Monsoonic Islands of Exile: Tsundue's Indian Imagination

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Although better known as activist, Tenzin Tsundue (1970) is also a prominent Tibetan English poet[1]. As part of a generation of Tibetans born in the exile chosen by their parents, Tsundue considers Tibetan his mother tongue but feels most comfortable writing in English. Tsundue belongs to a generation that, in Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's words, relies on "a language different from our mother tongue to speak of the loss or absence of a country" ("Nostalgia"). Hybrid in many ways, his poetry returns constantly to a, sometimes literal and sometimes literary, journey of return to the ancestral homeland. Closely associated with the many shapes this journey takes are the utopian and imaginary destination and the dystopian and more realistic point of origin. In other words, the imaginary Tibet of the second-generation Tibetan, nurtured by familiar memories but rarely (if at all) seen, stands in stark contrast with the day to day reality of India, which comparatively appears in a dystopian fashion. Tsundue's life and work constantly travel between these two locations, both in writing and in reality, as Jigme explains when discussing some of the poet's biographical details (292).

[1] In this regard, Buchung Sonam argues that "he is poet first and activist second", however, he also concedes "Your [sic] have the full liberty to argue against this and you may even win" ("Bread and Freedom").

As an Indian-born, second-generation Tibetan, Tenzin Tsundue regards India as other, despite being his native land[2]. Consequently, his poems are pervaded by the tension between Tibet as ancestral homeland and India as provisional house. An important element in this tension is the depiction of India, or the Indias inhabited by Tibetan exiles, as precarious and unstable grounds. The house that is India, which stands in opposition to the imaginary home that is Tibet, is sometimes perceived as a prison but also as a springboard facilitating return to the ancestral homeland; its precariousness fostering the homecoming journey. The ambivalence that pervades these representations calls for a complex and nuanced exploration of these Other Indias, which are Indias seen as other by a subject that is other, or wishes to set him or herself as an-other in relation to India.

The tensions that pervade Tsundue's work lie at the heart of what Namgyal refers to as his "double identity" (5). Although Namgyal is referring to Tsundue's activist-poet identity, this duality can also be applied to his Indian-Tibetan sense of belonging and to his complicated relationship to both India and Tibet as unstable grounds. This duality, at times resembling an aporia, pervades Tsundue's poems about India, marking it as a space of both strandedness and belonging. Though the activist-poet duality is easier to deconstruct and even resolve if we consider that "for Tibetans living […] in displacement, every expression of a distinct culture is a political act in itself" (Anand *Geopolitica* 88), the ambivalence surrounding the tensions haunting the representations of both India and Tibet remain aporiatic. As Oha points out Tsundue's visions of home (and, by and large, exile, since they are both conceived in dialogical opposition to each other) represent a "Third Displace", a notion he borrows from Rath:

[2] Perhaps the best well known statement about his complicated sense of Indian identity can be found in Tsundue's poem "My Tibetanness": "My Registration Certificate / I renew every year with a *salaam.* A foreign born in India // I am more of an Indian / Except for my chinky Tibetan face" (13, ll. 14-18).

"The 'Third Space' is a 'Third Displace' in which 'Here', 'There' and 'Where' converge" (97). This contested, unstable and ambivalent space appears in Tsundue's poems through several symbols and images, which highlight its threatening, seductive or uncertain qualities depending on the context.

The aim of this paper is to explore the texture of these images, and the unstable ground they represent, or, in other words, how India is experienced and constructed by a Tibetan born in India, a "born refugee" as Tenzin Tsundue puts it[3]. The Tibetans' India is certainly an-other India, but not one that simplistically accommodates the recreation of old (pre-1959) Tibet. On the contrary, India seems to offer the chance of constructing a new Tibet, in the image but also in the absence of Tibet. In a sense, India stands for Tibet's negative image, it's very opposite. India is the background that enables certain constructions of Tibetanness to emerge and is also the framework where they become meaningful. In relation to this environing India the exilic subject becomes an island, often flooded by too powerful a sea, but who also celebrates his or her insular condition. In fact, this metaphorical appraisal of the exilic condition of the Tibetan subject in India could well serve as a common ground for the two main poems chosen for this discussion: "When It Rains in Dharamsala" (*Kora* 22) and "Exile House" (25).

These two poems from Tsundue's most famous book, *Kora*, seem to perfectly instantiate the main themes that run through his representations of India. In his poetry, the spaces inhabited by Tibetans seem often haunted by monsoon and overgrown vegetation, becoming insular spaces which are at once decaying and resistant. However, these spaces of tiredness and depression also contain the potential of being seduced by their environment, which is often regarded with a strong sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, the possibility of being seduced and swallowed by this

[3] The phrase "born refuge" features in Tenzin Tsundue's poem "Refugee" (*Kora* 14).

alien and oceanic India could provide a home for the homeless Tibetan but, on the other hand, it poses a threat to what he or she perceives as the core of his or her identity: being out of place in India, wishing to "return" to Tibet.

If we understand the wish to return as one of the defining traits of exile, such wish needs to rest in a double process of construction of the forsaken fatherland as a promised land and of the provisional home or house as a place suitable to be forsaken. From this perspective, Tsundue's representations fulfill the purpose of regarding India as a place suitable to be left behind, a good (if negative) inspiration for starting the journey "back" to Tibet. Nevertheless, his representations of the exilic ground are not devoid of ambivalence. In his Indian poems Tsundue can truly be said to be "affirming Tibetanness [and by extension India and Indianness] through its problematisation" (Anand "A Guide" 33).

A dialogical reading of both "When It Rains in Dharamsala" and "Exile House" highlights the ambivalent representation of India as an-other. Whereas "When It Rains in Dharmasala" stands for the precarious and treacherous fluidity of exile, "Exile House" emphasizes the rootedness that Tibetans experience in India, both as a blessing and as a hindrance. Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that each poem stands for radically different approaches to India as exilic ground, since both poems are highly nuanced and complex in their singular ways.

Although the imagery of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" is more fluid, the insular possibilities of rootedness and resistance are also more clearly defined than in the exile house of "Exile House", whose boundaries appear already confounded, about to be swallowed by the environing sea. Thus, the first stanza of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" exposes the violent nature of the exile's environment, in this case

presented under the mask of rain: “When it rains in Dharamsala / raindrops wear boxing gloves, / thousands of them / come crashing down / and beat my room” (ll. 1-5). The persona seems clearly under siege, assailed by bomb-like “raindrops” which appear, nonetheless playfully clad in “boxing gloves”. This first aggressive appearance of the monsoonic and environing sea also introduces the island under attack: “Under its tin roof / my room cries from inside / and wets my bed, my papers” (ll. 6-8). The crying room is an in-between, and literally permeable, space between the sea and the island, which is the persona within the room. The rooms is personified, its wetness not seen as a direct objective consequence of the assailing rain but as a subjective reaction to it; the room cries because it is being attacked. This intermediate space seems an extension of the persona’s subjectivity, a border half-conquered by the rain but which acts as an expression of the island-persona’s autonomy and not as an inanimate space. It is a living shore.

In fact, the room is not the only spatial element that has been personified. The invasive rain appears also personified in the second stanza: “Sometimes the clever rain comes / from behind my room / the treacherous walls lift / their heels and allow / a small flood into my room” (ll. 9-13). In this case the rain appears not only as aggressive or imperialistic but also as “clever”, sagaciously looking for gaps to flood or conquer a room that is portrayed as “treacherous” and coward (“lift / their heels and allow”). However, the flood also highlights the resisting and resilient nature of the island under siege. This is very clear in the third stanza, where the persona and his insular bed are explicitly identified with the notions of nation and country: “I sit on my island-nation bed / and watch my country in flood” (ll. 14-15). This displaced and isolated “nation” is, in a sense, empowered by the flood since “notes on freedom, / memoirs of my prison days, / letters from college friends, / crumbs of bread / and Maggie noodles / rise

sprightly to the surface / like a sudden recovery / of a forgotten memory" (ll. 16-23). This "rising" could be interpreted as an act of remembrance, as hinted in the poem, but also, more symbolically, as a form of insurrection. It seems that the rain enables the island to become aware of its archive, and therefore of its past, and to resist the flood by rising with this new acquired self-consciousness. After all, what triggers the rising of this archival collection is the invasive flood.

Furthermore, the archival collection is not merely surfacing but re-emerging, evoking a past in which the island was not displaced or flooded. It should not be forgotten that this re-emergence of the past, and its articulation as an archive for the island, is enabled by the aggressive rain. In fact as the rains goes on for "three months of torture" (l. 24), the insular persona becomes further resilient to it and turns to soothe the personified room: "Until the rain calms down / and stops beating my room / I need to console my tin roof" (ll. 28-30). This living extension of the island-persona becomes now the object of his compassion, which also exposes the unsuitability of this in-between space as a home, a room "who has been on duty / from the British Raj. / This room has sheltered / many homeless people. // Now captured by mongooses / and mice, lizards and spiders, / and partly rented by me" (ll. 31-37). Paradoxically, this room "who […] has sheltered / many homeless people" cannot provide a home for them, but a perilous and temporary shelter.

The unsuitability of the room qua home also strengthens the position of the persona as a resilient island, who shares the space with a myriad of creatures who like the rain seem to have "captured" or invaded it. This growing sense of separation between persona and room, and therefore between the persona and the outside rainy space, becomes further clear towards the end of the poem. The more descriptive flow of the poem is transformed towards the end into the formulation of a resolution: "I cannot

cry like my room" (l. 49). It seems that this is the persona's ultimate gesture of resistance, which is expressed as separation and difference: "There has got to be / some way out of here. / I cannot cry like my room. / I have cried enough / in prisons and / in small moments of despair" (ll. 47-52). Crying is seen as giving in to an oppressive and invasive flow, not only because of the subdued attitude this action entails, but also because it mimics the rain, which was first identified with the oppressive flow. As the last two lines of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" succinctly put it: "I cannot cry, / my room is wet enough" (ll. 55-56). The wetness inherent in crying becomes an act of mimesis with the sea that assails the island-persona and therefore it needs to be resisted at all costs, so that his independence and difference are preserved.

The exilic implications of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" seem evident. The exilic subject feels overwhelmed by the vastness of the host country, which tries to swallow him in a somewhat violent way. His resistance to be assimilated, mostly successful in "When It Rains in Dharamsala", only makes him feel more lonely, more of an island surrounded by an alien sea. This is an analogous feeling to that of the Tibetan personas of Tsundue's "The Tibetan in Mumbai" (16) and "My Tibetanness" (13), who appear flooded, though not swallowed, by the vastness of an India who always misidentifies them: "'Nepali?' 'Thai?' 'Japanese?' / 'Chinese?' 'Naga?' 'Manipuri?' / but never the question- 'Tibetan?'" ("My Tibetanness" ll. 19-21). In this way Tibetan subjectivities are rendered invisible, either because they are too similar to other others in the plural society in which they are superseded or because they are seen as what they are not. In this last respect, the most painful misidentification Tibetans suffer is that of being mistaken for Chinese (e.g. "They think he is a Chinese / run away from Beijing" ("The Tibetan in Mumbai" ll. 5-6) and "He gets angry / when they laugh at him / 'ching-chong ping-pong'" ll. 24-26).

However, India does not only appear as a powerful sea, or sea-monster, about to swallow the Tibetans, but as a far more ambiguous and welcoming ground. In fact Tenzin Tsundue, as activist, has never been particularly outspoken about denouncing a perceived attempt of the host society to dismantle Tibetan identity. This seems more of an underlying concern pervading many of his poems than a political priority in his agenda. Moreover, Tsundue calls himself an Indian-Tibetan, considers Hindi one of his languages and has kind words for India's generosity towards the Tibetans, often mentioning India's independence struggle as an inspiration for his own cause. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that India, as exilic ground, also stands for all the exile's fears. India is the very ground that offers the exile a point of origin for a hypothetical journey of return, but it is also the space in which the exile feels trapped, when he or she realises that the homecoming journey is an impossible one. Thus, this is a rich and complex ground, full of marred and living possibilities.

This sense of ambivalence is perfectly expressed in Tsundue's "Exile House" (25), a poem that reproduces the sea-island pattern in a rather different way. Again, the sea that is the host society or land and the island that represents the exilic subject meet in an in-between or third space, to use Bhabha's term (55). This space is another building, a house rather than a room, which can be said to be the battleground between the conquering sea and the resilient island.

However, Oha reads "Exile House" as "a representation of the Tibetan-exile living environment in India as a decaying, dilapidated place that is fast being claimed by the jungle [that] rhetorically evokes pity about the Tibetan exilic condition" (94). Such reading of "Exile House" as a straightforward exilic narrative seems to obliterate the ambiguity implicit in its use of imagery. On the other hand, Meredith Hess, using "Exile House" as a pre-text for discussing larger Tibetan diasporic themes, acknowledges it as

an instance of the "ambivalent endeavour" that is "creating a home" (30). This second and more nuanced interpretation seems to do justice to Tsundue's complicated sense of belonging as expressed in "Exile House".

The poem can be said to begin with the roof once again, opening with a highly unstable image: "Our tiled roof dripped / and the four walls threatened to fall apart / but we were to go home soon" (ll. 1-3). From the first stanza the reader is reminded that this precarious house, on the verge of collapse, is not home. It is, if anything, a stepping stone towards home. In a sense, the precariousness of the exile contributes and facilitates return. The fact that the house is about to disintegrate is made acceptable because it is only to be inhabited temporarily and so the house's regrettable condition keeps the idea of return alive.

However, the next stanza introduces a far more ambiguous imagery, one that hints at success through vegetal explosion: "We grew papayas / in front of our house / chillies in our garden / and changmas for our fences, / then pumpkins rolled down the cowshed thatch / calves trotted out of the manger" (ll. 4-9). Many of the elements in this explosion are not only typical of Indian soil; they are also alien to Tibetan agricultural practices. It is impossible to grow papayas, changmas or pumpkins in the Tibetan plateau and yaks tend to be the most common form of cattle. The vegetal fences seem to have well exceeded their original function and have even taken over the house they were meant to protect: "Grass on the roof, / beans sprouted and / climbed the vines, / money plants crept in through the window, / our house seems to have grown roots" (ll. 10-15). This overwhelmingly successful harvest seems to be invading the in-between space the house stands for; however, the line that closes the stanza does not suggest instability but rootedness.

The fact that “our house seems to have grown roots” seems to resolve the initial precariousness of the exilic dwelling but it also brings about a sense of unease and regret. This is poignantly expressed in the last stanza: “The fences have grown into a jungle, / now how can I tell my children / where we came from?” (ll. 16-18). The original setting seems to have turned upside down. The house that was about to collapse is now well rooted and the fences that were meant to keep the insular independence of this exile house have grown completely out of plan or proportion, eventually taking over the island-house. The wildness of the scene paradoxically represents the house’s domestication; it has been absorbed and assimilated to its environment. The self-defeating fences have proved to be more than a porous boundary, acting as a bond to the land, linking rather than setting apart.

Unlike the gloomy room of “When It Rains in Dharamsala”, this house is far more welcoming, but also trapping. Although portrayed as a somewhat wild and run-down place the exile house is also abundant in food (e.g. pumpkins, chillies, beans) and full of life that is not threatening (e.g. calves). This invasion seems mediated through the language of seduction, rather than aggression. In other words, Tibetans have been successful in growing foreign vegetables in a foreign land and now their success and wealth traps them. The instability that enabled return has been substituted by a sea of abundance that provided groundedness and hindered the possibility of return. However, this sea has not been fully successful in conquering the island of exilic resilience and therefore the insular persona still looks at this sea of vegetation with regret. In fact this regret might be an island within a sea of satisfaction. He seems to be saddened because his children are being prevented by the jungle-like fences to connect or return to the place “where we came from”. Nevertheless, the tone of the poem, as regards to the

overgrown vegetation, is certainly ambiguous, showing the mixed feelings of the persona towards this seductive and exuberant attempt of assimilation.

To conclude, the other that is India seems to appear in Tenzin Tsundue's poems as an ambivalent ground that poses a fundamental threat to Tibetan subjectivities: to dissolve what they perceive as the core of their identity (e.g.displacement, hope of return). However, this ground is also acknowledged for its welcoming and generous qualities and its instability is positively valorised as a factor facilitating return to the ancestral homeland. Nevertheless, its overwhelming capacity to assimilate, by means of coercion or seduction, is also recognised and met with resistance. The metaphor of a powerful and all-environing sea that tries to flood an island is a useful one for looking at how India appears in Tsundue's poetry, particularly in the two poems that deal with exilic homes more explicitly: "When It Rains in Dharamsala" and "Exile House". The sea seems at times successful in its assimilating endeavour, however the island's resilience and wish for independence always resurface and eventually prevail. Nonetheless, what is most relevant in these metaphorical battlegrounds is not independence but interdependence: the fact that both sea and island construct themselves in relation and (sometimes violent) dialogue with each other. Whatever the outcome of the battle, the hybrid space where sea and island meet and fight remains a contested and open one.

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