

**Creating a Mezzanine: Representation of Home in the Writings of Tenzin Tsundue**

Prof. Bibin Thomas  
Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,  
Christ College (Autonomous) Kerala.

“Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
  
And makes me end where I begun”

– *A Valediction, Forbidding Mourning*, John Donne

Migration, whether be forced or voluntary, has existed from times immemorial. This process is undoubtedly accompanied by a sense of uprooting whether noticed by the migrant or not. At times this uprooting gets masked by the better prospective in the migrating nation thereby forcefully taming the mind to accept the new place as the home. In case of refugees, this situation is completely different. Their migration is usually a forced one where the survival urge dominates over the connection to their homeland. What remains is a dream- a dream of the past and a hope for the future.

The typology “refugee” was established as an international concept only in 1951 at the UN Convention. The Organization of Africa Unity (OAU), in 1969, passed a regional supplementary convention defining a refugee as:

Every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing order in either part of or the whole of his country of origin or nationality is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality. (OAU Convention on Refugees 1969)

This definition caters more to the idea of homelessness as a reality in the life of a refugee. For him/her, 'home' becomes a metaphor for what has been lost or what he/she craves for. It turns out to be a distant reality, a place where they dream to be. Home can be regarded as having both an objective characteristic of location and a subjective experience of the individual. Home has been defined as "a place of security and comfort, a place in which an individual develops a conception of self" (Walmsley and Lewis 5). The life of a refugee is full of uncertainties, doubts and insecurities, since the country that offers temporary shelter never has that personal warmth attached to one's own native land. The person is always seen through frowned eyes in the sheltering country. Even if the person ever gets a chance to go back to his native land, he still faces disappointment as he is likely to confront a completely different land – to which he cannot come in terms with. "In cases of actual return to home, individuals are likely to experience feelings of loss and bereavement" (Beristain and Doná 8). For people who have been forced to migrate, "home is at once a memory and a hope, since many refugees hold to the dream of eventually returning home" (Mallett 63).

It is in this background that we should ponder over the history of Tibet and the refugee life of its people. Tibet was for long a theocratic society, governed by the Dalai Lamas. The land was forbidden to foreigners and for centuries the Tibetans had lived in their secluded corner of the world. The Mongol and the Manchu emperors of China conquered Tibet but had given special status to the rulers of Tibet. In the 1940s the Kuomintang party led by Chiang Kai-Shek overthrew the Chinese monarchy. Chiang Kai-Shek was later overthrown by Mao Zedong in the 1950s. With Mao in power China started conquering the nearby states. Mao's government had introduced several dream projects for China. But most of them were great failures which caused severe famine in China. Hence China conquered the neighbouring lands like Tibet, East Turkistan, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria in order to feed its teeming millions. Tibet was occupied in the 1950s and from then on the successive Chinese governments started

pumping the majority Han Chinese into Tibet in order to occupy these new “colonies,” claiming that Tibet was originally a part of Greater China. The Chinese influence in Tibet was painful for the Tibetans. The Chinese exploited Tibet and introduced many rules which were unfavorable to the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama had to flee from Tibet in 1959. He became a refugee in India and established a Government in Exile in India. Following him thousands of Tibetans also accepted exile as their reality (John i)

The resistance against the Chinese government for a free Tibet still continues by many, all the while living a refugee life. Tibetan Literature, in this context, plays an important role with many Tibetan writers sharing their experiences under the Chinese regime, along with their desire for a free Tibet, via poems, stories, essays etc. The writings of Free Tibet activist and poet, Tenzin Tsundue, in this regard becomes interesting for perusal as it contains the blend of all that it means to be a refugee. Born and brought up in India, Tsundue belongs to the third generation (if such a division is possible) of Tibetan Literary figures. He belongs to the generation who “know Tibet only as a partial reality, different from the perception of their elders” (iv). Through his writings, poetry in particular, Tsundue tries to imagine and recreate his homeland, which he visits for the first time only after his graduation. Along with the pains and anxieties as a refugee, his poems portray many facets of ‘home’ –a *mélange* of dream and reality.

Home is never a settled concept: “the concept of place irrevocably ties the physical world with the social, cultural, and emotive worlds of people” (Easthope 137). When applied to refugee studies, this means that perspectives of home represent pragmatic relations with places and people, as well as with narratives and meta-narratives of forced migration. It follows that definitions of home are located within socio-cultural relations. For Tsundue, the idea home of home begins from his acceptance of his refugee self. In the poem titled ‘Refugee’, he portrays this reality that he had to confront from his birth.

From there to the next  
next to the next  
horizon to horizon  
every step is a horizon.  
  
Count the steps  
and keep the number.  
  
Pick the white pebbles  
and the funny strange leaves.  
  
Mark the curves  
and cliffs around  
for you may need  
to come home again. (9)

The poem marks the journey of a refugee from one place to another. Home is never a fixed reality for such a person. He is on constant movements where every step that he takes becomes a horizon. His forward movements are energized by the thoughts of once returning back. The act of marking stones and cliffs on the way can be seen as a means to find the way back to home. Marco Gemigani, in his Doctoral thesis asserts that “excessive attachment to the memories of home may lead to psychological immobility” (*Refugee Narratives* 36). This immobility is fired up by the hopes of once returning home. “As part of the mourning for the loss of their home, refugees do not want to engage in the development of a new sense of belongingness” (Christou 20). Each place that he stays becomes a marker that he tries to keep safe in his mind so that he can use it on his return journey.

We find a shift in the idea of ‘home’ as we move on to another poem titled “A Proposal” by Tsundue. Here the poet is seen to be accepting his new home as a reality. The dreamy land

of the past gives way to the present reality. The host country that once offered shelter to the refugee slowly gets transformed from an unfamiliar landscape to a familiar one, where the person desires to live. He acknowledges the host country to be a home – a secondary one probably, but still a home.

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 the 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* 15)

Tsundue imagines the host country as a large house in which he requests to have a mezzanine of his own. For him “the hosting place evolves to become the context and symbol of new values” (Berry 7). The poem points towards another reality faced by the refugees, i.e.

the absence of ownership of any kind. They live and die at the mercy of others. The freedom that they had enjoyed in their former home has to be pleaded for in the new one. Whatever they receive from the host country is similar to a gift that is to be returned later.

“The Tibetan in Mumbai” portrays a refugee who has acclimatized and merged into the life of the host country. He has almost lost his foreign self except for his distinctive features. He is now very similar to the ‘aam-admi’ of the host nation. He lives in a *kholi* (shack) just like others, works in local shops and uses the common slang except “during vocabulary emergencies” (*Kora* 16).

The Tibetan in Mumbai  
is not a foreigner.

He is a cook  
at a Chinese takeaway.  
They think he is Chinese  
run away from Beijing.

He sells sweaters in summer  
in the shade of the Parel Bridge.  
They think he is some retired Bahadur.

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.  
He catches the bus at a signal,  
jumps into a running train,  
walks into a long dark gully  
and nestles in his kholi.

He gets angry  
when they laugh at him  
“ching-chong-ping-pong”.

The Tibetan in Mumbai  
is now tired,  
wants some sleep and a dream. (16)

The representation of a Tibetan refugee as a common man in Mumbai points towards the acceptance of the host nation, happening in the mind of the refugee. He parallels himself with the common man and feels angry when his differences are pointed out. But this doesn't mean that he has completely lost the memories of his former home. His dreams travel him to the Himalayas allowing him to enjoy the warmth of his home. This further triggers his desire to work harder for the return to his homeland. What is different in this case is that he is ready to accept his dual homes and attaches the same sense of a regard for both.

The life of a refugee swings between many places. Being forced out of one's home, he is always on the lookout for a similar place, all the while dreaming of his native land. This dream gives him the strength “to take arms against a sea of troubles” and push forward each day of his life. Many questions like “Where do I belong?”, “Whom do I belong to?”; “What is ‘there’ in relation to ‘here’?” etc haunts his existence. He can attain peace only when he/she accepts his/her position and starts to mould the life accordingly. Such an acceptance is seen in

the poetry of Tenzin Tsundue. This acceptance gives him the strength to fight more fiercely for his homeland. He is able to create smaller mezzanines until he reaches his Tibetan home. What is interesting about the representation of 'home' in Tsundue's poetry is that the readers can find the mental struggle in the mind of every refugee for accepting and being accepted in a new home. These homes become a miniature of their dreamlands that gives them comfort and warmth in the struggle for freedom.

### Works Cited

Beristain, C. M, and G. Doná. "Psychology in Humanitarian Assistance." *NOHA – Network on Humanitarian Assistance*, European Commission Publisher, <http://www.doc-developpement-durable.org/file/Gestion-entreprises-et-associations/gestion-humanitaire/Psychology.pdf>.

Berry, John W. "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation." *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5–34.,  
[http://www.cultureresearch.org/sites/default/files/berry\\_1997.pdf](http://www.cultureresearch.org/sites/default/files/berry_1997.pdf).

Christou, Anastasia. *Narratives of Place, Culture and Identity: Second-Generation Greek-Americans Return 'Home.'* Amsterdam UP, 2006.

Easthope, Hazel. "A Place Called Home." *Housing, Theory and Society*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2004, pp. 128-38.

Gemignani, Marco. "Narratives of Identity, Home, and Return of Kosovarian Refugees: Steps Toward a Postmodern Sense of Agency." *University of Florida*, 2005,  
<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0011646/00001/pdf/0>.



John, Appu Jacob. "Resistance in Exile: A Study of Tibetan Poetry". *MG University*, 2012,

<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/19638>

Mallett, Shelley. "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature." *The*

*Sociological Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2004, pp. 62-89.

Tete, Suzanne Y. A. "Narratives of Hope?: Displacement Narratives Of Liberian Refugee

Women And Children In The Gomoa-Budumburam Refugee Camp In Ghana."

*Norwegian University of Science and Technology*, 2004,

<https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu->

[xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/265001/125675\\_FULLTEXT01.pdf?sequence=1&isAl](https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/265001/125675_FULLTEXT01.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

[lowed=y](https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/265001/125675_FULLTEXT01.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

The UN Refugee Agency. *OAU Convention Governing Specific Aspects of the Problem of*

*Refugees in Africa*. UNHCR, 1996.

Tsundue, Tenzin. *KORA: Stories and Poems*. 10th ed. Tibet Writes, 2014.

Walmsley, D.J., and G.J. Lewis. *People and Environment: Behavioral Approaches in Human*

*Geography*. 2nd ed. Longman, 1993.