Chapter 4

An Ethnographic Approach to Tibetan Poetry

Ethnicity is a term which these days has become the watchword of scientific research that ranges from literature to sociology and anthropology. Hansaki Kohei in the foreword to the book *Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict, Crisis* mentions that “ethnicity” is a term that came into existence with the 1972 supplement of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is what Kohei has to say:

> It is with the crash of the geo-political hegemony of the colonial first worlds that the third world ethno-identical struggle began. It is with the rise and success of the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America that the two words became representative of the many realities of the oppressed few. The first world had been prophesying a ‘Theology of Progress’ to the colonies. This philosophy based itself on the fact that ‘progress is commercialisation, assimilation, cultural unification, equality and freedom based on atomised and abstract individuals.’ (iv)

The awareness that the above mentioned development was false brought in many radical changes in the third world which redefined the meaning of the pair of words “ethnicity” and “identity.”

Ethnicity has become one of the serious topics of study and discussion in the literary and the critical world of today. Studies are also being conducted regarding identity and the search for identity. Ethnicity is a live issue that is being addressed in
various ways by the global bodies. The year 1992 was celebrated by the United Nations as the “International Year of the World’s Indigenous People”. The same year the UN brought out a declaration regarding the rights of the indigenous people. The main thrust of the declaration was that the indigenous people should be given due recognition. The rights of the indigenous people are set in the larger context of all minorities so that all people grouped under this label could be given their due share of importance. However, this declaration too, like so many others of the same kind, continues to remain a worthless paper.

Ethnic thirsts as well as a search for one’s identity are two pressing issues in the world today. Ethnicity is self-esteem, a search for rediscovering the history, culture and traditions of a race. It is an attempt to preserve and protect one’s own heritage against the constant action of the majorities to eliminate or to efface the ethnic symbols of the minorities. This feature of a re-search for one’s identity has created a search for ethnicity. This search is often positive though the ruling classes also make use of the same consciousness to promote narrow ethnocentric and blind chauvinism which ultimately leads to conflict (*Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict, Crisis* v). Thus it becomes the duty of the ethnic minorities to put them on high alert regarding the motives of the ruling classes.

In human beings the sense of ethnicity has its beginnings from time immemorial. It began when agriculture developed and human beings started living together in groups. The nomadic life of hunting and gathering gave place to a more settled way of life with the need to work and live together in order to survive.
Institutions like the family and ceremonies like marriage developed as the years passed by with groups of people forming themselves into communities. Religion was a very important factor of community life. People lived together, ate together, slept together and prayed together. This togetherness gave rise to a group consciousness and a “we-feeling” (An Introduction to Sociology 220). This “we feeling” originated because of a shared meaning that each group of individuals possesses. It is based on the life experiences of the community as well as that of individuals. A shared life and a shared culture add strength to the group and to community life. This created shared meanings based on their life experiences as a community, in many respects including those in literature. Such groups are known as “ethnic groups” (An Introduction to Sociology 230 and 430).

J. P. Deniker in his book The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography has explained ethnicity thus: “ethnic groups are formed by virtue of community of language, religion, social institutions, etc., which have the power of uniting human beings of one or several species, races or varieties (...).” (3). Hence an ethnic group varies from others based on its separate individual traits. Within itself it is unified by a group of arbitrary characteristics which are inclusive of a common goal and a set of common beliefs. This is what makes the ethnic group exclusive. This specialised branch of knowledge that discusses the ethnic characteristics of the human race is called ethnology or ethnography. However the same tool was used by the west to denote that all the other races around the world were much lesser than them. It was only in the days of post-structuralist
theoricians that we find ethnography refined to include everything and not just differentiating people with their looks, as lower and higher. Here ethnography is used only in order to differentiate the Tibetans from the other races around the world.

The term ethnography developed from two Greek words “ethnos” meaning people and “grapho” meaning to write. Hence the term ethnography signifies writing about a people. It is a qualitative research method aimed at learning and understanding the cultural phenomena that reflects the knowledge and system of meanings on which the life of a cultural group is dependent. Ethnography is used for gathering empirical data on human societies and cultures. It is done through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, and such research methodologies.

Like many social sciences of its class ethnography as a school of thought began in the late 19th century and flourished in the first half of the 20th century. It should also be noted that the age was when the colonisation processes was at its pinnacle. Ethnography arose in the context of a particular set of historical circumstances that influenced early ethnographic work. These circumstances included European imperialism, American expansionist tendencies, and dominant understandings of race, ethnicity, and gender that usually placed white males in the colonial positions of privilege and power and all others in marginalized or colonized positions of oppression and subordination. The beginnings of this school were to study the populations around the world. This study was not just to understand the various people in the various colonies but to stratify them differently based on the
European scales of values. Hence ethnography was primarily Eurocentric. Also except for a very few set of women ethnographers most of the ethnographers were the white male population and the studies were held on distant non-European marginalized groups. Hence the study was andro-centric also. The products of these researches were undoubtedly a clear cut observation of the “others.” Hence the chances of bias and avoidance of multiple perspectives were found in the early ethnographies.

Ethnography originally developed as a branch related to anthropology. Cultural anthropology, which focused on the study of cultural variation among humans, collecting data about the impact of global economic and political processes on local cultural realities was the first form of ethnographic research. Cultural anthropology grew up around the practice of ethnography. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) by Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Nuer* (1940) by Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by Margaret Mead, *Ethnologische Excursion in Johore* (1875) by Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay, and *Naven: A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View* (1936) by Gregory Bateson were the early examples of ethnographic work. The differentiation between the civilized and the savage was the first results of ethnographic analysis. J. P. Deniker’s definition of Tibetan people based on their physiological characters mentioned in this chapter provides a good example in this subject. Such a situation had easily helped the development of philosophies like Nazism and its associated
theories like Aryan supremacy. This was in fact very true as the largest numbers of ethnographic studies were conducted in pre Second World War Germany to prove the Aryan superiority. A number of Indology departments had sprung up in the European universities around this time.

In the post-Second World War era the situation with regard to ethnographic study has changed drastically. The thrust on the “subject” changed. It developed as an independent and individual science. Post structural ideology has changed this school of thought. The observer became part of the observed and he/she is supposed to describe the race without any personal bias. Works of Claude Levi-Straus provide a good example in this matter. Some ethnographers like Zora Neale Hurston, though they worked in the early 20th century, were clearly conscious of the non-traditional strategies of ethnographic research. A close examination reveals a rich history of ethnographers experimenting with research strategies, research sites, and styles of presentation. This experimentation and variation almost certainly stems from their awareness of the tremendous variation in their research subjects and circumstances and the challenge of studying complex social and cultural phenomena in action. By the mid 20th century a number of critiques arose regarding the question of ethnographic study. They had formulated four subjects which ethnography should focus on. They were objectivity, perspective, bias and ethics. All future studies were done giving due importance to these four factors in their research. This has shaken the Eurocentric base of ethnography.
Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, anthropologists began writing “confessional” ethnographies that intentionally exposed the nature of ethnographic research. *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by Claude Levi-Strauss, *The High Valley* by Kenneth Read, and *The Savage and the Innocent* (2000) by David Maybury-Lewis are good examples. Later reflexive ethnographies refined the technique to translate cultural differences by representing their effects on the ethnographer. Famous examples include *Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight* by Clifford Geertz, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) by Paul Rabinow, *The Headman and I* by Jean-Paul Dumont, and *Tuhami* by Vincent Crapanzano. In the 1970s and 1980s we find several critiques of the classical ethnographies coming with their corrections. For example, Annette Weiner criticized Malinowski’s study on Trobriand islanders. She says through her book *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976) that Malinowski was androcentric in his description. Derek Freeman’s book *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983) criticized the works of Margaret Mead’s work on Samoan islanders. He says that she was misled by her informants. Similarly Sharon Hutchinson’s *Nuer Dilemmas* (1996) is a sequel and criticism to Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Sudanese Nuer years earlier. Also Daniel Martin Varisco’s *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* provides a very sound and well-informed literary critique of Clifford Geertz’s *Islam Observed* (1968), Ernest Gellner’s *Muslim Society* (1981), Fatima Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil* (1975), and
Akbar Ahmed’s *Discovering Islam* (1988). Many African writers have engaged this school of thought in order to demystify the western notions on Africa.

In the 1980s the rhetoric of ethnography was subjected to intense scrutiny within the discipline, under the general influence of literary theory and post colonial/post-structuralist thought. Experimental ethnographies that reveal the ferment of the discipline include *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (1987) by Michael Taussig, *Debating Muslims* by Michael F.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, and *A Space on the Side of the Road* by Kathleen Stewart. This critical turn in socio-cultural anthropology during the mid-1980s can be traced to the influence of the text, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), edited by James Clifford and George Marcus. It helped to bring decisive changes to both anthropology and ethnography often described in terms of being “postmodern,” “reflexive,” “literary,” “deconstructive” or “post structural.” With the development of experimental forms such as “dialogic anthropology” and “narrative ethnography,” *Writing Culture* helped to encourage the development of “collaborative ethnography.” This exploration of the relationship between writer, audience, and subject has become a central tenet of contemporary anthropological and ethnographic practice wherein active collaboration between the researcher and subject has helped blend, in certain instances, the practice of collaboration in ethnographic fieldwork with the process of creating the actual ethnographic product that emerges from the research itself.
Many theorists now think of ethnographic study as an understanding of the observed developed through close exploration of several sources of data. Using these sources as a foundation, the observer depends on a cultural frame of analysis. Now the definitions have also changed. Paul Willis and Mats Trondman in their “Manifesto for Ethnography” defined it as follows:

It is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, representing, recording, representing partly at least in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human experience.

(http://eth. sagepub.com/manifesto.htm)

University of Toronto based scholars Scott Reeves, Ayelet Kuper, and Brian David Hodges describe ethnography in the most modern sense. They consider it as the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within teams, organisations, and communities. The studies gather information through participant observations and interviews. Using these methods ethnographers can generate an understanding of the social action. Since the ethnographer shares a relationship with the participants; a sort of reflexivity plays as a central element in such research practices. Ethnographers compare and contrast various methods to enhance the quality of their work. It is important as what people say would contrast with their actual actions. Now ethnography has developed tremendously in such a way that we can see its applications in almost all walks of life – mostly in business-related fields.
Such a deep participant observation was not possible in the present research. Even though this research was largely based on non-participant observations, some effort was used in participant studies like interviews. However, the researcher had to depend more on the early forms of ethnographic observations like that of Deniker to differentiate the Tibetan from other ethnic groups around. But in the case of poetry analysis, due care was given taking into consideration the recent trends in ethnography.

Ethnicity has both an anthropocentric angle as well as a cultural perspective. Anthropologically, ethnicity is about a certain race of people. Culturally, it is the search for a person’s identity and self. Anthropology studies the question of ethnicity in a number of ways. Ethnography becomes useful in this context. It is essentially a qualitative research method aimed at learning and understanding cultural phenomena which reflect the knowledge and system of meanings guiding the life of a cultural group. It was pioneered in the field of socio-cultural anthropology but has also become a popular method in various other fields of social sciences. It is often employed for gathering empirical data on human societies and cultures. Data collection is often done through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, etc. Ethnography aims to describe the nature of those who are studied through writing.

The development of ethnography as a discreet school of study was in the 20th century. This was in the form of two phases. Phase one began in the 1920s and ended in the mid-80s and the second phase beginning in the mid-80s continues to
the present. In the first phase of development of ethnography it was in the form of measurements whereby the somatic and ethnic characteristics of the individual under study was recorded and studied. A differentiating spirit was prominent differentiating one from the other like the savage from the civilized. In the second phase the ethnographic study shifted its focus on to the co-living and co-learning of the rules and regulations of the community and abiding them. Participation gained more prominence than differentiation. This later phase was not possible in the case with this study.

Reflexivity or the ability to view deeply into the individual relations becomes relevant in this study. It demands an exploration of the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences and acts upon such studies. However, reflexivity becomes a problem in the study as personal biases could intervene. The researcher could tend to be carried away by his own personal predictions. Leaving the bias aside, ethnography still can be found useful in the study of ethnic communities. Hence the tenets of the first phase are used to show the difference that Tibetans have with other races of the world. To understand Tibetan ethnicity completely one needs to have an understanding of the anthropological as well as the cultural sense of these differences.

Deniker argues that the chief concern of ethnography is with regard to those people “who have not been adequately treated by historians” (9). Ethnography in this sense describes the various stages of people and civilisations as well as the formulation and evolution of the general principles of each society. Here what we
understand as common for a society is certainly a product of the collective effort which came into practice during the development of the society. As ethnography is considered a science it should without doubt have a scientific basis for its arguments. Deniker classifies the parameters for understanding an ethnic group as two in number. They are as follows:

(1) Somatic ones in which the morphological features between man and other species of a similar nature like apes and the physiological features which make man a superior being.

(2) Ethnic ones in which the linguistic characteristics which make the transfer of ideas easier and the sociological features which make men live in co-operation in a society.

These parameters are not fully involved in this study. However, they come in useful as a method to understand and identify the Tibetan race as a prominent ethnic group – in a sense to differentiate them from others. It is an attempt to go through their creative output, poetry in the case of this research, and try to trace how their poetic renderings are influenced by their ethnic features. Though ethnography cannot fully measure features like experience and emotion, this tool is useful in assessing the collective spirit of the people. It tries to decipher the characteristics that have become deeply engraved into the conscience of the multitudes like the things that have inspired the race for many generations. These are the life experiences of the people as a community. This is somewhat similar to the idea of the “Collective Unconscious” proposed by C. G. Jung. It could be linked with
religion, philosophy and every single thing dealing with the race. It is the essential substance of a race.

Ethnicity here is an umbrella term referring to a “set of people sharing common origin, culture and language” (*Cambridge English Dictionary* 268) which is essentially an ethnic group. Ethnography is a multi-disciplinary approach involving all aspects of the ethnic group. Ethnography is essentially a community oriented study. Such a community centring is also the basis of literature. Every literary rendering, in all its diverse forms, is essentially subjective. The person does not remain completely cut off from society. Without society man cannot exist and vice versa. Thus literature is a product of society. This is the same with Tibetan literature also. The audience is always considered outside the realms of the text. Hence the researcher is also an external observer watching the ethnic elements of a literature that is not his own. Each literary text in some manner bears traits of ethnicity. These traits are prominent in the individual works. The works of many modern writers specifically include terminologies from their parent languages to address certain permanent issues of their own social fields of reference. This adds individuality to the ethnic elements. Since ethnicity is associated with societies ethnography becomes a valid tool.

Tibetans as a community were able to produce a unique literature. The essential features that make up a society are the same that produce its literature. It can be termed as an essential “Tibetanness” which makes Tibetan works different from others. This idea is similar to concepts like the African “Negritude.” Literature
is an outpouring of both personal and social emotions. It creates a sphere where it is connected to freedom and other issues as the ethnic group is connected with events of exile. Hence literature is studied in the light of the ethnic identity. As the observations are made from the perspective of ethnic identity ethnography is a good tool.

Tibetans as an ethnic group share the same meaning in many cases including religiosity and literature. In other words it can be said that the whole group’s “we feeling” rests on these meanings. These meanings are independent and intertwined with others. In the case of Tibetans in exile they are four as follows

(1) Religiosity – Religion is the most important factor that unites the feelings of the Tibetans. Buddhism was the single thread that had conjoined the various tribes in historical Tibet. Even today the Tibetans in and out of exile are joined together by the thread of religion. This is also how the Dalai Lama has become an international symbol of Tibet.

(2) The reality of exile – Being in exile is the most powerful reality faced by the Tibetans in exile. They face the challenge of building a life in unknown lands at the same time their hearts are longing for the unknown motherland. They wish to return to a land which is only known through religion and myths. The Tibetans accept exile hence they opt for other ways to overcome these experiences.

(3) Desire to return – Even in the midst of the problems of exile the Tibetans all over the world feel a spirit of return to their motherland. This is the same for Tibetans born outside Tibet in exile. It is similar to the feeling shared by the Israelite
community all over the world when they were in exile. It has become the life mission of the Tibetans in exile to return to their land of origin. This often becomes a despairing reality for the Tibetans in exile.

(4) Presence of a voice of hope – Even in the midst of all these miseries Tibetans continue to cherish the desire to return. In their entire literary renderings one can find this positive note of return. It can be concluded that along with the protection of their culture, the reopening of the Tibetan traditional institutions in their land of exile was surely a sign indicating the living hope of the Tibetans.

J. P. Deniker gives a very detailed classification of the Tibetan race in his book *The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography*. As the book was first published in the early twentieth century the land of Tibet is described without any political inhibitions but often as the land of a lesser race. The fact that it had recognized the Tibetans as different from Chinese and Mongol races is the reason for its inclusion in this study. The land Deniker describes is not limited to modern Tibet; instead it extends from the mainland of China to the Himalayan states of India. He includes the non-Mongolian population of the land also in this classification. He calls the land in the older style as Thibet. Deniker’s description is as follows:

We may include under this name the non-Mongolian populations of Thibet and the surrounding countries known by the name of Bod, or the Thibetans properly so called in southern Thibet, by the name of Tanguts in the Chinese province of Kuku-nor, of Si-fan in Western
Sechuen by that of Ladaki and Champa in eastern Cashmere (province of Leh), of Gurong, Limbu, Mangar and Murmi in Nepal, of Lepachs or Rongs in Sikkin, of Bhutani in Bhotan etc. The Abors, Mishmee, etc., of the Himalayan country are also included among the Thibetans, but they approach the Indonesians in type. It is the same with the Garro and their neighbours on the east, the Khasia or Djainthia, whose language, however, differs from the Thibetan. (381)

Deniker’s Thibet is evidently more extensive than today’s Tibet. Sir Charles Bell’s *Tibet: Past and Present* provides historical references approving the claim of an erstwhile Tibetan empire. The Tibetan race has a number of subdivisions as Deniker remarks. These, he says, have cross bred with the passage of time. However Deniker describes the race of having some pronounced physical features. They are of “slight figure, brownish complexion (...) straight profile, oval face, high forehead, straight and anchored nose, thick bearded even on the sides of the face and always frizzy or wavy hair” (381).

Most of the Tibetans were either peasants or shepherds. A lot of them have nomadic characters. Yet they have a well-formed script which is a part of the Tibeto-Burman language branch of the Indo-European languages. The monasteries were the seat of learning. The people who wanted to get advanced education joined the monasteries. The monastery was the centre of all the activities. The divide between man and woman is very low in this community. The weaker sex is glorified as “the mother,” an iconic representation of life. The family too is given high value in the
Tibetan system. Family relations are considered holy and conditions like divorce and separation such modern are unheard of (The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography 390).

The essential Tibetanness is the major feature in literary renderings also. This feature can be understood through racial elements like ethnicity and the collective unconscious. Ethnicity is based on the racial origin and common goals which the entire group pursues. Collective unconscious, a Jungian idea, remains the common thought process of a group. Each set of people of different ethnic origin has a varied ethnic basis. This is seen in their thought process also. The features of Tibetanness make their appearance in all Tibetan poetry though it is not possible to isolate a particular feature in a particular poem. On the other hand they appear in an intertwined manner in all the poems.

First and foremost, as in the case of the land of Tibet, Tibetan poetry is related with the Buddhist religion and culture. Religion is the basis of all the activities in Tibet. Religion and symbols associated with religion form a major part in Tibetan understanding. The first act which the Dalai Lama undertook in exile was the building up of monasteries in exile to preserve the Tibetan culture.

From top level administration to the meanest of all the activities, religion percolated down to all activities of life. The central administration consisted of the Dalai Lama (Head of State) and the Parliament (Kashang). There were two Prime ministers (Kalon Tripas), one a monk and one a non-monk elder, who were central in the administration (Freedom in Exile 309). The government cared for the people and
controlled both religious as well as lay affairs. The monastery was the representative unit of the administration as well as the seat of the local administration. The abbots and the elders formed a council which was instrumental in ruling over the provinces. They cared for many of the requirements of the people over the province. In fact the monasteries were the granaries, hospitals, libraries and universities rolled into one.

Lobsang Rampa’s *The Third Eye* is a fictitious account of the life of a novice monk in the Cho-Po-Ri medical lamasery. He gives a very detailed picture of the monastery life. Since the medicine monks were given much importance in the land their training also was as important. Hence the monastery gave a good picture of life in the Tibetan monasteries. The medical lamasery was destroyed with heavy artillery fire in 1959 by the invading Chinese army (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chokpori).

The monasteries had their branches in almost all the villages at least in the form of a prayer house or a shelter for travellers and the homeless. The monks were the emissaries of the government to the villagers as most of them were at the same time teachers, priests, doctors and judges. The village was the basis of the community, with its own administrative system consisting of monks and elders.

The most powerful form of repression the Chinese put on Tibet was through the infamous Cultural Revolution. The religious and cultural symbols were distorted and destroyed. For the Tibetans this is a matter of grave concern and they saw to it that the beliefs and symbols of their religion are preserved and re created even in exile. Hence a major feature of Tibetanness is the influence of religion. Religion and culture are deeply intertwined in the Tibetan context. Modern Tibetan poetry simply
abounds with notions regarding the traditional images of Tibet, but with the
confusion of refugees. This has resulted in a confused idea about religion for most
of the exile poets.

The religious images of Tibet are seen throughout the poems but at the same
time confusions regarding their relevance in the modern world too exist. Poems
like Tenzin Tsundue’s “Desperate Age” is a good example. It goes thus:

Kill my Dalai Lama

that I can no believe no more.

Bury my head

beat it

Disrobe me

chain it.

But don’t let me free. (Crossing the Borders 20)

The same is the case with his poem “Betrayal”. Tsoltim N. Shakbpa of the second
generation also recognizes this religio-cultural effect. His “OM MANI PADME
HUM” is another of the same kind. The modern generation too shares the same
concerns in perhaps a more pronounced manner. For example, Dhargyl Tsering in
her poem “Shambhala” speaks about the deep philosophy of the Shambhala
tradition of Buddhism. Religion still remains the key factor for the Tibetan in and out
of exile. It would still remain the number one factor of life for the Tibetans amongst
all odds. It is in one word the life breath of a Tibetan.
The second feature influencing Tibetanness is their specific ethnic identity. This identity is deeply related to religion. The Tibetan identity as discussed in the earlier chapters is very different from the Chinese identity. Deniker also confirms the same in the case of somatic and ethnic features. But the Chinese conquered Tibet and tried to justify the aggression saying that they share the same identity. Mao Zedong’s infamous comment, “(...) return to the motherland (...),” is considered the basis for the wars between China and Tibet. Hence poetry makes deliberate attempts to preserve the Tibetan identity by introducing images dealing with the bare realities of life. Images of food, daily life, and ways of living form part of Tibetan ethnic identity and are used in poetic representations. Though many of the poets and writers of modern Tibet themselves do not know much about their unique past, they dream of it and express it through their poems. The poems of Tsundue are a good example for these. Tsundue’s “Losar Greetings” shows the same. Losar is the New Year celebrations of the Tibetans.

It runs thus:

Tashi Delek!

Though in a borrowed garden

you grow, grow well my sister.

This Losar

when you attend your Morning Mass,

say an extra prayer

that the next Losar
we can celebrate back in Lhasa. (Kora 12)

Many Tibetan exile poets take pride in showing the world that they are Tibetans. We find statements like “I am a Tibetan,” “We are Tibetans” and “My Tibet” along with phrases like motherland/fatherland, announcing their ethnicity used in great detail in their poems. Many cultural symbols also have been well used. The Tibetan exile is represented as a fish out of water – an idea that is amply expressed in Tsundue’s poems “My Tibetanness” and “Tibetan in Mumbai.” Thupten N. Chakrishar of the third generation also shares the same. His poem “A Pledge” has the same concept of freeing the motherland.

This ethnic identity has been preserved by the Tibetan community in exile. The Tibetan community was keen in rebuilding the monasteries that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in China. In exile the Tibetan community took great care in the preservation of everything Tibetan from traditional costumes, customs and manners, cuisine and language, traditional texts and the reconstruction of great monasteries, temples and other institutions. The establishment of the Men-Tse-Khang (Astro-Medical Institute) set up by the Dalai Lama in 1961 to preserve traditional medical lore and such other schools for preserving Tibetan culture are good examples. Many of the business firms that the Tibetans in exile started were also centred on making and selling their traditional artefacts. All these shows the way the Tibetan community is keen on protecting their ethnic identity. The same is true with regard to the poems.
The third factor in Tibetanness is the presence of three generations of exiles. There are basically three voices underlying Tibetan poetry all through these ages. They are representative of three generations of Tibetans in exile. They are united in their desire for independence and return to the motherland. The Tibetan poet Buchung D. Sonam was the first to raise this idea of three generations. He says that as the world was deeply attracted to Buddhist studies Tibetan culture and heritage also came to be noticed. It was during this period that Tibetan writing in English developed as a separate branch. Though other branches of literature also developed, poetry was the favourite medium of expression for these writers in exile. Poetry therefore became a major part of secular culture. This may be because poetry played a great part in their lives in the form of the chants, songs and mantras of the Buddhist religion.

The first generation of poets was born in Tibet and had lived in Tibet for a quite long time before they were forced into exile in 1959. The poetry of these writers gives expression to the bygone era of Tibet. They are only waking up to the reality of exile. They thus sing of Tibet’s golden past, its tales, myths and legends connected with the culture of the forbidden kingdom. Amdo Gendun Chophel, Chogyam Trungpa and Dhondup Gyal are the major poets of the age. Gyal can also be considered as a transitional figure to the poets of the second generation.

The second generation was either born in Tibet or had to migrate to India at a tender age to the refugee camps on the Indian borders. Tibet, for them was a distant reality but they were more intense in returning to Tibet than the other generations.
Hence many of them joined the armed resistance. Having to give up the armed struggle at the orders of the Dalai Lama was a great disappointment to the young Tibetans of the age. This disillusionment is most pronounced in their poetry too. Exile is continuously their topic of discourse. K. Dhondup, Lahsang Tsering, Gyalpo Tsering, Ngodup Paljor, Norbu Zangpo and Tsoltim Shakabpa were the other major writers of the period. Shakabpa is the transitional poet between the second and third generation poets.

The third generation was born and brought up completely in India as refugees. Their knowledge of Tibet is as a reality familiar only to their elders. They drew inspirations from their earlier generations. Poets of this age represent things in a powerful manner. The disenchantment between reality and dream is always with them. Tenzin Tsundue and G.C. (Gendun Cheophel Jr.), Tsering Wangpo Dhompa, Buchung D. Sonam, Tenzing Sonam, Thupten N. Chakrishar, Kathup Tsering, Topden Tsering, Tsamchoe Dolma, Tenzin Trinley, Tenzin Gelek, Kalsang Wangdu, Ugen Cheophel, Namgyl Phuntsok, Sherab W. Cheophel, Gur Gyal, Tenzin Palzon, Dawa Woeser, Wongchen Tsering, Tsering Dolkar, Dhargyel Tsering. Pema Tenzin, Cherin Norbu and Tsering Dorjee are the other significant poets of the age.

The fourth major feature related to Tibetanness is the importance given to human rights, specifically the right to exist and express. It is this right that is constantly usurped by the Chinese Government in Tibet. The People’s Republic of China is an important member of the United Nations, a permanent member in the Security Council. In spite of the fact that the United Nations is bound to protect and
preserve the human rights of people the world over it has turned a blind eye on and
a deaf ear to the violation of the rights of the Tibetan, the Mongolian and the
Uyghur community which China had colonised.

The first phase of the violation of Tibetan human rights was marked by the
forceful induction of rice to the traditional barley-based Tibetan diet. The ingestion
of rice had caused severe gastronomic disorders in the health of the Tibetans.
Though this is not regarded as very relevant in the whole scenario, in itself it has
caused a lot of misery to ordinary Tibetans. The Tibetans are forced to opt for exile
as life in the Tibetan plateau has been made dangerous and unsafe by the Chinese.
More and more people from the Chinese mainland are encouraged to settle in Tibet.
All sorts of appliances and gadgets, means of transport like the railways and fast
cars, places for work and living like skyscrapers and other high rise buildings have
changed the topography of the land and brought in its wake pollution on a large
scale. All this has been done in order to cater to the comforts of the immigrants but
in the process the pristine beauty and unpolluted atmosphere of the land have
become the casualties.

The next phase of violation of human rights was by banning religious beliefs.
The belief in the Dalai Lama is banned by the administration and even the mention of
the name of His Holiness could imprison one for an indefinite period of time in the
notorious prisons. These prisoners are considered bonded labour and are set to
work to bring out all sorts of cheap, counterfeit articles which are pumped into the
international market. Many of the Tibetan poets like Tsoltim L. Shakpba have
condemned the sad state of human rights within Tibet and in all other places where the Tibetans are in exile. They see the breach of human rights in the case of Tibetans in and out of exile. His poem “Made in China” discusses the condition of Tibetan prisoners in China and condemns the counterfeit Chinese products produced in their jails. Tsundue’s poem “My Tibetanness,” “Space Bar: A Proposal” and Lahsang Tsering’s “Waiting” also are good examples. The third generation Tibetans are frustrated about their inability to return to Tibet. They express the absence of the fundamental rights of life which are automatically accorded to every citizen but denied to the Tibetan refugee. The exiled Tibetan’s right to live in today’s world of competition is discussed in detail. Tsundue’s “Space Bar: A Proposal” is a refugee’s plea to the world to give him some space in this already congested world.

The fifth major factor related to Tibetanness is the desire to return. Return to Tibet is the greatest wish of all Tibetans in exile. All the poets in exile also share the same desire and express it through their poems. This is clearly evident in the poems of the second as well as third generation poets. Tsundue’s poem “Horizon” is a good example. He says thus:

Pick the white pebbles

and the funny strange leaves.

Mark the curves

and cliffs around

for you may need

to come home again. (Kora 1)
This is the basic spirit of return in the hearts of all Tibetans. Many had to leave Tibet forced out by the Chinese hegemony. Many had to cross the treacherous snow fields and the bullets of Chinese soldiers. Only a lucky few escaped into the settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan. The old refugees of the 1950s as well as the neo-refugees of the present day share the same feelings of returning to Tibet.

Tsundue’s “Crossing the Border” is a poem which deserves special mention in this context. It tells about a mother who had lost her family while escaping from Tibet to India.

This desire to return to the homeland remains an unrealised dream for the Tibetans. They also recognised the impossibility of such return and their frustration spilled out into an anti-China feeling, a sort of disillusionment. The third generation poets like Wangchen Tsering (“Is It Snowing In Tibet?”), Cherin Norbu (“The Majestic Himalayas”), Pema Tenzin (“The View”), Tsering Dolkar (“Emptiness”) and Gur Gyal (“Emptiness Again”) express the feeling of disillusionment and frustration. Tsundue’s poems also present the same. His poem “My Tibetanness” shows that spirit as follows:

I am Tibetan.
But I am not from Tibet.
Never been there.
Yet I dream
of dying there. (Kora 15)
In the same poem he is angry that even India where the Tibetans have been living as exiles for the last half a century too does not care about their identity. He comments that borders between countries are set for humans while wild animals cross these borders with total freedom. His poem “A Personal Reconnaissance” written after a failed attempt to enter Tibet runs thus:

I didn’t see the border,
I swear there wasn’t anything different, there.
I didn’t know,
if I was there or here.
I didn’t know,
if I was here or there.
They say the kyangs come here every winter.
They say the kyangs go there every summer. (Kora 13)

These lines should be read along with Tsundue’s revolutionary activities like climbing towers during the visits of Chinese premiers and marching to the Indo-Chinese border to forcefully occupy Tibet. His is perhaps the most expressive face of the feeling of return. It is so fierce that Indo-Tibetan friendship associations like the “Friends of Tibet” call him the “Rebel Warrior.” Tsundue’s poem “Exile House” is another good example where the Tibetan views on exile and return are discussed.
The return to Tibet is a hazy dream but this is a dream shared by all three generations. Though the younger generations have not experienced the reality of their unseen motherland they too have the same desire to return. A final return to Tibet is not possible for many of the elders, but for them too it is an essential part of their lives. Many of the elders have died out but the young are still striving hard to return. Probably the wish to return is the major reason that keeps the exiles together. Hence their poetry is positive. This positivity makes the Tibetans rise up like a phoenix even in the days of their worst trials.

The sixth major feature one might find in the works of the Tibetan poets is the presence of a strong voice of hope. It is like the Aristotelian “catharsis” which is the purgation of thoughts and emotions. It gives out a positive hope for the Tibetan poets, purging away negative thoughts regarding the success of their plans. Poetry for the Tibetan poets in exile is positive, giving out a hope of return. The cathartic voice is different in the Tibetan case. Here it is not a purgation of one’s emotions but a singing out to the world about the condition of Tibet and its exiled people. It is a voice which wakes the world from its forced slumber, to look around and understand the Tibetan pain. Hence it becomes a positive voice, one which brings in hope.

Poetry for the Tibetan poets in exile is positive, giving its readers and writers the hope of return. It tells the world the condition of Tibet and its exiled people. The chief aim of the poets is not just the expression of their life but also a loud voicing of the Tibetan cause. In Tibetan poetry in exile we find a strong conscience which
constantly beckons the world to recognize its state. The tone of the poems may be frustrated like those of Tsundue or angry like Shakapba or serene like Lahsang Tsering or problematic like the works of Dhompa or peaceful like the works of Gyalpo Tsering but they all end up in on the positive note of the hope of return. The modern generation finds it a rather difficult situation as in the case of Thupten N. Chakrishar. His poems present his unhappiness about his status as an exiled Tibetan who is forced to turn a deaf ear to the voice of his motherland and a blind eye to its plight. The poem “My Last Wish” expresses the poet’s dilemma regarding the situation of Tibet’s occupation while another poem titled “The Freedom Song” is about an imaginary land.

The modern generation Tibetans are often thought of as having a dilemma. They present a confused voice regarding their existence. In all these writers the chief aim is not just expression of their life but also a loud voicing of the Tibetan cause. Here in Tibetan poetry in exile we find a strong conscience which constantly beckons the world to recognize its state. The origin of this conscience is probably their own justification of their inability to find a realistic answer to their quest for freedom. The same can be seen in the light of the Buddhist scriptures which proclaim the renunciation of desire which is the root of all evil.

The seventh major feature is the voice of a political orphan. Tibetan poetry is always the voice of the orphan in the global community, the plaintive wail of one who has been left out. The term political orphan is used here to state the condition of the Tibetans in exile. They are no longer refugees from an independent country
but no country in the world accepts this fact. Hence they don’t have the status of an exile or a refugee. In this sense they are unrecognized exiles or political orphans. Tsundue’s poem “Losar Greetings,” “Exile House,” and “Space Bar: A Proposal” show the orphan’s voice. “Space Bar: A Proposal” is the best example to quote. Tsering Dhompa’s poems express the same orphan’s voice. Being a poet of the third generation, her poems express the refugee women’s voice in a global perspective. Tibet and exile are not clearly mentioned but underlying all the voice of Tibet resounds in our ears.

Modern Tibetans are unable to change to keep pace with the new world order. They are torn between tradition and modernity. Dhompa’s two poetry collections, In the Absent Every Day and Rules of the House, recall the same dialectic. Lahsang Tsering on the other hand powerfully declaims the orphaned voice of Tibetan exile. His poems like “Tomorrow,” “Waiting,” “Bamboo Curtain Burning,” “Country, Nation and Freedom,” and others represent the voice of the international orphan. Tsering has produced wonderful works whereby many readers have known the world about the Tibetan exile. In “Bamboo Curtain Burning” he sings:

Come fellow Tibetans, let’s not sit and wait.

Come fellow Tibetans, let’s not lose courage.

Come fellow Tibetans, let’s rise together.

Let’s go for Freedom – we can be Free!

Let’s fight for Freedom – TIBET WILL BE FREE.
Finally one can say that there are seven distinguishing features for Tibetan poetry. They are as follows:

1. Deep Association with Religion and Culture.
2. Specific Ethnic Identity.
4. The Right to Exist and Express.
5. The Desire to Return.
6. The Presence of a Strong Hope.
7. The Voice of a Political Orphan.

These features are intertwined expressing the essence of the Tibetan soul. They are interrelated and at the same time distinctive. The seven features form examples of a deep relation between each other which forms the essence of Tibetan poetry. This is what this study calls Tibetanness. This Tibetanness is the essential factor which makes up a Tibetan poem in exile. These features were fashioned thus by the experiences of exile. Hence they are best unified in the exile poetry.

In an even closer survey one might find there are more features associated with Tibetan poetry in exile. However, these seven features are the most prominent ones. The above mentioned features may not be distinctive for every reader but it is possible to see certain strands interlaced with each other. However, even when much is said on these interlaced facets of poetry, Tibetan poetry still remains as powerful as others.
The essential features of Tibetanness are independent, inter-dependent and intra-dependent. They make the poet and his poems different from others. These features are as said earlier interlacing with the others; what makes them unique is their seasoning with the fire of exile. This is very true in Tibetan poetry. What was just ritualistic songs of worship turned out to be poetic renderings of their identity and existence when flavoured with Tibetanness. It is with their political status of exile and refugee life that they started using poetry in a more expressive manner. In that sense exile is a key factor which makes all things in modern Tibetan poetry specifically important. In a single phrase it can be truly said that it is exile that makes Tibetanness. It is on that anvil that these seven elements are melded together to make up the single factor of Tibetanness. This factor has to be discussed in detail so that the various features of resistance in Tibetan poetry in exile can be fully understood.