14). As a symbolic centre of the Tibetan exilic community, even though there are larger concentrations of Tibetans in other parts of the world, Dharamsala has been enshrined as the re-embodiment of old Tibet, an archive, a site of pilgrimage and an analogy of exile itself. From this perspective, the narratives that shape the hybrid space that is Dharamsala can also be said to be the stories that articulate the symbolic universe of Tibetan exile.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how Tenzin Tsundue’s short story ‘Kora. Full Circle’ and Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam’s *Dreaming Lhasa* negotiate the circular narratives that enshrine Dharamsala as the centre of Tibetan exile. By so doing I wish to show how the circular pattern can be rewritten and contested, in analogously circular but resistant ways, giving birth to new forms of imagining Tibetanness.¹ The two texts chosen are great examples, literary and filmic, of the reimagining of Tibetan identity in exile. For instance, the circular dynamics in ‘Tsundue’s *Kora* (2002) provide one with space to critically engage with the multifaceted construction, reproduction, and expression of Tibetan-ness’ (Yangzom 2020, 62). Furthermore, the circular movements inherent in the diasporic experience, as Yangzom points out, shape this space: ‘The notion of *soujourn*, as going back and forth from multiple locations, is helpful in situating the diasporas. Since the current location, as well as the ancestral place, is thought of as home, *going back* occurs in various stages, from recreating existing institutions in the host land to visiting relatives left behind’ (2020, 65).

Analogously, Matta discusses *Dreaming Lhasa* as Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin’s ‘own cinematic versions of Tibetan history, creating their *historiophoty* of Tibet’ (2020, 167). In this way, films like *Dreaming Lhasa* provide a “semioticised space” for telling a plurality of different (hi)stories that never recomposed into a single image of Tibet’ (Matta 2020, 167). The creative plurality of Tibetan imaginaries is intimately linked to the circular movements of the exilic space and strengthens Tibetan displaced subjects as crafters of their own representations. In Matta’s own words: ‘The film shows Tibetans as agentive subjects, displaced and yet rooted and centred in their dream of retrieving, and preserving, memories of Tibet’ (2020, 170). In this way, ‘the dream of retrieving’ provides an axial centre to the circular journeys of creative reimagination, which are inscribed as much in the filmic and literary texts discussed as in the material and subjective space of Dharamsala.

However, before reading the rewritten circles of diaspora/exile as contestation, the spatial and discursive contexts of the dominant narrative (from the ancestral land) need to be discussed first. The city of Lhasa was originally constructed as a set of three concentric circles, surrounding the Jowo, a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni that sat at the symbolic centre of the city in the Jokhang, the main temple. Interestingly enough, the Jowo was one of the few Buddha images spared during the Cultural Revolution, because it was an alleged proof of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Legend has it that the statue was a wedding gift brought by Princess Wengchen to Songtsen Gampo, the king who brought Tibet to its greater imperial expansion in the seventh century. Thus

the Jowo is not just a religious foundation of Buddhist Tibet but also a reminder of its glorious imperial past. Ironically, for the Chinese it proves the opposite: Tibet's belonging to China, since the marriage of the Chinese princess and the Tibetan emperor is considered as an act of union. However it might be, the centre of Lhasa, even of Chinese-occupied Lhasa, remains the same.

Around that centre the city developed through three concentric rings, purposely built for the Buddhist practice of *khorra*, which involves circumambulating a holy site clockwise. The first circle environs the Jowo within the Jokhang, the second is the Barkhor (literally *in-between circle*) which has been the symbolic centre of many Tibetan protests since 1987 until 2008, and the third is the Lingkhor (literally *outer circle*) which used to mark the limits of the city. Thus, as Lhasa gradually became a centre of pilgrimage for all Tibetans, they could pay homage to the city's holy heart or centre three times. It is important to note that the centre of the city was not the Potala Palace, even if the Potala (built in the seventeenth century) was also envired by the Lingkhor. As the religious and political centrality of the Potala increased a new circular route was also created to environ this new royal seat.

Whereas the Jowo stands as a symbol of a former king, the Potala became the actual residence of the current king, as the Dalai Lamas rose to power in the seventeenth century (at the time of the fifth Dalai Lama, who also started building the Potala). The two symbols coexisted as the holy centres of Lhasa until 1959 during which they parted from each other. The Dalai Lama fled to India after the March uprising and the Jowo remained in its seat in the Jokhang, being carefully respected by Chinese authorities (while they desecrated its religious surroundings). The reestablishment of the living symbol of the Tibetan kingdom in Dharamsala in 1960 involved an analogous process of power-spatial construction in the old British hill station. As soon as the new centre was established, the seat and residence of the King-in-Exile, a new circuit was created, in this case called the *lingkhor*.

Interestingly enough, only the outer of the three rings was transplanted to the capital in exile, perhaps hinting at the fact that this is an eccentric centre, far away from the limits of the original one. Whatever the reason, it is certain that what Anand calls the 'dominant story' of 'Dharamsala as a temporary home' (2002, 19) is certainly construed as some kind of eccentric *khorra* or circumambulation. This narrative, playing with the fact that '*Dharamsala* in popular Hindi usage refers to a temporary home' (2002, 19) regards exile as a temporary malaise, a circular journey that will be finished by returning to the motherland. This discourse is tied in with the preservationist mentality that also constructs exile, and Dharamsala as its emblem, as an archive, the repository of old and lost Tibet. As Harris argues, the official policy of the government in exile of privileging certain artistic styles as 'authentic' is risky since it could hinder the development of a culture that, like any other, is in constant change: 'If exilic "Tibet" is only remade in terms which appeal to the dream of Shangri-La, it could remain on a life-support system in perpetuity and the romantic and timeless vision of its culture could destroy any chances it has of self-regeneration' (1999, 197).

Harris uses the word Shangri-La here in an interestingly ambivalent way; Shangri-La is not just the mystic Tibet enshrined in Western fantasies and embodied in the more touristic aspect of Dharamsala but also an equally fictional old Tibet enshrined in the Tibetan exilic imagination. The retrospective construction of old Tibet as a timeless utopia is

typical of many exiled or diasporic communities, which turn the forsaken fatherland into a promised land (Dodin and Räther 2001; Anand 2007). In the Tibetan case the rhetoric of cultural preservation is often linked with the dominant story of exile as a temporary malaise. The reason why culture needs to be maintained in an alleged state of purity is the fact that old Tibet has been allegedly destroyed so that the archive/repository that is exile will have to restore Tibetan culture back in Tibet once return is accomplished. As both Anand (2002) and Harris (1999) indicate, this idea is mutually created and maintained by Tibetan conservative elites and by Western consumers/scholars/Buddhist practitioners.

If applied to the *khorra* narrative the idea is that exile is a circular journey with a destination; a journey that will come full circle when return happens. It is not the journey that matters, since that is regarded as a temporary state, a means to an end; the focus is very much on the goal. By focusing on preservation the travellers are thus focusing on the destination, which is identical to the point of origin in this circle of restoration. Nonetheless, this same circular structure might be appropriated to tell a different story of Tibetanness, even though it might still use Dharamsala and its holy circuit as a symbolic centre. An instance of such appropriation is Tenzin Tsundue's 'Kora. Full Circle', a short story included in his 2002 book *Kora*. In a way that is typical of Tibetan-English writers, Tsundue presents his contestive rewriting of the *khorra* ritual, which departs from its original religious meaning to acquire political significance, but which is still framed and embellished with traditional values and motifs.

Thus the short story is preceded by a short Buddhist tale:

A fly sat on a crumb of cow dung being carried away by the rainwater flowing down the street. The streamlet took it to the end of the village where a stupa stood. The streamlet then went around the holy structure taking the fly on a circumambulation and finally jointed into a nearby tributary. The fly was born into a human being in its next life, blessed with an opportunity to hear the words of the Buddha. Thus a scripture says. (Tsundue 2008, 35)

This narrative foreshadows the story of Tashi, who, accidentally, will also be dragged into a circumambulation with an equally unexpected result. He seems to be wandering aimlessly in the evening of 'a particular boring day' (Tsundue 2008, 36), 'dirt and wispy patches and drawings in his jeans' and 'an attitude typical of his age that shines on his face' (Tsundue 2008, 35). In fact, his friend Nyima invites him to go circumambulating the lingkhor but he refuses, by saying 'no man' (Tsundue 2008, 35).

However, out of boredom he ends up entering the circuit and is immediately absorbed and transformed, a bit like the fly sitting on the crumb of dung. Later on he will meet with 'Old Man', walking with a stick, who mocks his speed and uselessness. Tashi retorts by blaming him for being complicit in the loss of the old country and Old Man naturally answers back: 'You tell me what you've done for Tibet up to now?' (Tsundue 2008, 38) Tashi replies by outlining his short CV of 'protest rallies', cultural 'exhibitions' and 'hunger strikes' but quickly feels afraid of 'sounding a little hollow in front of the Old Man' (Tsundue 2008, 38). This implicit acknowledgement of humbleness through silence works as the equivalent of a request to teach in Buddhist contexts; the student exposes his ignorance and asks the teacher to start teaching.

Nevertheless, this Old Man, even though acknowledged as Tashi's 'old master' (Tsendue 2008, 40), does not necessarily conform to the more conventional Buddhist ethics. Although they are engaging in *khorra* and the two men often stop to offer prayers and prostrations at various spots, their conversation might certainly be deemed unholy by those who understand Buddhist values as synonymous with non-violence. The Old Man was a guerrilla fighter in the Tibetan resistance and proudly celebrates his feats. In his own words: 'We killed ten Chinese, left many of them badly wounded begging for mercy, and we looted enough food and ammunition to last for two weeks' (Tsendue 2008, 39). As he goes along he also starts to hold 'his walking stick across his waist as a sword' to demonstrate his warfare skills and the narrator adds realism to the scene by verbally turning the stick into a sword: 'He raises his sword high up in the sky, against the snow peaks, and brings it down in a slash, and immediately crosses it with another sharp slash slanted the wayside bush' (Tsendue 2008, 39).

Moreover, the Old Man's tone is unashamedly celebratory, 'KI HE HE! We entered', he says when describing some war scene, and concludes his narration by proclaiming 'We killed rampantly!' (Tsendue 2008, 39). In his story, there are no traces of the ambivalences of other, fictional or real, former guerrilla fighters, like another old man in *Dreaming Lhasa* who, half-proudly half-apologetically, explains how 'in 1958 we ran away from the monastery and joined the resistance. We fought the Chinese many times. We killed many Chinese and we lost a lot of good men too but we really fought. Om mani padme hum. We've sinned a lot' (Sarin and Sonam 2005). Old Man's speech is a very clear apology of armed struggle as a brave and valid means of resistance. Such opinion does not compromise his commitment to the Dalai Lama, in fact he states that the ultimate goal of his struggle is taking 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama back to a free Tibet' (Sarin and Sonam 2005), or his devotion to Buddhism, expressed by performing the ritual of circumambulating his residence and doing small ceremonies along the way.

Old Man's seeming paradox is not however unprecedented in Tibetan history. Many of the guerrilla fighters who saved the Dalai Lama's life in 1959 were fighting the Chinese against his orders. This is a curious sense of devotion; the fighters were ready to die for their leader but not necessarily to obey his instructions. Also, their actions are not necessarily against Buddhist ethics, just against certain interpretations of Buddhist ethics which have become increasingly popular in exile. Trying to market the Tibetan struggle as a non-violent one was an important strategic move for the Tibetan government in exile, since it was thought to elicit much sympathy and support from Western countries. After all, a non-violent struggle highlighted the role of the Tibetans as victims and made them seem more aligned with the Shangri-La stereotype of Buddhist Tibet. Nevertheless, a more radical reading of Buddhist narratives was done both at the time of the Chinese takeover and afterwards to legitimise violence as a valid means of resistance (Norbu 1986; Chagdud 1992).

However, Tenzin Tsendue does not seem particularly interested in revisiting those Buddhist validations of violence, but simply to present violence as naturally embedded in Tibetan (exilic) culture by using the narrative of circumambulation. The violent talk of Old Man coexists peacefully with his acts of devotion and worship. Worship is sometimes addressed to fierce deities like Palden Lhamo, often invoked at times of war in old

Tibet and before demonstrations in more recent times. Nonetheless, Tsundue's rewriting of the *khorra* narrative is not a mere celebration of violence as a path of liberation; it also modifies the emphasis on old Tibet or restored Tibet as a goal or horizon.

Even though 'Kora. Full Circle' shares the same goal as the official discourse of the Tibetan government in exile (i.e. to 'take His Holiness the Dalai Lama back to a free Tibet'; Tsundue 2008, 40), the importance and nature of the means differ radically from it. For a start, exile is not regarded as a malaise but rather as a school where lessons might be taken for the future. The unavoidable hybridity of exile is not regarded as problematic. It is worth noting that Old Man never criticises Tashi's jeans or his Western education, but the fact that he is either too fast or gets tired too easily. Old Man scolds Tashi's impulsiveness and arrogance, something to do with his age and not with his exilic and hybrid condition. Old Man's remark is typical of old people all over the world and not specific to the Tibetan context; in other words, it is not politically or culturally conservative. Also, what the Old Man's narration conveys is the importance of the path over the goal. As he puts it: 'Live one day, but with dignity and freedom' (Tsundue 2008, 40).

Thus, the focus of Old Man's story is not on what he achieved for Tibet but what he did for Tibet, what he sacrificed for Tibet. In this way, victory lies always in the present; it is fighting bravely right now and not some imaginary and far-off goal. This very Buddhist approach to the national struggle, which emphasises correct action at every step of the way while pursuing a remote objective, highlights the importance of the means over the end.

Consequently, what needs to be kept alive or preserved is not a certain version of Tibetan culture, constructed as 'authentic' by the exiled leadership, but the spirit of resistance. Old Man is presented towards the end as 'a father speaking to his son and asking him to keep up the struggle' (Tsundue 2008, 40). Although Old Man appears sometimes as a guru figure and sometimes as a father, the whole narrative borrows from Buddhist stories. Not only is their circular encounter framed as a Buddhist narrative but, most importantly, their interaction follows many of the traits of a Buddhist teacher–student model.

First of all they meet in a seemingly accidental way that ends up fulfilling their destiny; like the fly that accidentally becomes a human being and has the chance to listen to the Buddha's teachings, Tashi is carried by boredom and chance to listen to Old Man's political teachings. The teacher first scolds the student but after the latter gives up his pride he accepts him and passes on to him what is most precious (i.e. his spirit of resistance). In turn Tashi plays the good student and corresponds by 'listen[ing] closely to his old master' (Tsundue 2008, 40). Moreover, the parting of both men can easily be construed as a transmission in which vows are taken. Old Man refuses Tashi's more casual handshake and 'commands Tashi to get up. "We touch foreheads and say prayers. That's the way it is done". The Old Man sensing Tashi's hesitation says, "May you complete the work left incomplete. May you be successful in the struggle and take His Holiness the Dalai Lama back to a free Tibet"' (Tsundue 2008, 40). The solemnity of Old Man turns this farewell into some form of appointment or transmission of his still unaccomplished vows.

An unaccomplished vow is precisely the starting point of *Dreaming Lhasa*, a film that portrays the fulfilment of a promise made in Tibet in the slippery and circular spaces of

Tibetan exile. Although *Dreaming Lhasa* is a complex film with a variety of subplots, its central plot might be said to be Dhondup's quest, eventually fulfilled through Karma's help, which consists on returning a charm box (*ghau*) to its rightful owner. Dhondup is a Tibetan from Tibet who has just arrived in India following his mother's dying wish, hoping to find Loga, the mysterious man to whom the charm box belongs. Karma is a Tibetan-American making a documentary about Chinese repression in Tibet based on testimonies from recent exiles or passing travellers, like Dhondup. Jigme, a young(er) Tibetan born in India, completes the love triangle and provides a sceptical voice to the quest in which Dhondup and Karma immerse themselves. Jigme does not see any significance in returning the charm box to Loga, but both Karma and Dhondup sense that this is a larger quest, one that has to do with the Tibetan predicament at large and the uneasy search for a stable identity. The returning of the charm box turns out to be Dhondup's mother's way of telling Dhondup about his (ever absent) father, since Loga, or Tsewang Phuntsok (as he is acknowledged towards the end of the film), is none other than Dhondup's father.

In the process of finding his father, Dhondup (and Karma *qua* travelling companion) traverse(s) in a circular manner various places that make up the Tibetan exilic space in India. His quest takes him from Dharamsala to Delhi, Jaipur, Clement Town (Dehradun) and back to Dharamsala. Although those places are shown through brief introductory shots, most of the action develops within the Tibetan communities that inhabit those exilic spaces; there are no primary or even secondary non-Tibetan characters in *Dreaming Lhasa*. Both Indians and Western tourists are part of the landscape but play no part in the plot. This highlights the portrayal of these Tibetan exilic spaces as reclaimed all-Tibetan spaces. Furthermore, the journey through all these Tibetan settlements is circular and therefore could be seen as a form of *khorra*. In a sense, Dhondup and Karma's journey is a post-Buddhist circumambulatory pilgrimage, however *Dreaming Lhasa* is a more explicit rewriting of another (circular) Tibetan Buddhist narrative.

This circular narrative uses the metaphor of a mother and a child meeting as the reunion between the luminosity (*'od-gsal*) of an individual (i.e. the perception of his or her mind's true nature) as he or she cultivated it through Buddhist practice and absolute luminosity which transcends individuality (i.e. the true nature of the individual's mind, which is identical with the cosmos as a whole). Such an encounter is like the merging of a river back into the sea and is based on recognition, which puts an end to existential estrangement and alienation. Fremantle describes this encounter in the following manner: 'The luminosity experienced in meditation is called the path luminosity, simile luminosity or child luminosity. The true luminosity of our awakened nature is called the basic luminosity or mother luminosity; it dawns at the moment of death, and if it is recognised, the mother and the child meet and become one in liberation (2003, 198–199).

Furthermore, a similar though more elaborate narrative is sometimes told in Tibetan Buddhist contexts to justify the necessity of the path of practice. Given that the nature of the aspirant and that of the cosmos are the same and all that is needed is this simple recognition of mutual identity it might be questioned whether the long and complex meditative journey(s) that make up the Tibetan Buddhist curriculum are necessary at all. The story begins with a son asking his mother about his father (an absent figure, as in Dhondup's narrative), the mother directs him to some faraway place with a vague hint.

Eventually, after a long time of intense searching, collecting little bits of information, the son returns to his mother's village only to discover that his father lived next door to his mother. When faced with her son's anger at this discovery the mother retorts that her son would have not believed her if she had told him the simple truth. Thus, the many practices and stages of the Tibetan Buddhist path fulfil the purpose of bringing the practitioner back to a truth that was too close to him or her, from the very beginning. The Buddhist metaphor and the story bear strong resemblances with Dhondup's predicament, however, in *Dreaming Lhasa* the quest has nothing to do with the Buddhist path of liberation but is merely a narrative of familial reencounters (with political and social overtones). Dhondup discovers an important part of his identity by meeting his father and in this way he puts a (temporary) end to the personal estrangement caused by recent Tibetan history.

Thus the world of *samsara* (literally 'wandering', but more largely defined as the world of delusion or estrangement) becomes identified with what Bhum calls the Tibetan 'modern condition' (2008, 114). The fact that father and son have never met is a direct consequence of the Chinese occupation, which led the father to get involved in the Tibetan resistance and eventually flee to India. By meeting his father, now a hermit on retreat in the hills of Dharamsala, Dhondup accesses an important missing piece in the jigsaw of his life story but his ultimate soteriological destiny is not altered. There is no attempt at presenting the meeting between father and son as the Buddhist epiphany that the reunion of mother and child luminosities (or the wandering son's discovery of his father) represents. This is a personal epiphany that reflects a larger and more complex political and social context, in which Tibetan Buddhist motifs play an important role as cultural and narrative points of reference, but do not modify the fundamental nature of the encounter. Therefore the circular quest that leads Dhondup to his father is framed and developed through various Buddhist narratives, not unlike the interaction between Tashi and Old Man, but its message is not necessarily or exclusively a Buddhist one.

For instance, Dhondup's quest begins with his mother's dying wish, which not only resembles the story-metaphor of the Buddhist path outlined before but also the life stories of Milarepa and Gampopa.² Moreover, *Dreaming Lhasa* is full of events that foreshadow the nature and direction of Dhondup's search. The first and most blatant example takes place towards the beginning of the film when Dhondup and Karma encounter a hermit who is on retreat in a little hut outside Dharamsala. The scene follows Dhondup and Karma's meeting with one of Loga's ex-wives who expresses her conviction that Loga must still be alive, but knows nothing of his whereabouts. The silence that follows from such a scene is broken in the next one when the two searchers encounter an old monk and Dhondup says, 'A Hermit ... must be on retreat' (Sarin and Sonam 2005). Although Dhondup is referring to the man Karma and Dhondup meet on the road (who is played by a different actor than Dhondup's father), his remark comes as an afterthought from the conversation in the previous scene, thus dropping an important hint about Loga's identity.

Next, Karma and Dhondup consult a Tibetan oracle who, after entering a trance-like state, proclaims: 'He [Loga] is not dead. He is far yet near. He should not be disturbed'. Further, she addresses Dhondup: 'The success of your search depends entirely on your own efforts' (Sarin and Sonam 2005). The mystifying language of the oracle is exposed by Jigme, who shows his scepticism about the quest and the means by which

Dhondup and Karma are leading it in the following way: ‘That’s the problem with these oracles. They are never clear, just in case they get it wrong! [...] I’m telling you, you are not gonna find anything [by going to Delhi]’ (Sarin and Sonam 2005). However, both the oracle’s encrypted statement and Jigme’s rebuke turn out to be true. Loga is too near (in Dharamsala) and yet far (beyond the world in the sense that he has renounced the world by becoming a hermit) and, by going to Delhi to look for him, Karma and Dhondup ‘are not gonna find anything’ (Sarin and Sonam 2005). The confirmation of these two seemingly opposing statements, coming from a female oracle presumably born in Tibet and from a young and sceptical Tibetan born in India, highlights the post-Buddhist and pluralist agenda of *Dreaming Lhasa*.

Dhondup and Karma’s journey through the various spaces of Tibetan exile is used to show the viewer many different kinds of Tibetan exiles: sweater sellers, scholars, rough butchers, ex-guerrilla fighters full of regrets, rogues, monks and nuns, young Tibetans obsessed with money or sex or trying to get a green card by seducing American tourists, hunger strikers, devout lay Buddhists, Tibetans who mock their Buddhist background but use it to attract Westerners, and so on and so forth. This kaleidoscope of Tibetan realities and subjectivities operates in ways that repeat the symbolic structure of Tibetan Buddhist narratives, but it does not reproduce the content or intent of those narratives. Thus the sceptic and the oracle are given equal success in their predictions and the monk is not presented as more authoritative than the rough butchers, both contributing valuable information and advice to Dhondup’s search. Through this journey the multifaceted nature of Tibetan exile is portrayed in all its diversity, having at its centre Dhondup’s quest for (familial) identity. However, Dhondup’s identity-quest is not a deliberate or self-conscious one and is not revealed to be so until he realises that the man he had been looking for all along was his father. Analogously, Karma, Jigme and the other Tibetans who grapple with their identity and who wonder about the best way to contribute to the Tibetan cause explore their questions in an indirect and riddle-like manner, much like Dhondup, who is always looking for something or someone without realising what or who it might be.³

This situation resembles the Buddhist idea that beings wander in *samsara* looking for something without realising what it actually is or who they actually are. In terms of the film, most characters are dreaming Lhasa, dreaming their idea of Tibet, but remain unsure about what to do with that growing dream. Lhasa and its circularity haunt in subtle ways the circular journey of *Dreaming Lhasa*. It surfaces in Karma’s documentary through the testimonies of those involved in the uprisings of 1987 and 1988 (Dhondup being one of them), which in turn remind Dhondup about the time his father disappeared. Also, Lhasa is not just the spiritual or imaginary political centre for the dream of Tibet (the ideal seat of the Dalai Lama, who also appears briefly in the film); it is also the place where girls are ‘very pretty’ (Sarin and Sonam 2005) and where Samten vows to go in order to get over an unrequited love story. The constant absence of Lhasa makes it the centre of a collective *khorra*,⁴ one in which the circumambulators dream about the encircled object but can never reach it. For Jigme, Lhasa is the symbol of freedom and independence, for Samten it means beautiful girls, for Karma a fragment of her history as Tibetan, which she tries to relive by interviewing Tibetans who were involved in riots that happened while she was growing up in America.

In fact, the only character who is not dreaming Lhasa, because he knows it well and is certain to return to it, is Dhondup. Dhondup has an important part of himself hidden beyond Lhasa; he is dreaming Dharamsala, his lineage and the confusing stories concerning Loga. His dreams do not flow north towards Lhasa but south towards India, unlike those of most characters in *Dreaming Lhasa*. In this sense, the inner exile embodied in Dhondup and the outer exile embodied by Karma can be said to complement each other. This is dramatised in their affective relationship, which highlights their mutual incompleteness. Far from being repositories of a full sense of Tibetanness, they both appear as incomplete subjects seeking completion in the other. Dhondup completes himself by travelling through exile and Karma by imaginarily travelling (via others) through Lhasa's recent history. In this way, the claims of both exiled Tibetans and Tibetans from Tibet of holding a complete, coherent and 'authentic' version of Tibetanness are implicitly undermined. Tibetans, both from Tibet and in exile, are thus shown needing each other to complete themselves. Karma, as an exiled subject, is instrumental in Dhondup's journey, because the latter's lack of connections in exile and knowledge of English or Hindi would have made his discovery impossible. Likewise, Dhondup offers Karma many stories and unshared experiences from the old country and is, presumably, one of her few friends with whom she is forced to speak only Tibetan.

Karma and Dhondup's complementary relationship flows much more smoothly than Karma and Jigme's. Dhondup's and Karma's fascination for each other contrasts with the link between Karma and Jigme who are, culturally, much more similar (e.g. they always speak in English, have grown up in modern capitalist societies, etc.) and are constantly annoying each other. Two good examples of this uneasy relationship are Jigme's perception of Dhondup as a Sinicised traitor, partly out of jealousy (because of his growing intimacy with Karma) but partly out of a perception of Tibetan exiles in India as the Tibetans who best retain their 'authentic' identity. This upsets Karma, who regards Dhondup as a Tibetan experiencing Chinese oppression first hand and resisting it in a direct way (unlike the young exiles born in India who spent their days drinking beer, playing music and chasing after tourists). Jigme feels uneasy about his lifestyle and does not know what to do for Tibet, but at the same time still holds on to the prideful self-perception of being a true Tibetan because of being in exile (even though it was his parent's decision and not his to flee Chinese-occupied Tibet).

This proud self-perception also leads Jigme to compliment Karma in the following way: 'Karma, you're looking so beautiful tonight, just like a real Tibetan girl' (Sarin and Sonam 2005). Karma, not exactly pleased, retorts: 'Jigme, I am Tibetan' (ibid.). Despite Karma's assertive self-definition, Jigme and Karma's uneasy relationship is partly due to how they both challenge their shaky senses of Tibetanness. They both consider themselves Tibetans but feel somehow guilty of not doing enough (Jigme) or not being connected enough (Karma) and thus accuse the other of being less Tibetan to defend their self-perception as Tibetans. Such uncertainties are absent in Dhondup who feels unequivocally Tibetan and whose identity is only challenged once (publicly and by Jigme). He, however, rises to the challenge by singing an anti-Chinese Tibetan song of resistance which galvanises his audience leaving them speechless. Also, Dhondup has no doubts about his return to Tibet, which is not only his ancestral but also his native land. Dhondup's circular journey through the Tibetan spaces of India brings him back to Lhasa, having resolved the mystery of his origins through Loga's

charm box. Such a journey mimics Karma, who eventually goes back to America after having also connected with an important part of her heritage by participating in Dhondup's quest and by gathering the stories of the victims of the harshly repressed Lhasa demonstrations. Only Jigme is left in the same position; still wandering in the circular space of exile, with its routine of political marches, billiards, drinking and tourists, who are ready to sleep with Tibetan men but never to take them with them to the West.

Although the three characters tread a circular path only Dhondup and Karma find fulfilment at the end of the circle; for Jigme there is no end, just endless rounds of the same circuit. The role of Dhondup as a central character is ironical in a film about Tibetan exile, since Dhondup is the only character who is not really an exile and he is not dreaming Lhasa but rather completing and finding himself through the mirror reflection of Tibetan exile. If he dreams at all he dreams Dharamsala, but only as a temporary home, as a space that can allow him to fulfil his late mother's wish and eventually go back to Tibet. In this way, although the structure of the Buddhist narrative of mother and child or of circular return to one's origins is followed, what lies at the end of the path is not ultimate fulfilment but a contingent and partial sense of resolution. Thus father and son part by telling each other to take care of themselves and the father hints that they might never meet again ('It is my karma to die in a foreign land. But you are still young. I'm sure Tibet will be free within your lifetime'; Sarin and Sonam 2005). This ending mirrors the film's last scene in which the charm box begins a new journey, being now entrusted to Karma, who takes it with her on her return to America. In this fashion, the three characters part and the object that brought them together initiate a new (and possibly circular) path.

To conclude, difference, divergence and dissent are far from absent in *Dreaming Lhasa*, rendering a complex narrative woven by many voices which contrasts with the discursive singleness of 'Kora. Full Circle'. It must be noted that, unlike 'Kora. Full Circle', *Dreaming Lhasa* does not aim to reclaim a specific political legacy (e.g. the Tibetan guerrilla) or imagination (e.g. the ideal of restored Tibet); its project is far more descriptive, though equally political, wishing to reveal the manifold ways in which Tibetan exile(s) exists in India. Nonetheless, both *Dreaming Lhasa* and 'Kora. Full circle' show that there are alternative ways of dreaming Lhasa than the one prescribed by the Tibetan exiled leadership. In this sense they both share the same conservative goal of returning to the forsaken homeland and restoring Tibet to some ideal form. Even so, 'Kora. Full Circle' presents a celebration of violence as an alternative dreaming of Lhasa and *Dreaming Lhasa* makes clear that there are many, infinite perhaps, dreamings of Lhasa. The pluralist and largely egalitarian (not privileging some dreamings over others) agenda of *Dreaming Lhasa* contrasts with the hierarchical way in which 'Kora. Full Circle' is articulated. In the film, there are no masters and disciples and the ways in which the circular space of exile is travelled varies from character to character.

Furthermore, Tsundue's narration and Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam's film can be said to be post-Buddhist, since they reappropriate well-known and defined Buddhist structures to convey a message that is not necessarily or exclusively Buddhist. In Tsundue's case, the celebration of violent resistance is not necessarily against Buddhism, but it definitely runs against the official Buddhist discourse of the Government in exile at the time of *Kora's* publication (2008). Thus Tsundue uses a post-Buddhist narrative in order to contest the non-violent dominant discourse by reclaiming a heritage, that of Khampa

guerrilla fighters, which is often and purposely ignored. It also needs to be noted that Dharamsala, the post-colonial city, acts as an enabler for the circular meeting and the circular appropriation it contains. In the same way that Dharamsala mimics Lhasa and then claims its lost authenticity, Tsundue mimics the Buddhist narrative of *khorra* to invest with legitimacy his dissenting discourse. Although Tsundue's project might be deemed to be ultimately conservative, since its goals are the same as the exiled elite's (e.g. return to Tibet, restoration of the Dalai Lama as ruler), he is not only advocating unorthodox means (e.g. violent struggle) but also enshrining an alternative imagination of Old Tibet. This alternative Old Tibet is not inhabited by peaceful monks who spend their lives meditating in caves but by fierce warriors who 'kill rampantly' and stand up for their freedom. Thus the theme of return and restoration is still present but its imagination has been altered radically.

Nevertheless, in *Dreaming Lhasa* dissent is not presented as a single alternative but as a fairly rhizomatic dialogue of three main and countless secondary voices. These voices traverse the same circular spaces of Tsundue's narration, spaces that are haunted by Lhasa's circular structures, but they do so by differing among themselves and with political, religious and cultural orthodoxies. Thus, although the central theme might be return to or discovery of one's origins, its articulation follows the same circular pattern, the path is traversed by each character in a unique fashion. Again, a Buddhist (set of) narrative(s) is used to tell the story of Tibetan exile but its treatment is, also in this case, very post-Buddhist. *Dreaming Lhasa's* use of the Buddhist story of the meeting of parent and son does not fall into any teleological course, but instead turns into a celebration of diversity in which Buddhist values and motifs are not rejected but included as one of the many sides of the Tibetan world. By focusing on the stories of three, almost archetypal, Tibetans who belong to the three main branches of Tibetan modernity (Tibetans from Tibet, India and the West), Sarin and Sonam highlight how the Tibetan 'modern condition' (Bhum 2008, 114) speaks different languages and is animated by parallel yet uniquely specific concerns. A Buddhist narrative is used to frame the treatment of an often uneasy and occasionally conflicted quest for identity, which despite its divergent manifestations might be said to be the thread that unites most Tibetans across linguistic, ideological, religious, national or geographical boundaries.

Finally, in both the film and the short story the space of exile, particularly manifested through Dharamsala, functions in analogously circular ways. The circles can be seen as scars, painful reminders of a lost circuit beyond the Himalayas; however, they are also regarded as the opportunity of coming 'full circle' or returning to one's lost origins. The circle remains oppressive for characters like Jigme who wander in it without escape or further directions but it also operates as a symbol of the central hope of every exile: return. By treading the circular routes of their Buddhist heritage, new generations of Tibetan writers and artists are going beyond that very heritage and are creating an identity that is hybrid and often resistant to the solidity of established Western, Chinese and Tibetan discourses. It seems that the circumambulating monks and prostrating women of Mistry's description have been replaced by more critical and questioning, though equally circular, voices. These voices do not aim to neglect the past but they seem to celebrate it in an innovative way, not as a prescriptive and authoritative referent, but as one of the many expressions of a constantly evolving and future-facing present.

Notes

1. Tibetanness refers to the modern construction of a Tibetan identity in the context of exile and diaspora. Such a construction departs from traditional forms of belonging (e.g. clan; dialect, religious affiliation; etc.) and focuses on the idea of a coherent, unified identity that encompasses all Tibetan speaking peoples. Like all contemporary attempts at defining identity, Tibetanness is a contested ground, with various voices within the Tibetan diaspora advancing their own imaginations, as this article explores.
2. The spiritual careers of both Milarepa (1052–1135) and Gampopa (1079–1153) were prompted by the unfulfilled vows or wishes of his mother and his dying wife, respectively. For a full account of the lives of both Tibetan teachers, see Trungpa (1982) discussing Milarepa and Stewart (2004) writing about Gampopa.
3. A similar plot development happens in two of the three Tibetan-English novels written so far: Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (2003) and Thubten Samphel's *Falling Through the Roof* (2008). In both narrations, the main characters discover aspects of their identity by looking for things other than their identity, confirming unconscious or unwilling processes of realisation as a running thread in Tibetan exilic literary/artistic production. For further analytical material on Norbu's novel, see Galvan-Alvarez (2014) and Guest (2020).
4. Galvan-Alvarez has further written about Tibetan exile as an imprisoning circular space in relation to *khorra* and the poetry of Tenzin Tsundue, see Galvan-Alvarez (2012). A further exploration of Tenzin Tsundue's poetry can be found in Yangzom (2020).

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