Chapter 6

Tibetan Poetry: A Resistance in Exile

Tibetanness is a term that encompasses the very psyche of the Tibetan and it manifests itself in the thoughts and expressions of every child of Tibet. The reality of exile at the physical and mental level has become part of the Tibetanness that sets the Tibetan apart from other exiles and refugees the world over. There are seven features that make up Tibetanness. It must be understood that all the seven features cannot be found in each poem; on the other hand, these elements are intertwined in most of the poems. The seven features of Tibetanness, the essence of the Tibetan self, are the following:

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.

Exile is the single factor that reigns over all these features which makes Tibetan poetry and its characteristics different from all others. The prayer songs of the earlier generations turned out to be poems of their identity and existence in the present generation. The political condition of exile and the hardships of refugee life caused them to use poetry in a more expressive manner. It is in exile that the seven
features mentioned above are conjoined together to make up the single factor called Tibetanness. Each of these features is here discussed with adequate examples.

1. Deep Association with Religion and Culture

The Buddhist religion and culture, particularly Tantric Buddhism, is the faith that enriches each Tibetan. Religion is the basis of all the activities in Tibet. Religion and symbols associated with religion form a major part in Tibetan understanding. Religion permeated all levels of administration and in every facet of life for the Tibetan. The first act which the Dalai Lama undertook was the building up of monasteries in exile to preserve the Tibetan culture. One of the worst actions done by the People’s Republic of China in the Tibetan Autonomous Region was placing a ban on the worship of the Dalai Lama – this was like cutting at the root of the Tibetan system of faith.

This deep influence of religion is a major factor in the idea of Tibetanness. The poetry abounds with notions regarding traditional images of Tibet. The confusion and bewilderment of the refugee Tibetans also are taken into consideration. The religion which their forefathers said to have once existed in Tibet is a contradiction of the religious bans they had seen in Tibet as well as the pan-religion condition they experienced in India and elsewhere as refugees. Thus religious images are seen throughout the poems but at the same time confusions regarding their relevance in the modern world too exist for the modern poets. Tenzin Tsundue’s poem “Desperate Age” is a good example. Tsundue can be considered as the angry man of Tibetan poetry. He is angered over the injustice his
country has been suffering from the so-called just world. He is desperately unhappy as he feels that he has not done justice to his faith. He is unhappy as he thinks that he has betrayed his ancestors, who had laid their lives for the country’s freedom.

The same is the case with his poem “Betrayal” where it says:

My father died

defending our home,

our village, our country.

I too wanted to fight.

But we are Buddhist.

People say we should be

Peaceful and Non-Violent.

So I forgive our enemy.

But some time I feel

I betrayed my father. (Kora 21)

Tsoltim N. Shakbpa’s “OM MANI PADME HUM” is another poem of the same type. He has in fact reset the Tibetan moolamantra to suit his needs as a chant representing the multiple realities of life in a colony. Om Mani Padme Hum (Hail the Jewel in the Lotus (Lord Buddha)) is improvised as Tibet is my true home and it will be the same even when the Chinese say it is not. He says:

Tibet is my true home

no matter what the Chinese say

they cannot take that fact away
my land is a part of my heart
China cannot tear it apart
my people are a part of my soul
we stand united in one goal
my culture is part of me
unique it is you can see
we pray and non-violently fight
with all our soul, body and might
we will get our country back
our land, people and our yak
Tibet is my true home
om mani padme hum. (Muses in Exile 48)

Shakbpa is always for a free Tibet and a speedy return to the mother land. Hence he takes every opportunity to express this desire. Hence the redefinition of the poem has a great deal of importance.

It should be remembered that the adherence to religion is not just limited to pious worship and the performance of rituals. The sincerity of the performers and participants of religion is the key to the successful routine of religion. Lahsang Tsering’s poem “The Monk and the Nun” is another good example. It is based on an actual incident Tsering had come to know from his friend Dr. K. Delbray in Mac Leod Ganj, Dharmasala. Dr. Delbray witnessed a fat (“ample-bellied big one”) monk racing the roads in a Toyota jeep while a lean (“frail, sad looking little one”) nun was
selling postcards to feed her fellow nuns. He says both of them look the same, their face looks the same, their robes look the same and their religion and vows are the same. But one is strong and the other is weak and Tsering finds this an unpalatable reality. Tsering’s political self expresses itself by the end of the poem and he questions this discrepancy. It runs thus:

Well, that is simply because

The big one is a monk

And the other only a nun

And while it is not true –

Nor all nuns are poor,

Yet, between the monk and the nun –

There seems to be a discrepancy,

Which does not favour the nun. *(Muses in Exile 40)*

It should be noted here that Tsering does not criticise those monks and nuns who are serious and sincere in their religious attitudes.

The modern generation too shares the same concerns on religion. For example, Dhargyl Tsering in her poem “Shambhala” speaks about the deep philosophy of the Shambhala Buddhist tradition. Shambhala is supposed to be a mythical kingdom situated somewhere in Inner Asia, a Buddhist “pure land,” abode of the Bodhisatva. Shambhala is also associated with the Kalachakra ceremony, the greatest ritual in the Vajrayana tradition. It is a sort of paradise in the Tibetan concept. The same idea was described in the well known Tibetan myth – “Shangri
The Shambhala tradition was developed by Sakyong Mipham Rimpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche was a master of Shambhala training. This philosophy has influenced many westerners to a great extent. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shambhala). Dhargyly Tsering sings:

Along a dark tunnel I walk
Not knowing where it leads,
Dampness makes me sneeze
my body aches.
A lamp glows at the far end
a sign of hope
a sign of survival
and then
Shambhala beams in front of me
and I become. (Muses in Exile 171)

Buchung D. Sonam mentions the same in “Dandelions of Tibet.” Here he speaks of the matter from a non-religious angle but the colours yellow and red here present an ethereal image of the Buddhist monks sitting in prayer. The poem goes on as follows:

They were in full foliage
The Dandelions of Tibet,
When the hall stormed
Maiming all that there was,
Each yellow petal estranged
From the mother bud,
Roam aimless in strange meadows
Where they rot unknown and unclaimed. (*Muses in Exile* 143)

The poems of Tsundue are also good examples like his poem “Losar Greetings.” Losar is the Tibetan New Year connected with the religious calendar. Celebrations are always meaningful in the case of those who are free; it is very different in the case of an exile. Religion still remains the key factor for the Tibetan in and out of exile. It still remains the number one factor of life for the Tibetans against all odds. It is, in one word, the life breath and life blood of a Tibetan.

2. **Specific Ethnic Identity**

The second factor influencing Tibetanness is their specific ethnic identity. The Tibetan identity as discussed in earlier chapters is different from the Chinese one. The Chinese had colonised Tibet on the pretext that they share the same identity. The poetry makes deliberate attempts to preserve the Tibetan identity. Pains are taken to introduce images dealing with the basic realities of life – images of food, drink, and the routines of daily life including the language for communication. This idea has already been discussed in chapters two and four. Though many of the poets themselves do not know much about their unique past they dream of it and express their thoughts in their poems. The poems of Tsundue are a good example for this like his poem “Losar Greetings.” The Tibetan brother and sister are getting education in India. It is not in the traditional sense but in a much modern sense
where one’s identity is effaced and one has to cope with a foreign identity. The poem goes on as follows:

Last year
on our happy Losar,
I had an IDLI-SAMBAR breakfast
and wrote BA final exams.
My IDLIS wouldn’t stand
on my toothed steely forks,
but I wrote my exams well. (Kora 12)

Here Tsundue describes the realities of daily life. But at the same time Tsundue is prophetic. He compares the Tibetans in exile as plants grown in a borrowed garden. He wishes them to grow above the walls and asks them to send their roots through the bricks, stones, tiles, and sand. He says:

Send your roots
through the bricks,
stones, tiles and sand,
Spread your branches wide and rise
above the hedges high. (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 and fatherland, announcing their ethnicity. Many cultural symbols also have been used to denote this. The Tibetan exile is
represented as a fish out of water as in Tsundue’s poems “My Tibetanness” and “Tibetan in Mumbai.” In “My Tibetanness” he says:

I am Tibetan.

But I am not from Tibet.

Never been there.

Yet I dream

of dying there. (Crossing the Border 17)

In “The Tibetan in Mumbai” he speaks about the exiled Tibetan’s life – the life of a refugee. He says:

The Tibetan in Mumbai

is not a foreigner.

He is a cook

at a Chinese takeaway.

They think he is a Chinese

run away from Beijing.

He sells sweaters in summer

in the shade of the Parel Bridge.

They think he is some retired Bahadur. (Kora 19)

Tsundue goes on further making the sad plight of the exiled Tibetan vivid. He continues:

The Tibetan in Mumbai

Abuses in Bambaya Hindi.
with a slight Tibetan accent
and during vocabulary emergencies
he naturally runs into Tibetan.
That’s when the Parsis laugh.
The Tibetan in Mumbai
Likes to flip through the MID-DAY,
loves FM, but doesn’t expect
a Tibetan song. *(Kora 19)*
But even in the midst of all these problems the Tibetan continues to live with
optimism. Tsundue concludes his poem by saying thus:

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is now tired,

wants some sleep and a dream.
On the 11pm Virar Fast,
he goes to the Himalayas.
The 8.05am Fast Local
brings him back to Churchgate
into the Metro: A New Empire. *(Kora 19)*
Thus Tsundue’s expressions of Tibetanness show his concern over his own state as
a refugee as well as the status of the community as in exile. The young generation
poet Thupten N. Chakrishar’s poem “A Pledge” has the same concept of freeing the
motherland. He writes:
Before I fade away
I will find a way,
To make you FREE...
Wait for me MOTHER
I will set you FREE... (Muses in Exile 158)

The ethnic identity is not limited to the exile community alone though it has
been most zealous in preserving the Tibetan ethnic identity. The Tibetan community
in exile was keen in rebuilding the monasteries which were destroyed during the
attack by China. It took interest in the preservation of everything Tibetan – its
culture markers in the form of dress, cuisine, language, and in the reconstruction of
great monasteries, temples and other institutions. Many of the business firms
established by the Tibetans in exile specialised in making and selling their traditional
artefacts. Aspects of culture differentiating the Tibetan exiles from others are
preserved in every form possible. The same interest is preserved in poetry also. All
these show the manner in which the Tibetan community protects their ethnic identity
particularly through their poems.

3. The Presence of Three Generations

The third factor in Tibetanness is the presence of three generations of poets.
There are basically three voices underlying Tibetan poetry all through these ages.
They are the representations of three generations of Tibetans in exile. Buchung D.
Sonam in his introduction to the collection Muses in Exile in Tibet has clearly
spoken about this in detail. He says:
Exile Tibet minds three generations. Those who were born and grew up in independent Tibet and chased into exile after 1959; those who were born amidst the political upheavals of the communist Chinese takeover of the 1950s and sixties and came into exile at a tender age; and those who were born in exile. In that time span we have witnessed a complete revision of our social structure. One of exile’s positive changes was the increased access to education, and as a result of this a new wave of intellectual fervour flourished. (Muses in Exile “Introduction” ix-x)

He also says that as the world was deeply attracted to studies on Buddhism the secular heritage of dance, opera, music, folklore, and poetry remains barely noticed. The Tibetan exiles writing in English were the ones responsible for kindling the interest of the world in the secular heritage of Buddhism as practised by the Tibetans. Tibetan writing in English developed but it was the genre of Tibetan poetry in English that flourished more than the other branches of literature. Tibetan poetry became the best medium of secular culture.

The first generation of Tibetan poets and writers was born in Tibet where they lived for quite a long time until they were forced into exile in 1959. Tibet was a bright beacon of life for them. The poetry of these writers speaks about the bygone era of Tibet and sings of Tibet’s golden past, its tales, myths, and other images connected with the land. The reality of exile barely impinges upon their consciousness.

Amdo Gendun Chophel was the first to use English as a medium for writing poetry. He was a rebel and many of his biographers call him the “stray monk” as he
refused to stick to the beaten track. Chophel died at a relatively young age of forty seven in the early years of the colonisation of Tibet. He thus sings of Tibet’s golden past, its stories and myths. His “Milerepa’s Reply” is a good example:

The earth and sky held counsel one night,
And called their messengers from northern heights.
And came they, the storm fiends, the bleak and the cold,
They, who the storm winds in grim fingers hold,
(... But Milarepa, the Snow–mountain’s child
Feared not their onslaughts, so cruel and wild.
Though they attacked him most fiercely and grim,
He only smiled – they had no power over him. (Muses in Exile 1)

The next major poet of the same age is Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche. He was also a monk – a tulku or an avatar of an earlier high ranking lama. Trungpa’s poetry attracted many across the borders. The American beat generation poets like Allen Ginsberg had a high opinion of his works. Ginsberg says that Thrungpa’s poetry represented:

Dramatic situation of someone who has realized the World as pure mind, and gone beyond attachment to ego to return to the world and work with universal ignorance, confront the spiritual – materialist daydream of Western World – and tell it in modernist poetry (...)

(Muses in Exile xii)
Trungpa’s poetry is an account of his experiences in an alien country. His poetry also highlights Tibet’s past but represents it in an alien exile world. His poem “Haiku” is a good example. He writes:

The beginner in meditation
Resembles a hunting dog
Having a bad dream.
His parents are having tea
With his new girlfriend –
Like a general inspecting the troops.
Skiing in the red and blue outfit,
Drinking cold beer with a lovely smile –
I wonder if I’m one of them,
Coming home from work,
Still he hears the phone
Ringing in the office.
Gentle day’s flower –
The hummingbird competes
With the stillness of the air. (Muses in Exile 9)

The alien culture has placed the life of the exiles into a jeopardised reality and “Haiku” is a good testament of this. The alien Tibetan in Western civilization had to face such problems in the beginning of his exile life in various countries across the world.
Dhondup Gyal, one of the founders of modern Tibetan literature, can also be considered along with this generation. Gyal never left Tibet but lived in the land of his birth under the Chinese hegemony as an alien exiled from his own culture. He experienced the trauma of the Chinese takeover and the Cultural Revolution. Unable to bear this trauma any longer he committed suicide in 1985. Matters changed after his death when critics like Pema Bhum spoke of him as “A Shooting Star that Cleaved the Night Sky and Vanished.” Gyal’s famous poem “Waterfall of Youth” is ample testimony of his genius. The poem is a vivid portrayal of the Tibetan psyche. It is one of the best romantic poems in Tibetan poetry. Gyal portrays it as a sentinel watching over history. He sings:

Waterfall!

You are witness to history,

the way of the future –

the breathing and lifting of the snow land are written

on every droplet,

the rise and development of the Land of Snows

shine in each of your rays,

Without you!

Where can we whet the sword of language?

Where can we sharpen the sword of our skills?

(http://www.tibetwrites.org/_Waterfall_of_Youth)
One can say that Gyal forms the link that connects the past with the present inspiring the poets of the second generation.

The second generation was born in Tibet and had to move into exile at a tender age. For them Tibet was a true reality though a distant one. They were intense about returning to Tibet and so many of them joined the Tibetan armed resistance which was operating from Mustang in Nepal. The resistance movement began with the tacit support of the CIA. The resistance movement had been used by the United States of America as an outlet for them to get rid of the excess weapons and ammunitions prepared for the Second World War. The Dalai Lama’s autobiography *Freedom in Exile* mentions about such an instance where he found a freedom fighter trying to show the working of an outdated Bazooka missile to him during his exile to India (154). The Dalai Lama could not allow bloodshed of any kind as it was against ahimsa. He ordered the rebels to stop fighting. The rebels agreed and laid down their arms. This generous act of peace and non violence met with an opposite reaction from the Chinese who exterminated all they could lay hands on. Those who were lucky escaped to many places around the globe. The failure of the resistance was a great disillusionment to the young Tibetans of the second generation. This is reflected in their poetry also.

K. Dhondup, Lhasang Tsering, Gyalpo Tsering, Ngodup Paljor, Tsoltim Shakabpa and Norbu Zangpo were the major writers of the period. The idea of an immediate return to Tibet, which they had been cherishing in their heart from the very first days of their exile, is now no longer the subject. The present, more than
the past, is their topic; exile is continuously their topic of discourse. They have
started expressing the ideas of exile. “Exile,” a poem by K. Dhondup, is a
representation of the exile experience.

Lahsang Tsering is the best example of the group. He continues to write and
has also produced some powerful poems like “Country, Nation and Freedom,” “My
Dear, Dear Homeland,” “How Long?,” “If,” “No Country,” “Tibet! O Tibet!,” “Ode
to a Freedom Fighter,” “Waiting,” and others represent the pains of the exile. His
poem “Waiting” is all about the hopeful waiting for freedom. He writes:

Waiting to know if she’ll see her son again,
Waiting to know if her man will ever return,
Waiting to know if she will go back home,
Waiting is what a refugee woman must do.

(...) Waiting is, therefore, what she will do,
Waiting despite the pain and loneliness,
Waiting till the end of her dreary days –
For waiting is what a refugee woman must do.

(Tomorrow and Other Poems 3)

Lahsang Tsering, K. Dhondup, Gyalpo Tsering and others were a great inspiration
for the third generation poets. “Exile Brothers,” an exile Tibetan rock band which
has taken Lahsang Tsering’s poems for their albums. The vigour and energy
expressed in his poems can only be equalled to those of Tenzin Tsundue of the next
generation. Tsundue’s poem “I am a Terrorist” expresses the same vigour. He says:
I am a bullet
I do not think.
From the tin shell
I leap for that thrilling
2 – second life
and die with the dead.
I am the life
you left behind. (Kora 23)

The third generation of poets was born and brought up in India as refugees. These poets know Tibet only as a distant reality, the dream of a previous generation. Many of them draw inspiration from their earlier generation. There is always a tug of war inside each of them – their real identity versus the identity cards of the exile. Ajit Baral has rightly put it in the introductory paragraph of his 2003 interview with Tenzin Tsundue for the Daily Star from Bangladesh titled “I am born a Refugee.” Tsundue confides that every year he has “to renew my documents on which I am described as a ‘refugee from Tibet.’ The Indian government gives me these documents but it does not recognize the existence of a country called Tibet (…)” (Kora 42).

The disenchantment between reality and dream is a characteristic always with the third generation poets. Tenzin Tsundue and G. C. (Gendun Cheophel) have written poems which are titled “Untitled,” focusing on the doubt of existence. G. C. sings:
I am just a soul in a fix
Crying for the right direction
My mind is so mixed
It’s in total confusion
Time is made of tenses
But moments are gone when it’s gone
I am the judge of the senses
But I always have moments to feel
It’s neither me nor life
Moments are still pure
Only neither can be conceived. (Muses in Exile 90)

The poem “The Tibetan in Mumbai” by Tsundue shows clearly a gap in the psyche of the third generation. The poem shows how his identity is misunderstood even in India - the land where the maximum numbers of Tibetans are in exile. Another poem of his entitled “My Tibetanness” also shares the same thought. There too he is angered by the world’s indifference towards the Tibetans. These poets try hard to define the Tibetan identity in the modern age. They strive hard to define their exile status as well as indicate their wish for the future.

4. The Right to Exist and Express

The fourth major factor relating to Tibetanness is the value 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. Gerald Schmitz in his essay “Tibet’s
Position in International Law” has given a number of instances when the Tibetan rights are challenged. He begins from the days of the Sung, the Mongol (Yuan) invasions of 1240 to the Tang, the Ming, the Manchu, the British and the Chinese periods. He considers that in the modern era a major right is challenged in Tibet. It is the “Right to Self Determination.” This right leads to a “Claim for Restitution” which in turn leads to a “Right to Self Defence” (Exile as a Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 65).

The People’s Republic of China is an important member of the United Nations. It has its representatives in the Security Council where China is a permanent member. Therefore the troubles of Tibet are not given the importance it deserves even in any of the accepted international fora. The colonisation of Tibet was one of both body and mind. Firstly it was through the forceful introduction of rice to the traditional barley-based Tibetan diet. Secondly the Tibetans are forced to opt for exile from their motherland which has turned hostile to them by the introduction of all sorts of non-Tibetan devices like the railways which do much to pollute the pristine landscape of the kingdom on the roof of the world. Thirdly the Tibetan in Tibet is denied employment unless he adheres to the propagandist plans of the People’s Republic of China. Fourthly the belief in the Dalai Lama is banned by the Sino-Tibetan administration in Tibet.

Khentse Norbu’s award winning film “The Cup” (2008) comments on this gastronomic colonisation as a vital problem faced by the Tibetans. The bonded labour of Tibetan prisoners is used to flood the international market with cheap,
counterfeit articles. Palden Gyatso’s *Fire Under the Snow* cites many examples regarding this fact. With the presence of a hegemonic overlord like the PRC it has become difficult for the free existence of the Tibetans in Tibet. Many of the Tibetan poets like Tsoltim L. Shakpba have condemned the sad state of human rights in Tibet and wherever the Tibetans are in exile. They see the breach of human rights even in the case of the identity of Tibetans in and out of exile. The poem “Made in China” by Tsoltim N. Shakbpa’s discusses the condition of Tibetan prisoners in China. He says:

made in China

by unpaid prisoners

made in China

by starving prisoners

made in China

by brain washed prisoners

made in China

by tortured prisoners

made in China

by dying prisoners

made in China

from dead prisoners

would you buy anything

made in China? (*Muses in Exile* 46)
The feelings are also shared by Lahsang Tsering’s “Waiting” and Tenzin Tsundue’s “Space Bar: A Proposal.” Here the exiled Tibetan’s right to live in the competitive world are discussed in detail. Tsundue’s “Space Bar: A Proposal” is a refugee’s plea to the world to give him some space.

The failure of the United Nation to settle the Tibetan issue is a pain for the Tibetans. One of the first decisions that the present Dalai Lama took when he took charge as the new head of state of Tibet was to bring this issue to the notice of the UN (Handbook of Tibet 23). Three major resolutions considering “The Question of Tibet” were taken by the UN General Assembly on the issue. These were all voted out favouring Chinese hegemony. No major country including India, which holds a neutral status and boasts of being the biggest democratic country in the world, cared to speak for Tibet (Handbook of Tibet 45). The US and other countries who nowadays often speak fervently about the human rights violations in Afghanistan and Iraq, have turned a blind eye upon Tibet. This has angered the later generation Tibetans. Thupten N. Chakrishar’s “My Last Wish” is a good example for this. Chakrishar writes:

But when I die, my dear friends

cut my head as my last wish

and present it to the UN

so that they will realize

that the spirit never dies. (Muses in Exile 155)
Certainly the spirit is still there fighting against the Chinese rule both inside and outside Tibet.

5. The Desire to Return

The fifth major factor relating to Tibetanness is the desire to return – a wish of all Tibetans in exile. Tsundue’s poem “Horizon” gives a clear picture of the exile’s return. He says:

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 spirit that longs to return burning brightly in the hearts of all Tibetans.

Many have been forced out of Tibet by the Chinese hegemony. Many have had to cross the treacherous snow fields and brave the bullets of Chinese soldiers. Only the lucky few managed to escape into India, Nepal and Bhutan. These new refugees too share the same feelings with their earlier generations – to return to Tibet. Tsundue’s “Crossing the Border” is a very good example of the travails that Tibetans fleeing colonised Tibet have to undergo. The poem is the plaintive wail of a Tibetan mother who flees the motherland and crawls through “the white killing fields” with her small family of, “a daughter here, a son there/a baby on my back.” She suffers physical
exhaustion and constant fear of the strange land and the stranger. She has to watch her daughter dying of frostbite unable to do anything but pray to a relentless, merciless God and his presence on earth, the Dalai Lama (*Crossing the Border* 13-15). Yet after she attains her goal of reaching a place of refuge she still hankers for her home on the roof of the world. Tsundue writes about this tragic experience as follows:

Then, one night, my daughter complained about a burning foot.

She stumbled and rose again on her frost bitten leg.

Peeled and slashed with deep bloody cuts,

She reeled and writhed in pain.

By the next day both her legs were severed.

Gripped by the deaths all around,

I was a helpless mother.

“Amala, save my brothers,

I shall rest here for a while”.

Till I could no longer see her fading figure,

till I could no longer hear her fainting wails,

I kept looking back in tears and agony.

My legs carried me, but my spirit remained with her.

(*Crossing the Border* 14-15)

This poem gives us the true picture of Tibetans who moved out of Tibet to refugee sites all over the world. Even after going through all this they wish to return.
home to Tibet. The new generation is sad about the impossibility of their return. Tsundue in his poem “Betrayal” feels that any compromise on returning to Tibet is like betraying his elder generation.

Return could possibly be a reality that cannot be realized very quickly but the desire to return exists for all the three generations. This is stronger for the elder generations. The younger generations are not familiar with the reality of their unseen motherland yet they too have the same desire to return. Many of the elders have died but the youngsters who have only heard of Tibet are still striving hard to return to their motherland. Tsundue’s poem “Exile House” is a good example. The wish to return is perhaps the main reason which keeps the exiles together. This spirit that craves to return is found in all the three generations of poets.

6. The Presence of a Strong Hope

The sixth major feature one might find in the works of the Tibetan poets is the presence of a strong hope, a great optimism. Poetry for the Tibetan poets in exile is positive giving its readers and writers a hope of return. Tibetan poetry tells the world the condition of Tibet and its exiled people. Shakbpa’s poem “Life, as We Know It” is a clear example for this voice of hope. Unlike his usual angry poems, he becomes an elder who stands by the young generation, guiding them. He says thus:

Don’t be ashamed to cry
I’ll stand by you
Don’t be afraid to die
I’ll pray with you
And never deny yourself your rights
Life is worth living
If lived to its fullest
Waste not, haste not
Defy, apply and aim high
Live happily and peacefully die.

(http://www.friendsoftibetglobal.blogspot.com).

It is a voice which wakens the world from its forced slumber, an exhortation to look around and understand the Tibetan pain. This voice of hope can be clearly heard in poets of many different types. The voice is multi-dimensional, sounding differently for each poet. It is irritated like Tsundue’s in “A Desperate Age” or annoyed like Shakbpa’s in “Made in China” or serene like Lahsang Tsering’s in “Tommorrow” or problematic like the works of Tsering Wangpo Dhompa in “Third Lesson” or peaceful like the works of Gyalpo Tsering in “To You from Exile.” In all these writers the chief aim is not just the expression of their life but 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 of present statelessness. It is perhaps this voice of hope that is their justification for not finding an aggressive solution to their quest for freedom. Buchung D. Sonam in his introduction to the collection *Muses in Exile* comments thus:

For thousands of young exile Tibetans born and growing up in squalid refugee camps, the imagined Tibet offers enchantment and a sense of
belonging, thus reinforcing their pledge to the struggle for independence. There is an urgent longing and intense need to go back to their imagined Tibet (...). But being thwarted repeatedly in life by unfavourable situations, the exile youth have accumulated a deep sense of trepidation nearing a point of desperation. Some channel this creative energy into creative writing, as this book demonstrates. Many ventured into myriad avenues. A few are caught up in the ever recurring dreams of drugs. The collective conscience expressed by them today has a root of deep resentment directed towards the UN and the Government in Exile for their failure to find a workable solution to the dilemma of Tibet’s occupation. (xiv-xv)

Thupten N. Chakrishar’s 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 her plight. The poem “My Last Wish” expresses the poet’s dilemma regarding the situation of Tibet’s occupation. Thus he says:

Oh! My friends

Pierce my eyes with a sword

for I can no longer see my Mother suffer,

curse me for I cannot save her.

Cut my arms for they are useless

bonded with laws of the world.

Cut my legs for they are fettered
I cannot walk to my Mother.
Take my tongue with a hot blade
Because my voice disappears
in the mist of communist China.
Chop away my ear lobes
for they are my problem
I cannot hear the cries of my Mother. *(Muses in Exile 155)*

He is angered by the inability of both his as well as the world’s to work for the independence of his land. He concludes the poem stating his last wish of sending his severed head to the UN so that they know about the agony of Tibet. Another poem entitled “The Freedom Song” is about an imaginary land. He says that the Tibet he has never seen is a land where his father was killed which should not be forsaken. He firmly believes that the entire world should work together for the freedom of Tibet. Here he says as follows:

I ask you for no help
I have done that a million of times,
I accept no compromise
What is mine is rightfully mine.
Liberation was what they said
Sufferings are all we paid.
Universal brotherhood is what we hear
But never seen I must swear.
Do you seek happiness? I ask
As I seek in every task.
Decades ago they snatched my happiness
Want to bring back but I am helpless. (*Muses in Exile* 153)
The land is similar to the Shambala mythical land. But the myth is shattered by the inability of the people to reach there. As on a pilgrimage they toil hard to reach their destination but are unfortunate each time. Many have to sacrifice themselves for it, but again unsuccessful.

Buchung D. Sonam has spoken about Chakrishar’s spirit as follows:

Chakrishar, a young man born in India who has never seen Tibet. His imagined Tibet is clear, crystallized in the high snowy mountains and green pastures of Jhang Thang. Such an idealized image is typical of the generation born in exile. Having never experienced their native land, their only recourse is to build a mental picture based on what they hear from the elders and see in photographs. It goes without saying that this imagined Tibet is far from reality. Yet it offers them an opportunity to escape their otherwise dismal circumstance. (*Muses in Exile* xv)

These poems reveal the confused idea of Tibetans in exile on the theme of exile.

The Tibetan cries are sharp as they are not given any prominence in the public sphere. In Chinese controlled Tibet such poems and their authorship could land one in endless periods of imprisonment. The People’s Republic of China has successfully deflected international attention from the groans of Tibet. The print
media too has not given Tibet the coverage it deserves. However, this lack is remedied by the internet and they are free to express their thoughts through blogs like www.friendsoftibetglobal.blogspot.com, websites like www.tibetwrites.com and e-mails like shakbpa@verizone.net. It is these sites that bring the Tibetan outpourings to the outside world.

7. The Voice of a Political Orphan

The seventh major feature is the voice of a political orphan. Tibetan poetry has always been the voice of the orphan in the global community. The term political orphan is used here to state the condition of the Tibetans in exile. They are no longer independent but no country in the world recognizes this fact. Hence they do not have the status of an exile or a refugee. They are in this sense unrecognized exiles or political orphans. Tsundue’s poems, “Losar Greetings,” “Exile House” and “Space Bar: A Proposal” show the orphan’s voice. “Space Bar: A Proposal” will be the best example to cite. The poem runs as follows:

pull your ceiling half-way down
and you can create a mezzanine for me
your walls open into cupboards
is there an empty shelf for me
let me grow in your garden
with your roses and prickly pears
I’ll sleep under your bed
and watch TV in mirror
do you have an ear on your balcony

I am singing from your window

open your door

let me in

I am resting at your doorstep

call me when you are awake. (*Kora* 17)

Tenzin Trinley, another third generation poet, has approached this in a quite different angle. His “India - I See It Soon Depart” is a good example for the change in the world view of the modern Tibetan. He says that his life as an exile is going to change within a short period of time. He says for the Tibetan refugee that India is giving way for Tibet. He sings thus:

Faintly I see – our destiny

A blurred silhouette

Of freedom perhaps,

With its trail trailing

On to the land of a hundred suns,

From where we must leave

Not to decay in conceited certitude

And India, I see it soon depart

To the land of tantalizing vistas

To trace footprints of our forefathers,

To revive our childhood memories
Of valleys and pastures
Of chimes and chants
Here we came to read our history
To reaffirm pride in our root
To reassert our pledge for freedom,
And India, I see it soon depart
In chimes of freedom
And cry of victory. (Muses in Exile 149)

Tsering Dhompa’s poems too 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 we find the presence of Tibet. The Tibetan here is unable to change according to the new world order. He is torn between tradition and modernity. The name of two of Dhompa’s poetry collections is In the Absent Every Day and Rules of the House clearly express the helplessness of the Tibetan refugee. Lahsang Tsering on the other hand powerfully voices the orphaned voice of Tibetan exile. His poems like “Bamboo Curtain Burning,” “Country, Nation and Freedom,” and others represent the voice of the international orphan. Tsering has produced wonderful works in which the world has heard about the Tibetan exile. In “Bamboo Curtain Burning” Lahsang Tsering provides a good analogy between the Chinese oppression of Tibet with a bamboo curtain. He poses the question to his readers as to why this bamboo curtain is not collapsing though we have seen the fall of the Berlin wall. In the following
I see our prison walls collapsing,
I see our long oppression ending,
I see us from exile returning.
I see the Bamboo Curtain burning,
Forever and forever – and forever.
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.

(Tomorrow and other Poems 5)

A still closer survey might lead to the isolation of even more features associated with Tibetan poetry in exile. The above mentioned seven features are the most prominent in many of the poems though it may not be possible to perceive each one of these features in each poem. These seven features may not be seen in the same manner by every reader. In many cases one can see these features intertwined inextricably in these poems. These essential features give Tibetan poetry its Tibetanness, its uniqueness. What makes Tibetan poetry particularly different is its seasoning with the spice of exile. Tibetan poetry which began with the poetic outpouring of the spirit in worship to God became poetic renderings of their identity
and existence. It is the political condition of exile and refugee life that made them use poetry as a vehicle of expression. Hence exile in that sense is a key feature which makes modern Tibetan poetry especially important. In a single phrase it can be truly said that it is exile that makes the Tibetanness. It is on that anvil that the elements are joined together to make up single factor of Tibetanness.