

Circular Horizons, Impossible Journeys:
Imagining the Tibetan Fatherland in Tenzin Tsundue's Poetry

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Abstract

Although better known as activist, Tenzin Tsundue is also a prominent Tibetan English poet. 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. Hybrid in many ways, his poetry returns constantly to a, sometimes literal sometimes literary, journey of return to the ancestral homeland. For the second generation of Tibetans born in exile the journey "back" to the imaginary homeland is certainly one of discovery, but it is also one that never finds what it expects. Thus, the aim of this essay is to explore how the hope of return to Tibet is expressed in Tsundue's poetry through unconventional and circular journeys of discovery.

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Although better known as activist, Tenzin Tsundue (b. 1970) is also a prominent Tibetan English poet. 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 (Oha 2008). Hybrid in many ways, his poetry returns constantly to a journey of return to the ancestral homeland, a journey that is sometimes literal and sometimes literary. For the second generation of Tibetans born in exile the journey "back" to the homeland of their parents is certainly one of discovery, but it is also one that never finds what they expect. For them Tibet is a place not visited

but imagined through the inherited memories of their parents. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore how the hope of return to Tibet is expressed in Tsundue's poetry through unconventional journeys of discovery. Such a quest is by no means specific to Tibetan exiles in a world where exile, diaspora, migration and displacement have become important shapers of the way in which identities are constructed and studied. Thus, as James Clifford has suggested, similar instances occur in various

cultures of displacement and transplantation [which] are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political and cultural interaction – histories that generate what might be called discrepant cosmopolitanisms. (1997, p. 36)

These “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” present the challenge of coming up with an “approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling in traveling” (ibid). Whereas it seems evident that Tibetan exile can be included in the growing number of communities that are “traveling-in-dwelling” and “dwelling-in-traveling,” it is also true that a specific approach to Tibetan exile, and the literature it produces, is required.

For the purpose of understanding the various permutations of Tsundue's sense of dwelling and traveling, I shall first identify the various metaphors he employs to speak of the ancestral land. This land lies at the very end of the journey of discovery and, therefore, it determines the way in which the journey is presented. Despite how this journey of return is often constructed as the natural reversal of the first journey into exile, both journeys could not be more different. As traumatic as the journey of escape is, it reaches a somewhat stable location when it reaches exile (i.e. India). On the contrary, the journey of return never reaches any stable point of destination, being frequently lost in ever-deferred discoveries. In this way, the full circle or double journey associated with

fulfilment in the exilic imagination is always frustrated. It is worth noting here that when the term homeland is used in this paper it refers to the various notions and images engaged in Tsundue's poems and not, necessarily, to a geographical or territorial reality. Analogously, when dealing with the impossibility of reaching such homelands of the mind, the emphasis is on the various personas that appear in Tsundue's poems and not on the poet himself. In fact, Tsundue, the author, has been to Tibet, the place, where he was imprisoned and later deported; his personas, however, never seem to get "there."

In order to analyse this complex process of frustrated and yet dynamic patterns, various Buddhist narratives are useful, particularly the ritual circumambulation of holy sites (*kora*), which can be seen as a never ending circular journey (Schwartz 1994). Also important is the Buddhist narrative of the ground (*gzhi*), path (*lam*) and fruit (*bras*), which offers many hermeneutical possibilities for regarding gradual processes of realisation as journeys of discovery (Levinson 1996). This triple structure is a way of articulating the Buddhist path as a progression from a starting point or ground, which is the traveller's unrecognised primordial nature, through a path of increasing awareness and discovery leading towards a goal or fruit which is the eventual and total recognition of such nature. Thus, the ground-path-fruit can be regarded as a circular journey, since its beginning and its ending are fundamentally the same, with the traveller's perception being transformed by and through the journey.

In Tsundue's poems the fruit at the end of the journey is very often the ancestral fatherland (e.g. the slippery ground of "A Personal Reconnaissance" or the almost forgotten ancestral homeland of "Exile House"), a destination or goal that is not easy to access, considering the precarious connotations of this notion in an exilic context. This imaginary homeland is thus the object of discovery, but what is not infrequently discovered (like in Buddhist deconstructive and analytical

journeys) is not the object itself but its absence as the ending of “A Personal Reconnaissance” (2008, p. 11) shows: “I didn’t see the border, / I swear there wasn’t anything / different, there.” From this combined standpoint, Tsundue’s poetical journeys can be regarded as insights into the nature of exile, the ancestral homeland and the routes that link them, all being, like Buddhist descriptions of phenomena, evanescent, fluid and ultimately ungraspable. In this way, the local Buddhist logic of ground-path-fruit is linked to the wider themes of diasporic cultures currently developing all over the world. The construction of imaginary far away homes by diasporic communities, which are then revealed to be fleeting, thus resembles the Buddhist inquiry into reality as a circular journey that reveals the illusory nature of phenomena.

It is worth mentioning that some of these journeys are not just metaphorically circular but also literally so, built into Buddhist cities such as Lhasa or its new exilic inheritor, Dharamsala. Furthermore, not unlike Lhasa’s (or Dharamsala’s) concentric circles, used by many for the act of kora, Tenzin Tsundue’s book *Kora* also contains a short story called “Kora. Full Circle” (pp. 35-40). In Tsundue’s “Kora” an old ex-guerrilla fighter from Kham inspires a young Tibetan exile to keep up the struggle for Tibet. In this sense kora is a full circle, since it dramatises the continuation of a Tibetan consciousness of resistance through generations. The act of kora is used as an analogy of transmission and continuation, which seems also a good way of looking at how the book *Kora* sees itself, since it begins by paying homage to and seeking inspiration from “the freedom fighters of Tibet” (p. 5).¹

¹ In this respect, Schwartz interprets kora, as re-valourised from 1987 onwards, in the following manner: “Khorra retains its ritual significance as a means of accumulating merit; however, merit-making is transposed into the arena of political action and the everyday private practice of religion is transformed into public protest.” (1994, pp. 27-28) This very post-Buddhist appropriation resembles Tsundue’s definition of Buddhism as “service in action for society” (2007, p. 68) Furthermore, Schwartz points out how in this context “it is only necessary to substitute the Tibetan nation in the canonical Buddhist formula of acquiring merit by working for the welfare of all sentient beings to appreciate what the Deprung monks have accomplished by inventing a new form of protest” (1994, p. 30).

Another interesting example of how the act of kora can be rhetorically appropriated is a short article by two young Indian men who, after watching *The Motorcycle Diaries*, decided to visit Dharamsala, where they met Tsundue and became interested in the Tibetan question. Their article for a free community paper in Dharamsala is precisely entitled “Our Kora Has Just Begun” (Ghosh 2006). Following on the footsteps of young Tibetan exiles, the two Indian men redefine the act of kora in the following manner:

On the final day, we undertook a Kora. A Kora is a spiritual place around a sacred place. As we walked around the Dalai Lama’s temple, we realised that we too were on Kora –it was our journey to understand the Tibetan struggle for self-determination...for a dignified life in their land...and the fight to keep their culture and history alive. Our journey to find out how we could make some difference –how we could be part of it [...] hopefully, Che [Guevara] and Alberto [Granado] would be proud. [Punctuation shown as in the original]

Such reading of kora resembles the one we find in Kora’s back cover, which construes “Kora. Full Circle” as “an allegory on Tibet’s half-century-long struggle to break free from Chinese control.” In these discourses kora has been re-appropriated as a metaphorical journey of empowerment and resistance through knowledge. All these narratives seem to have drawn inspiration from the very literal use of kora from 1987 onwards as an act of protest. Furthermore, these readings of kora seem to focus on the journey and interpret circularity as a symbol of continuation or completion.²

² In an interestingly intertextual sentence Sonam describes such full circle kora in the following manner: “Our final kora will be complete when we return to a ‘free’ homeland after years of roaming in foreign jungles” (2008). Such statement closes a review of Tsundue’s Kora but also employs a metaphor from

However, these metaphorical circumambulations obliterate what is central to the literal act of kora, the site that is being surrounded, that is, the centre in relation to which the circumambulator is a periphery. In "Kora. Full Circle," the Dalai Lama's exilic residence is peripherally mentioned, but it seems to simply provide a setting for the encounter between the old Khampa and the young Tibetan in exile.³

In fact, both the old warrior and the young exile completely forget about the literal act of kora as they become absorbed in the metaphorical act of kora, that is, the re-telling of heroic stories from the Tibetan resistance. Thus the *lingkhor* (i.e. outer ring or circuit) and its holy centre seem to have been relegated to a peripheral position, merely providing a setting that frames and somehow legitimises the inter-generational encounter. This exchange between centre and periphery or, in other words, this emphasis on the journey rather than on the site, can be seen as a Tibetan version of the roots vs. routes model. By deconstructing the centrality of place, movement and travelling become all important as the new focus of these narratives.

In order to discuss Tenzin Tsundue's images of home in his poems I want to bring the focus back to the original centre, the (literal or metaphorical) sites encircled by kora. This is not to privilege roots over routes, but to acknowledge the empty place that stands at the centre of many Tibetan exilic wanderers. The focus on the periphery journey rather than on the centre place betrays the increasing decentring and displacement of Tibetan culture outside Tibet. Thus, by facing the empty centre I want to explore how unstable senses of home or ground are constructed in Tsundue's poems. In the same way that Dibyesh Anand plays "with the root word *dharamshala* in order to tease out

Chögyam Trungpa, who in "A Letter to Marpa" (1983, p. 29) speaks of himself as "Tiger-like Chögyam roaming in foreign jungles."

³ However, many of ritual details of the protesting acts of kora that took place in Lhasa in 1987 are reproduced in Tsundue's story, such as the invocation to Palden Lhamo, the burning of incense, the recitation of prayers or the offering of prostrations. (Tsundue 2008, p. 38; Schwartz 1994, p. 28)

various possible alternative narratives of Tibetan-ness” (2002, p. 13) I play with the Tibetan root *khor* in order to explore the issue of homelessness through the lenses of the *kora* (*khor ra*) narrative.

The root *khor* can be found in a number of Tibetan words such as *khor mo* which expresses the sense that something is continuous, uninterrupted, like a circular wall that surrounds a city or the word *khor mo yug* which refers to a circle or circuit, a space designed for the practice of *kora*, but which could also mean horizon.⁴ Rethinking Tsundue’s exilic homes through the narratives implicit in the *khor* words locates home as a recurrent or all-pervasive theme; a *khor mo*, continuous and uninterrupted. Moving towards the more spatial meanings of the word, the exilic journey could be seen as *khor mo yug*, a circuit that goes round and round an imagined homeland but can never reach it. The very *raison d’être* of the circuit is the centre it environs, however such centre is always beyond reach, at least from the circuit’s position.

The similarities with other exilic constructions of home are striking: ideas of home are all pervasive and lie at the centre of many discursive wanders, yet they constitute the very thing that cannot be grasped or reached⁵. It is of course true that the act of *kora* can also be construed as a return to the origins, as a full circle; nevertheless the very nature of exile prevents this *kora* from taking place, forcing the exile to wander round and round in a circular horizon or *khor mo yug*. Interestingly, the first poem in *Kora* is “Horizon” (p. 9) and expresses this sense of circularity that makes return impossible. Even though “Horizon” mentions the ground (i.e. “home”) in its first line, this is an

⁴ These definitions are from the Nitartha Tibetan English Dictionary.

⁵ A clear instance is Said’s notion of being “out of place,” a useful metaphor for interpreting the exilic condition as an ever displaced space, where the idea of home is not even conceived. This excerpt from his memoirs, suitably entitled *Out of Place*, resonates with the circular and frustrated journeys of Tenzin Tsundue’s poetry: “Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be ‘right’ and in place (right at home for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere” (269).

already a forsaken location, with the persona wandering a circular path: "From home you have reached / the Horizon here. / From here to another / here you go" (p. 9). It is worth noting the implicit identity of the two "heres," the two circular horizons, and their radical difference from "home." The second stanza further emphasizes this sense of endless journey through circular horizons: "From there to the next / next to the next / horizon to horizon / every step is a horizon" (p. 9). In this case the ground has been lost and the persona is trapped in a circular path that knows no end.

Even though the fruit of returning to the original ground seems impossible, the remaining two stanzas offer some sort of advice for enabling return. If the homeland is not to be forgotten, one must "Count the steps / and keep the number" and also "Pick the white pebbles / and the funny strange leaves. / Mark the curves / and cliffs around / for you may need / to come home again" (p. 9). The homecoming journey is thus mentioned at the end; however it is acknowledged as a somewhat unlikely possibility. Remembering the path seems the only way of enabling return to the home ground, the exile's fruit or desired destination. Against this Sisyphean endeavour the poetic voice, not unlike Camus in his reading of the Greek story, offers some sort of resistance by outlining an unlikely though determined path of escape from the circular and trapping horizon. The "white pebbles," "funny strange leaves" and the counting of steps all seem to be symbols of resistance against the exile's absurd destiny: to be caught in a vast succession of horizons that can never be reached or crossed. In this respect the Tibetan persona seems to engage in a "rebellion [. . .] which rejects despair in a self-conscious revolt against cosmic purposelessness" (Bellioti 31). In fact, writing about his situation is another form of rebellion, since the absurdity of his context is exposed and a way to revolt against it is offered.

An interesting and parallel example of these dynamics is the film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005) in which Lhasa or Tibet is never shown, even though the lives of the characters gravitate around this compelling idea of home. Tibet is the all-pervasive yet invisible and mostly unreachable thread that links the characters. Furthermore, Karma's and Dondhup's stories can be seen as a full circle kora, since they return to where they came from and accomplish what they intended to do. However, the homeland issue remains open and unsolved. As Karma writes in her screen when emailing her partner in New York: "sometimes, I don't know where I am...it's like I'm living, breathing, dreaming Lhasa" [punctuation as shown in the film]. Nevertheless, even when such a ground (i.e. Tibet) is technically reached it seems to slip through the persona's fingers. Such is the theme of Tsundue's poem "A Personal Reconnaissance" (2008, p. 11), which, ironically, is hardly a reconnaissance. The territory that is going to be inspected is the homeland, which "From Ladakh [. . .] is just a gaze away." Thus, this grandson of the land attempts to rejoin the place his parents left in the form of a military inspection. This does not only confirm Tibet as the ground where he comes from and the fruit he wishes to reach, but also as disputed ground, a place to be approached with a careful and somewhat sceptical attitude. Furthermore, the fact that this reconnaissance is a "personal" one might suggest that the inspection quality of the journey has not so much to do with Tibet being disputed ground qua occupied land, but with Tibet as a disputed space of the imagination. Therefore, the purpose of this "reconnaissance" is to confirm whether such imagined space exists at all. Care and suspicion seem natural (e.g. the persona goes "In a hurried hidden trip" to confirm what "they say," p. 11). In this respect, Meredith Hess comments on the imaginary nature of the home that animates this journey: "Tibet has become for these children and adults [educated in exile] an idea that surrounds them and grounds them even while they live in exile." (2009, pp. 56-57) It should be noted that while Hess is making a general point about Tibetan exiles, she uses "A Personal Reconnaissance" to illustrate her argument.

Thus, “from that black knoll / at Dumse” the reconnaisser sees Tibet “for the first time,” even though he calls it “my country.”⁶ However, this much-expected encounter seems rather an anti-climax. First, the exile tries, quite literally, to grasp the land and soak in its atmosphere: “I sniffed the soil, / scratched the ground, / listened to the dry wind / and the wild old cranes” (p. 11). Nevertheless, the realisation that the craved homeland is somehow intangible or non-existent comes quickly: “I didn’t see the border, / I swear there wasn’t anything / different, there” (p. 11). Even though what is realised to be non-existent is the border, the homeland vanishes as soon as the border does, since the latter is the gate towards the former, in other words, what makes the homeland a “there.” Moreover, the comma in the last line allows us to read “different” and “there” not necessarily as part of the same proposition, but as alternative though not necessarily contradictory propositions. It is not only that at the other side there wasn’t anything different but also that there wasn’t anything there. Such nuance shows us the slippery nature of the ground, which seems rather unreachable and could hardly be called a fruit, because it is never reached. The hesitations concerning this place develop further: “I didn’t know / if I was there or here. / I didn’t know / if I was here or there.” (p. 11).

The disappointment of not finding the homeland where he imagined, brings the reconnaisser to question his very position; he cannot be certain any more about whether he is “here” or “there” or even what “here” and “there” mean. Is “here” the ancestral home, the primeval ground of the exile or is it his surrogate home? If so, the ancestral homeland would be “there,” being an-other to him. Either way, the reconnaisser, once his initial desire to see the homeland has confused his reference points, is implicitly identified with another inhabitant of in-betweenness and uncertainty: the kyang, a wild ass that roams in the area. Not unlike these animals, who “come here every winter“ and “go

⁶ This first encounter with something that is somehow already known or familiar also relates to the Latin root of the word “Reconnaissance,” which is re-cognoscere, to know again. Thus, the exile can be said to go to the border to re-cognise that which is familiar to his imagination in a non-imaginary setting.

there every summer” the reconnoissee dwells, metaphorically, in the imaginary and impossible space of the border, a no man’s land in which the radical difference of all binaries (e.g. here / there, ancestral homeland / surrogate home) have collapsed.⁷ This can be seen as an instance of “dwelling-in-traveling,” since the only space the traveller can ever inhabit is the shifty and mobile “home” of the borderland.

The strong desire that enables the certain ground of dichotomies is progressively transformed by an unconventional “reconnaissance” that confounds all certainties and leaves the exile in no man’s land. In a sense, although his ideas about the homeland are not confirmed, his experience of in-betweenness is. The exile tries to reach the homeland but ends up being somehow stuck at the borderland; once the border, and therefore the homeland, is seen to be intangible everything transforms into a vast borderland. This vast and uncertain space is somewhat synonymous to the circular horizons of poems like “Horizon” (e.g. “From there to the next / next to the next / horizon to horizon / every step is a horizon,” p. 9), in which the border-horizon is always deferred and never reached. This constant state of unfulfillment, or being “out of place,” to use Edward Said’s phrase, forces the wanderer to inhabit the border-horizon, to make of every step a horizon and dwell in its in-betweenness. Consequently, this kora is not one that could be regarded as a full circle, but rather as one that never reaches the place it encircles. Nonetheless, the unreachability of such homeland seems also to entail some positive political possibilities, as Anand argues:

⁷ In this context, Figueira’s remark that “The theoretical nomad functions as do other discourses [...] that purport to engage the Other: It presents a means of observing the Self and reaffirming one’s own position. The nomad appears in theory as the armature on which the theorizing Self is sculpted”(88). Although Tsundue’s existence is far more nomadic than that of many other who identify with the nomad as a symbol, it is true that his use of the nomadic animals that cross the Tibetan boundaries functions as a metaphor of the exile’s condition. This is the mirror that returns a certain image of the poetic persona. Thus, the nomadic ass operates as a symbol that confounds and transcends boundaries, though not in a liberating way. It is the negative reflection of the self; what the self both is and cannot afford to be.

[T]hough for the Tibetans the memory, the ideal and the image of the land from which they have been exiled have been a potent force in the struggle for national recognition, the notion of return to the homeland is problematic. This problematisation should not be seen in terms of a pessimistic scenario where original Tibet has been destroyed and can never be retrieved. Instead, it guards against any naïve imagination of a particularised space-time projection of Tibet as a timeless construct. (2002, p. 31)

The many imaginative and political possibilities opened by the homeland being ever deferred to an unreachable “there” do not alleviate the disappointment of never finding it. In other words, the multiple possibilities of re-imagining identity do not eclipse the sad realization that the goal of regaining Tibet through independence remains unfulfilled. Thus, there is a shift from the realm of realpolitik to representational politics; the struggle is in this way deferred to a more reflective and speculative space.

This deferral of spaces is clearly instantiated in a shorter poem, “Illusion” (1999, p. 10). “Illusion” seems to engage the Buddhist trope that identifies the nature of appearances with a magical display or illusion that is gradually (in three stages) seen to be non-existent (e.g. “I saw it there,” “There was nothing there,” “I thought I saw something” (1999, p.10). In this way the viewer’s delusion is exposed, from the belief in something real to a conviction that his first perception was mistaken. However, in this case the fading of what was thought to be “there” does not seem to have soteriological connotations. Rather, it seems to speak of another imaginary homeland, one that can be seen or conjured but never reached, forcing its pursuer to reconsider his assumptions. Again, the realpolitik aspect of the Tibetan struggle becomes diffused, privileging representational politics and the need to re-think identity and its cartographies. “Illusion” begins with three very direct one-line and one-sentence stanzas: “I saw it there. // I tried to cross over. // I crossed over.” We are

never told what was at the other side of the bridge, presumably, luring the persona. The last two stanzas, in two lines of one sentence, simply state that “There wasn’t anything / on the other side of the bridge. // I thought I saw something / on the other side of the bridge.” Even though we are in the dark as to the object of the illusion—or, rather, disillusion—there are striking similarities with “A Personal Reconnaissance,” which appears on the opposite page of *Crossing the Border*, under the title “A Personal Reconnoitre–sic–.” In fact, “Illusion” can be seen as a prelude that introduces the theme later developed in “A Personal Reconnaissance” in more detail. In this case the yearned for ancestral ground is identified with something insubstantial and ever-fading, something that is never here but always there. This move re-plays the paradox of acknowledging that the fatherland is both a forbidden land beyond reach and an open ground that, in its absence, can be imagined in manifold ways.

In Tsundue’s poems, recognising the fatherland’s illusory nature does not seem to bring a soteriological kind of liberation as in Buddhist thought. Instead, it produces either a reflexive sense of disappointment (e.g. “A Personal Reconnaissance”) or a mere reconsideration, such as in “I thought I saw something.” It needs to be noted that in Buddhist contexts, not perceiving the illusory nature of the self, and the world it seems to inhabit, is regarded as the root of all sufferings. Consequently, realising the illusory (i.e. ever-changing and ultimately uncontrollable) nature of both self and world is highly valued as a liberative insight. This realisation leads to a deep sense of uncertainty or not-knowing (i.e. the goal or fruit of the path), which follows from giving up any attempt to conceptualise, pin down or figure out a reality that is always in flux. Unlike an exiled Tibetan poet from the previous generation, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tsundue does not link the in-between and uncertain space that is exile with any existentially analogous reality (e.g. the

undecidable nature of reality as perceived at the end of the path); he simply acknowledges such social reality with occasional bitterness, such as in his poem "I'm tired..." (2008, p. 18).⁸

Buddhist tropes like those of kora or fading illusion are still engaged for mediating the exilic condition, but the function of such tropes has been shifted in this new re-birth. It seems obvious that realising that what one thought to be there is merely an illusion involves deception and disappointment; however such discovery is valorised in a positive fashion in Buddhist contexts.⁹ As unsettling as this disappointment might be, it could still be said to be liberative disappointment.¹⁰ In this vein, it is interesting to note and compare how an analogous, though antithetical, rhetorical appropriation identifies pre-1959 Tibet as an illusion from a Buddhist perspective. When Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche speaks of impermanence he urges his audience to

⁸ Chögyam Trungpa, an author born in Tibet and exiled at the time of the Chinese takeover (1950s) often uses Buddhist tropes for interpreting the painful realities of displacement. In his early collection of poems, *Mudra* (Trungpa 2001) he constantly uses Buddhist narratives for making sense of suffering and transforming it into an inspiration for treading the Buddhist path. In this way exile is revalorized as a great opportunity to develop as a Buddhist practitioner since it tests the poet's equanimity, acceptance of impermanence or compassion for others. This approach differs radically from Tsundue's, who, even when using the same narratives, does not regard displacement as an opportunity but as a social malaise to be overcome.

⁹ Since the central aim of Buddhist systems is to bring about an epistemic shift by realizing the illusory nature of all phenomena (including nations, states, historical events or one's imaginary homeland) and not to achieve a defined political goal, any event or narrative tends to be interpreted as an instance of how things are ultimately impermanent, uncertain and undecidable. Although this attitude can be regarded as a political statement in itself, it is not oriented towards the achievement of realpolitik goals. This does not mean that Buddhist institutions and individuals have not struggled for such goals, but that there is a tendency to regard historical events as instances of timeless existential principles (i.e. impermanence) and not read them in terms of their more immediate historical- political significance. Thus, when Tsundue constructs Tibet as an illusion in order to express his political frustration he subverts the original purpose of the Buddhist metaphor, which was not only meant to console its user but also to offer a valuable insight into the nature of things.

¹⁰ In fact Chögyam Trungpa speaks positively of disappointment as the "dissatisfaction which accompanies ego's struggle [as what] inspires us to examine what we are doing." (2002, p. 5) In other words, liberation and understanding are enabled by an underlying sense of disappointment.

Take another example from the more recent past. Before the arrival of the Chinese Communists, how many monasteries were there in what used to be called Tibet, the Land of Snow? [...] Now not even a statue remains. All that is left of Samye is something the size of this tent, hardly bigger than a stupa. Everything was either looted, broken or scattered, and all the great images were destroyed. These things have happened and this demonstrates impermanence.” (2006, p. 22).

This is the opposite of what Tsundue is doing, since Tsundue uses a Buddhist trope in order to look at Tibet whereas Khyentse uses Tibet as an example for illustrating a Buddhist principle.

When Tsundue uses old Buddhist metaphors for speaking about new realities they have been stripped of any positive qualities; they are bare images of disappointment. In this sense, metaphors like that of illusion are not the disappointing ground to be transformed into some liberating fruit; they are the disappointing fruit of a path of unfulfilled wishes, rooted in a fundamental separation from what is perceived as the ground: the ancestral homeland. Such dynamics are very well instantiated in a poem that mirrors the way “Illusion” develops, also by using a well-known Buddhist metaphor, that of peeling an onion. The trope of peeling an onion has been engaged in an almost endless myriad of Buddhist contexts for speaking about processes of progressive unmasking or realisation, the fruit being the discovery that the onion and its covering layers were either disposable or illusions that naturally fade away when sought out.¹¹ “Looking for my Onion” (1999, p. 32), however, relates to the process in a different way; its very title conveys some sense of uneasiness about the lost onion. For a start, the intent of the peeler is not to deconstruct the onion

¹¹ The earliest Buddhist example of an onion-like metaphor being used is probably the Phena Sutta, from the Samyutta Nikaya in the Pali Canon. In it the same principle of onion-peeling is applied to a banana tree, which ceases to exist once its various layers are removed. For a translation of the Phena Sutta see Thanissaro.

but in fact to find it, thus: "I peel and peel and peel / looking for my onion." (p. 32) However, this path seems to have obliterated the ground that is aiming to reach and so, "when my eyes are full, / hands stained, / scattered peelings stare at me, / I realise I actually had one." (p. 32) Thus, the ground is only discovered once it is lost and, therefore, is only recognised as an absence. The final deconstruction of the onion is not celebrated; rather its concomitant disappearance is mourned by evoking a moment that precedes the poem (i.e. the full onion). The full onion is never mentioned, since the first line is already involved in the process of peeling; in fact the full onion is only acknowledged once its absence is also total.

If we are to regard the onion as a metaphor for the homeland, the process of peeling can be seen as a quest or search, which unavoidably deconstructs any comfortable and preconceived ideas about this onion-fatherland. The result is very similar to that of previous poems; the desired object is never "there" and its presence is always deferred somewhere else or to some other time. In this case, the onion-before-peeling state is evoked as an invisible moment beyond the poem, which is only acknowledged once the onion has ceased to exist. From this perspective, the lost onion is also similar to the lost homeland, since it was lost at a time when the poet was not yet born. Analogously, the poem starts already with the searching process, the process of losing the onion, a step away from the unpeeled full onion ("I peel and peel / looking for my onion." 2009, p. 32). In this respect it is interesting to compare the contrast of temporal sequences in Tsundue's poetry and in Buddhist thought. Although they both coincide in pointing at a preceding state of wholeness (e.g. rejoining the fatherland in Tsundue's nationalist narrative and primordial lack of confusion in the Buddhist one) they have strongly divergent ways to approach it. In both systems the subject is born already divorced from this preceding and primordial wholeness, but Buddhism offers a way to rejoin it and Tsundue's poetry constantly stumbles upon the impossibility of such re-union.

Thus, a symbol like peeling the onion, which in Buddhism is regarded positively, as a metaphor of seeing through all forms of delusions, becomes a source of frustration in "Looking for my Onion," since it has come to signify the ultimate inexistence of the homeland. In Buddhism, original wholeness is identified with the non-existent onion, already peeled and exposed as empty space, and, therefore, deconstructing the onion is getting closer to that wholeness; the absent or non-onion is the original state to be rejoined. However, in Tsundue's poetry the fatherland is the fully fleshed onion, existent, positive and material and, consequently, its deconstruction only brings frustration. So, Buddhist temporality works like a full circle, like a khor ra that returns to its beginnings and fulfills its purpose and Tsundue's as an unfulfilled one, spiral rather than circular, never finding what it seeks and leading into further levels of despair.

However, the analogy of onion peeling as a metaphorical search for a homeland only works partially since the homeland was not lost as the result of any search. "Looking for my Onion" is clearly about the exilic quest for the imaginary homeland; however, the fact that the point of origin slips out of the poem and is only remembered as a full absence can be seen as a veiled allusion to the poet's generation, which was born in exile and for whom Tibet is an inherited memory that precedes any personal memory: The "onion" of Tibet had already been peeled and its parts scattered by the time of their birth.

Although Salman Rushdie's famous "Imaginary Homelands" begins by mentioning a picture of a house "into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born" (428), it is worth keeping in mind that Tibet precedes the Tibetan exiles' memory in a different way. Whereas the imaginary homelands of Rushdie are reconstructions based on memories, which are unavoidably and ultimately fictional, those of the second generation Tibetans born in exile are altogether fictional. The memories that configure the imaginary homeland of second-generation Tibetan exiles are those

of their parents; they describe a place they have never seen and they cannot access. Thus, the poignant image of Rushdie going back to his old family house in Bombay (Rushdie 428) is impossible for many Tibetans, who are limited to look at their country from the other side of the border and contemplate the irony of nomadic animals being allowed to cross the very boundaries they cannot cross.

It is important to remember Said's remark in his "Traveling Theory" when thinking of the imaginary homelands of the Tibetans: "It [any transference of ideas] necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin" (157). For those Tibetans born in India, like Tsundue, Tibet is a narrative that hardly ever gets debunked by the reality it is meant to represent. They cannot go back to their parents' houses as easily as Rushdie or other South Asians can and they do not have memories they can call their own. The fact that they are only dealing with inherited memories or, in other words, they were born at a time when all that was left from the old country were quickly changing memories, makes their imaginary homelands far more elegiac and meditative. After all, the homeland is little more than a chimera, an almost philosophical idea of origin.

In opposition to the inherited and chimeric memories of Tibet stands India, which for many is a surrogate or host but also native land. Tsundue's "When It Rains in Dharamsala" (2008, pp. 22-23) and "Exile House" (2008, p. 25) deal with this other space in rather different ways. While "When It Rains in Dharamsala" emphasizes the contingency and precariousness of exile as an unstable and uninhabitable location, "Exile House" dwells on its opposite: the rooted and almost homely quality of the native, though not ancestral, land. These other homes do not seem to be portrayed as the evasive centre of kora—or the empty centre of a peeled onion—but as mere contingent steps in

the circular journey that is kora. In a sense they might be regarded as the journey itself, the space travelled and inhabited by the exile but never construed as a fruit or a goal.

The notion of home in Tsundue's poems seems to be always deferred to another shore, to a "there" that is never reached, even when it seems close at hand. This is the mirage that fades away in "Illusion" or the absence discovered at the border between Ladakh and Tibet in "A Personal Reconnaissance." This home is a point of origin that precedes the many circular journeys of "Horizon," the full onion, never seen and only imagined when fully lost in "Looking for my Onion." Although home is a ground, the primordial point of origin, it is also an unreachable fruit, one to which there is no path. The unreachability of the fruit and the absence of a path brings us back to another ground, that of exile. This ground stands for surrogate home that is sometimes precarious like the "rented room" of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" (2008, pp.22-23) or unsustainable like the ring the third side of the coin in "The Third Side of the Coin" (1999, p. 40), and sometimes prosperous but also confining like the rooted and overgrown vegetation of "Exile House" (2008, p. 25) Thus, the ancestral home is the ground of the first journey, the one that has exile as a destination, but from exile such ground is regarded as a fruit to be reached, as a move away from the oppressive ground of displacement. Nevertheless, that second journey is never accomplished; this is a kora that never ends up in full circle but is trapped in a seemingly endless circuit of circular horizons (khor mo yug). These two parallel, though antithetical, journeys constitute the double journey of exile, which crosses over a number of actual and imaginary boundaries. Even though home might be an ever-fading fantasy its search is not given up and a number of journeys are attempted in order to reach it.

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