Chapter 1

Introduction

Poetry, often regarded as the outpouring of the human spirit, has fascinated people across time and space. There have been many attempts to define poetry. But no one has been able to come up with a definition that suits everyone. Ancient theoreticians considered poetry to be a divine vision developed in solitude by a quiet meditation of facts, a vision powerful enough to put one into a cathartic experience. The Romantics believed that poetry is the spontaneous outpouring of emotions. The Moderns view poetry as a work written with a definite political goal expressing not just the imaginative spirit but also the tradition of the land and its people. Hence a definition of poetry is one that has been worked and reworked many times. Yet poetry remains indefinable because it is in a sense everything that pours out from the human heart.

A quick survey of world literature reveals that poetry is the first ever literary form produced. Whether it is the case of *Gilgamesh* the earliest written Sumerian epic, or the *Ramayana* the Indian epic with the largest number of variants, or the “Gregorian Chant,” the first forms of Christian worship, or the “Vedic Mantras,” used for tantric practices, poetry remains the earliest literary form. Even the umpteen folk songs found all over the world form part of the poetic oeuvre. Thus in every country of the world there is the concept of a first poet and a first poem like the idea of “adi kavi” and “adi kavya” in India. The same cannot be said about prose or the very first prose writer. This is ample testament to the fact that poetry is the first and
foremost form of global literature. Every epic bears the imprint of a particular
tribe or clan and it is the most powerful rendering of the past and present experience
of that particular tribe. It also includes the tribe’s dreams and aspirations for a better
future. This experience is valid only within the tribe; outside the tribal circle the
experience becomes meaningless.

It is difficult to categorize a first poet. The first poet is perhaps a single
shepherd meditating in the green meadows and producing music from the depths of
his heart as in the case of the Anglo-Saxon poet Caedmon who, as many literary
historians say, burst into song. On the other hand, there is also the belief that a
group of writers are responsible for producing an epic. The Greek poet Homer and
the Indian poet Vyasa could both be considered as representative names of a group
of writers rather than a single individual. A sharing of thex made of a set of collective
memories about the past; the communities fostering these memories cherish them,
and bequeath them to the future. Secondly, the community shows a spirit of
collective unity by which it stands together ready to accept all the challenges – a “we
feeling” (Nation and Narration 12). This “we feeling” is the source of energy on
which the poet depends.

The concept of nation in its western perspective is not the same with the
eastern notions of nation. A nation in western ideology is undoubtedly a device of
colonial practice. The theoretical stance regarding the concept of western
nationalism has been studied and represented right from Daniel Defoe, Walter
Benjamin, Victor Turner, J. A. Armstrong, Partha Chatterjee and Eric Hobsbawm to
Homi K. Bhabha. No such intense study has been conducted regarding eastern ideas of nationalism. The very few conducted have produced a confused yet fascinating picture regarding nationhood as having a mystical/degraded stance. Though theoreticians like Edward Said have upheld the eastern spirit most of the world still believes in the western notions that had considered the African continent as “the Dark Continent.”

In the eastern sense a nation is not a tool of colonial ideology as colonialism was never an idea shared by the east. Here the nations were often related to tribes and clans. They had colonial aspirations but in a limited manner unlike the Europeans. The brotherhood shared inside each nation helped them to convey the idea of a family more than a nation. This is true with regard to the Tibetan concept of nation also. The king was more than a ruler - he was the father of the tribe. This is the attitude of all theocracies where the monastic high priest of the clan was the father rather than the leader of the clan.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is a good text to define nationhood. Anderson quotes Ernest Gellner’s comment that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (6). Accordingly the nationhood of a state is lost and new nations are formulated. The case of Tibet after the 1959 Chinese colonial onslaught is a very good example of the Tibetan nation which has ceased to exist. In its place a modern Chinese nation began with re-defined borders and re-named territories. The original Tibetan land was reduced to one third of its size and was renamed as the Tibetan

The same happened to all the nations on the borders of China. Mongolia, Turkistan and Manchuria lost their nationhood and were annexed to China. A new nation named People’s Republic of China emerged. The original size of the aforementioned nations was reduced to half their size. The basis for annexing all these nations was the claim that they were all part of the former Chinese empire. Chairman Mao Zedong’s famous speech proclaiming the return of these nations to the parent nation was the justification for the Chinese action of annexation. However, history shows that these nations were once part of the Manchu empire. This is the invention of new nations as Gellner (*Imagined Communities* 6) had remarked. Thus the People’s Republic of China is also an invented structure.

Another example of a nation that is invented is the nation of Israel on Palestinian soil. New boundaries have caused the effacing of many nations which had once existed. This is what happened in Tibet and Palestine. In the context of Israel the Palestinians were reduced to a minority, and as the “Chosen Ones,” the Israelites all over the world were pumped into the “Promised Land.” In Tibet the Tibetans were reduced to a minority as the Han Chinese were made to settle in Tibet following the failure of the “Great Leap Forward.”

The suppression of the old nationalities has also given rise to terrorism. In its extreme case terrorism is prompted by religious fundamentalism. The rise of the Al-Qaeda and many terrorist outfits around the world are a result of this. So too are
terrorist outfits in the Indian soil like the ones in Kashmir and the Maoists in Central India. In Tibet also there were terrorists who were wedded to the cause of Tibetan freedom. But they were active for only a brief period between the 1960s and 1970s. The Dalai Lama could not condone violence of any sort and so in response to his exhortation the Tibetans laid down arms and gave up armed resistance of any sort. This was an unprecedented event in the world as no terrorist outfit has ever laid down arms without achieving its goal (*Dragon in the Land of Snows* 280).

It might be argued that literature is the constructive response to oppression. The poetry produced in Palestine and other lands close to losing their nationhood are a sure indication of this. In Palestine, poets like Mahmud Darwish have produced some wonderful poems in exile. In the same manner Tibetan poets over the years have also produced wonderful poems lamenting their present state of exile and hoping for a better future. It is a curious matter to note that these wailings of the oppressed soul come out in the form of poetry rather than any other form of literature. No doubt this is because poetry is the very first form of expressing a person’s innermost beliefs. When it deals with the thoughts and feelings, the hopes and desires of a community, poetry becomes the most expressive form of self representation.

William Radice in a lecture entitled “Poetry and Community” remarked that:

> Poetry can, I believe, play a vital part in promoting development and safeguarding the environment. At the same time, I do believe that a new belief in, and practice of poetry and art for the good of the community
– local, national, or international – will require a major cultural and ideological shift. It has its dangers, like any revolution: and we certainly don’t want art to be didactic, to turn into propaganda.

(*Poetry and Community* 15-16)

The practice of poetry is essentially linked to the society. It is, as Radice says, for promoting development, safeguarding the environment and for the good of the community. This observation is perfectly true in the Tibetan context. Tibetan poetry is the result of a reaction against colonial repression and oppression. The poets had profound optimism and they dreamt of a future when they could return to their motherland and live prosperously. At the same time they were troubled by the Chinese colonization and ardently longed for an end to it.

Tibetan poetry is also related to the community in matters of religion also. Religion is a unifying force, second only to the idea of nationality, which forges and binds people together into a tight knit community. Besides, the Eastern religions are even more powerful than their Western counterparts as they adhere more to the performing or ritualistic side. The ritualistic nature of religions also gives importance to poetic rendering in the form of mantras and hymns. Creeds were sung as mantras and this made them easy to remember. As these were sung almost on a daily basis they turned out to be the basis for all poetic rendering. This might be the reason why poetry became the vehicle to express the cries of the soul.

For the Tibetans too poetry was the expression of the soul. They used poetry to express their ideas and anxieties of being colonized. In their poems they uphold
their traditions and dream of a return to their lost world. All these characteristics form the themes represented in their poetry. Since literature is more powerful than any revolutionary organization poetry has become the voice of the multitude - a voice which cannot be ignored. It is sharp and disturbing and makes the existence of the individual reader problematic. People all around the world are affected by the readability of Tibetan poetry and share in the agony and longing expressed in it.

The People’s Republic of China which has deprived the Tibetans of their home and nationhood is hard put to quash this kind of resistance from the oppressed. The governmental machinery has been used in different ways to block this creative output. Writings by Tibetans are banned inside the People’s Republic of China. Outside Tibet, in almost all the countries where Tibetans live in exile, the host countries do not promote the publication of these writings fearing the loss of trade relations with China.

In spite of all these impediments Tibetan poetry continues to find expression. Most of these poems are produced in the form of independent blogs and emails and websites. Tsoltim Shakpaba, one of the most active poets of the present age, uses emails as a device to propagate his poems. shakbpa@verizone.net is one of the most powerful net publication enterprises in Tibetan poetry. Similarly www.tibetwrites.com is an active website publishing Tibetan poetry in exile. Again www.freetibet.blogspot.com is an independent blog publishing Tibetan poetry from all over the world.
The devices of blogging and mailing are considered as personal and unacceptable in serious study. Only published works are considered proper. This becomes a serious limitation for the scope of Tibetan poetry in exile. It must be accepted that the poems of Tibetans in exile are not published as a matter of choice. Circumstances are responsible for the lack of publication. Their writings are personal but are expressive of their free spirit chained by the hegemony of their colonizer. It is only natural for them to make use of the extensive freedom of cyber space in order to express their agony at being restricted in refugee space. In this sense they are equal with any other publication in spite of being published only in the private cyber space. They cannot be considered of lesser importance but equal to all kinds of poetic renderings which have come out in today’s poetics and are worthy of serious study.

Poetry for the Tibetans is a kind of resistance in exile. Resisting the colonial spirit with literary renderings has made their poems different from any other poetic venture. Poetry is creative resistance while terrorism is destructive resistance. While the world reels under one terrorist attack after another, such destructive resistance is able to achieve nothing other than still more massacres of innocent people. The creative resistance expressed by poetry is able to do more for the cause of liberation than any physical onslaught. It is here that the Tibetan poetry in exile has come into its own resisting colonialism and fighting to bring the plight of the homeless Tibetans to the notice of the world.
This research makes a sincere effort to understand the people of Tibet, their history, their culture and everything that makes them essentially Tibetan. These essential features are grouped under a collective noun which is given the name Tibetanness. The thesis is structured into eight chapters. Chapter I is a general introduction and Chapter II as its title indicates is a background study on Tibet which gives a brief but comprehensive account of the history of Tibet. Chapter III elaborates the history of Tibetan literature. Chapter IV approaches the Tibetan case by making use of the tool of ethnography in order to understand the Tibetan mind. Chapter V is all about Tibetan exile poetry and Chapter VI, the penultimate chapter is the core chapter discussing the exile poetry as a resistance. Chapter VII concludes the thesis with a brief summing up of all that had been studied in the foregoing chapters.

This study aims at understanding the reality of exile for the Tibetans through their poetic outputs which are deeply concerned with exile and religion. One feature that is evident throughout is the idea of exile that has become part of the very psyche of the people and influences everything they think or do. Exile is undoubtedly the key that unlocks the heart of today’s Tibetan. This thesis attempts to study the Tibetan and his land, his dreams and aspirations, his loss and sorrow and bring them before the cultured world.