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Diversity in Hybridity: A Quest for (Re)Locating the Self in Kaushik Barua’s *Windhorse*

Priyanka Chakraborty

PhD Student of English, Banaras Hindu University

The author is a PhD research scholar at Banaras Hindu University. Her Doctoral research area includes Tibetan identity and culture in and outside Tibet, with primary focus on Tibetan fictions, memoirs, biographies and auto-biographies. However, she has keen interest on folk culture, ethnicity and identity in postcolonial minority societies. She did her MA in English and Comparative Literature from Pondicherry University and her BA in English from West Bengal State University. Prior to joining her PhD program she served as a Guest Faculty in Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women and was also engaged in translation works. She has been published in a number of National and International Journals.

Abstract

Every ethnic group has a unique identity as an essential element of their existence – an identity which evolves anthropologically, culturally and topologically. While for the members of a diaspora community the very identity becomes further crucial for the existence and for their functioning in discrete cultural/political/social milieu of foreign countries. The notion of identity plays the pivotal role in the lives of displaced communities, as it prevents them from assimilation and acculturation. This paper on Kaushik Barua’s *Windhorse* would attempt to illustrate the plurality of identity present among individuals of the Tibetan diasporic community, scattered over different parts of India. The paper would also seek to throw light on its diverse manifestations, evolution, alteration and adoption. It would also aim at interrogating the role of identity, as one of the constitutive parameters of ‘nationalism’, deftly portrayed through the movement and their participation in it. The paper scrutinizes the life and experience of three young Tibetans bringing them on same temporal and spatial scale, thereby, making them interact with each other while carrying forward their own personal as well as cultural paraphernalia.

Keywords

Tibetan-ness, identity, hybridity, plurality, nation

Tradition is an important aspect of most Diasporic societies. It plays an intriguing role through the process of its acculturation, assimilation and revitalization. In an exiled community, tradition functions as an instrument of ‘ethnic-construction’; thereby unifying the community members and preventing their assimilation into the ‘host culture’. This sense of an ethnic identity validates the community’s claim for racio-cultural uniqueness. Culture, tradition and identity, in similar ways, play a pivotal role to the Tibetan question¹. The quest for Tibetanness is entirely based on the assertion of ethnic identity that is culturally, religiously and ethnically different from Han² identity. The preservation of these traditional and cultural traits has given momentum to life in exile; vibrancy in socio-cultural practices helped the community to strengthen its position and voice for liberation while residing in a foreign country.

It becomes further engaging when the author, a citizen of the host country narrates the tales of Tibetan refugees; from a distant third person’s perspective. This paper attempts to study Kaushik Barua’s *Windhorse* and how a work of fiction captures in detail certain tenets of the socio-economic composition of a refugee community from a different diasporic lens. It also focuses on the role played by heritage, memory and nationalism in the development of the individuals in the community; and how they encircle individuals in various intriguing ways. The novel is usually read as a representation of a refugee society based on Indian milieu: however the novel delves into deeper realm of social interplay. The textual site creates a hierarchical view of the refugee society which, along with many others, brings three young Tibetans of different background into the same temporal and spatial scale, thereby, making them interact with each other while carrying forward their own personal as well as cultural paraphernalia. The conflicts arising from those interactions allude to spiral out more complex issues present among such displaced communities, which, in turn, map the ideological conflicts regarding the definition and demarcation of diaspora.

The novel’s narrative form reveals three distinct generic strains, those of three types of Tibetan settlers in India. They are individualized by the difference in their social and economic condition. Norbu belongs to a rich business class family of an early Tibetan expatriate; Dolma is a Tibetan immigrant with family still in Tibet and Lhasang is a homeless refugee who fled from Tibet along with his parents. Further explication of the

¹ The disputed political question over the sovereignty of the Tibetan land and the power of The Dalai Lama See Tshakya’s Tsering *The Dragon in the Land of Snows : A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*

² Han refers to the traditional Chinese ethnic group.

novel reveals that to accrue the diasporic presence author manoeuvres both the time and place. Barua, in retrospection of Tibetan upheaval of 1959, re-visits the decade of 1950 in the texture of the fictional narrative, meticulously co-creating India and Tibet, which in a way became conducive enough for him to unravel the Tibetan lives in both sides of the border.

The novel begins with the fictionalisation of an era of political turmoil; projecting either side of the Indo-Tibetan border. The plot opens in around 1955 in Tibet when Chinese occupation is at its peak; forces have permeated into Tibet, owing to the Seventeen Point Agreement³, 1951. The discontent among the mass is accelerating along with the growing discomfort with the seat and safety of Dalai Lama. As a prologue to the Cultural Revolution, leader Mao Zedong has started securing the borders and homogenizing the culture all along the Chinese mainland. This unscrupulous intention could no longer remain hidden under the promises of development and modernisation of Tibet.

On the other hand, the newly independent Indian union with the Nehru government is still working on its political allies and the Panchsheel Agreement⁴, of 1954 paved the way for an amiable relation with China. This also implied a cold silence over the question of Tibet which has already been raised once before the UN Assembly. Barua deftly manifests the impact of Indo- Chinese Panchsheel Treaty on the fate of Tibetan question through a discussion between the government officer Vhora and Karma, a Tibetan expatriate who portrays India's silence over Tibet.

...said Vohra. '... and Nehru knows what he wants. Right now he wants Panchsheel.'

'Panchsheel? You mean the agreement with the Chinese last year?'

'... And if he wants Hindi-Chinibhai-bhai. Then so be it. Long live the India-China brotherhood' (Barua, 17)

³ 'Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' is called 'Seventeen Point Agreement' in short. This agreement was signed by delegates of 14th Dalai Lama with Central People's Government of the newly established People's Republic of China. It confirmed China's sovereignty over Tibet, which 1911 onwards was acting as a de facto independent nation.

⁴ 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', also known as the 'Panchsheel Treaty: Non-interference in others internal affairs and respect for each other's territorial unity integrity and sovereignty' was a signed on signed on 28 April 1954, at Peking by India and China.

In spite of this forged/welded brotherhood, tension on both the sides of the border escalated. The March 1959 uprising⁵ and the subsequent decampment of Dalai Lama pushed Tibet open to Chinese whims. From the very beginning of the Communist occupation in Tibet; mass imprisonment, abduction and execution were rampant. The news of The Dalai Lama's escape propelled them to fly away from their home land. The destruction of monasteries and public shaming of monks were perceived as death blows to the Tibetan religious beliefs. In the market of Barua's fictional village Rinwoche, the captive monks were tortured and forced to break their vows of celibacy in the open place before public eyes:

“... the soldiers had cornered three monk... in front of the two seated monks was another bald figure, stripped of his clothes. The monk was pushed on top of a woman. A pair of boots held him down, pressing his body on the woman” (Barua, 101).

The earlier vibrant market of Riwoche; under the reign of Red army became a space for exertion of power and proliferation of fear thus the market place which replicates certain prevalent conditions of the nation in turn becomes a microcosm of the nation itself. The Chinese mission of ‘liberating Tibet’, aimed at cleansing the society by getting rid of the ‘old clan system’; and building ‘a new society’ based on Communist ideologies. However, the hollowness of this promise of a future generation of equals was comprehensible from the ruthlessness of the Chinese policies and soldiers. The Old Tibetan Society was being trampled under ‘grey boots’.

I have to help him create a new society, he told me,’ said Dhondup. ‘But we have to destroy this one. We will be born again, he said. And I will be an equal, as good as anyone in the village. But first, first we have to clean out class enemies... (Barua, 96)

As part of this process of purification, many elders of the village like Namgyal, and Dawa among many others disappeared or were killed. Lhasang and his parents escaped the village at such time, on the verge of being taken away.

On the Indian side, Dalai Lama was warmly welcomed and offered hospitality by the Nehru government. The thousands of Tibetans who followed him and crossed the border were also given asylum. Chinese government didn't perceive this well and this

⁵ March 10th is popularly known as the Tibet Uprising Day. On this in 1959 a revolt erupted at Lhasa against the dominance of People's Republic Army which was effective in Lhasa since Seventeen Point agreement. This was followed by violent crackdown and flight of Dalai Lama into exile.

was marked as one of the major factors contributing to the Sino-Indian war of 1962. The defeat and a fear of another war made India silent about the Tibetan issue in international platform. Yet, Shastri government did vote for Tibet in the 1965 UN assembly which was acknowledged by His Holiness in his autobiography

“On this occasion India, at Shastri’s insistence, voted in favour of Tibet. During his tenure in office, it began to look as if the new Indian government might even recognise the Tibetan Government in Exile.”
(Gyatso, 194)

In, the novel Norbu’s friend Vikram, a civil servant represents the Indian diplomacy when Norbu asks him for government help. Apart from these, the novel also brings into consideration more complex and lesser known issues of clandestine American support and the training of Tibetan guerrilla army. Barua employs it as the climax through which his protagonists perish.

The novel, apart from being a political meta-fiction also exemplifies a quest for identity. The three Tibetans continuously seek to discover, understand and accept who they are and try locating themselves in the society. A cycle of acknowledgment and rejection of identities go on as meanings continue to shift with changing circumstances. *Windhorse* (2013) through diasporic lenses exhibits the shifting paradigms of Tibetan diaspora; a switch from a nationalist discourse to a diasporic one. A diasporic reading, thus also allegorises the romance between Norbu and Dolma as the unison of modernity and tradition which entails the process of assimilation of either of these elements. The union of docile Indian Norbu and the nonconformist Tibetan Dolma is surprisingly impossible in more than one ways, as the conflicts between Norbu and Dolma stand in for larger failures to connect. It unveils the difference between expatriates and refugees, pointing towards the difference in the nature of hybridity.

Furthermore, the educated Dolma’s passion for free homeland is again largely contrasted with Lhasang’s wish for a decent life. Lhasang had escaped Tibet to remain with his family and work hard to sustain it, but is carried away by the illusion of heroism, concerning the romantic pride for nationalism in exile. This further allows us to question the induced hyper-nationalism which made people to bleed for the lost nation; an idea which so long never existed in their mind. The characters, instead of being mere beings, are motifs used by the novelist; Kaushik Barua to bring in diversity. Each character with its own story establishes as a missing piece of the puzzle. These fictionalised beings

inserted within real political events infuse life to the narrative. *MajnukaTilla* features out as a battlefield of class, caste, tradition, religion and modernism

Initially, religion was considered as being instrumental in intensifying the knowledge and understanding the formation of identity. Later, religion evinced itself as the locus of identity formation. While analysing groups like Tibetans, Jews, Amish, Mormons, a correlation could be acknowledged as a direct linkage between religion and ethnicity. This correlation also throws light on whether one perceives religion subjectively or objectively. In case of these groups, the robust link suggests that in the absence of religion; these ethnic groups would have perished or would not have existed at all. The fate of the Tibetans were directly associated with their belief in The Dalai Lama and China's disbelief in the Lamaism. The Dalai Lama symbolises the politico- religious duality, pervading the Tibetan society. Therefore for China, allowing people to worship Dalai Lama is equivalent to worshipping a rebel leader.

Tibet from its very first interaction with the West has been highly idealised. Its geographical inaccessibility further mythicized it to the Westerners. This intense exoticization made Tibet a mystic land of Dharma, where Chinese occupation became the symbolic evil, destroying the Dharma. Apparently it seems that every Tibetan is a follower and believer of The Dalai Lama, but only after getting down to the individual level; one can understand the diversity of thoughts present and their complexities. In the novel, the three protagonists have their own belief systems which often contradict and intersect with each other and help to divulge the nuances of one's self.

Lhasang is born in Kham⁶, to highly religious Dadul. However, except for little respect, he neither has belief in Kundun nor partakes in any ritual. He continuously criticises Dadul for his belief in Gods and spirits of *Bod*⁷ like Tara⁸, Dorje Drakden⁹ etc, in spite of the deteriorating scenario.

⁶ Kham is a province in Eastern Tibet, presently divided between present-day Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan, with smaller portions located within Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan provinces of China.

⁷ Bod is the Tibetan name of Tibet.

⁸ Also known as Ārya Tārā, or White Tara, and Jetsun Dölma (Tib. *rje btsun sgrol ma*) known as the 'mother of liberation' appears as a female bodisattva in Mahayana Buddhism

⁹ The Great Dharma King (*rgyal chen*) Nechung Dorje Drakden (rdo rje grags ldan) or Nechung Chokyong (chos skyong) is considered to be the chief minister of heavenly, royal king It is the spirit of this deity which possesses the Nechung Oracle or State Oracle of Tibet. See Samuel, Geoffrey (1995). *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de (1956). *Oracles and demons of Tibet: the cult and iconography of the Tibetan protective deities*.

He (Lhasang) looked at Dadul's hand, which were twisting juniper into bushy tails. Which god was he sending his smoke to today? What rebirth was he preparing for while this life was being torn apart? (Barua, 92)

and

He (Lhasang) sat down next to Dadul but could not bring himself to join the prayers (Barua, 93)

After reaching India, his parents; Dadul and Pema travel to Dharamshala to stay near their Kundun however Lhasang insists on staying back at Missimari camp and searches for job. He later joins Thubten's army while at Majnu ka Tilla. He does it out of a persuasive feeling of loss, an induced nationalistic call for freeing the shackled motherland. He and his fellow mates are swayed by the hyper-nationalism and blindly follow Thubten towards their doom. This act is directed against his own plight and similar victimization of thousands of Tibetans like him. However, this hardly has any connection with the re-establishment of the Buddhist Dharma. The only spirit Lhasang is seen remembering throughout the novel is of the Gesar¹⁰, the epic hero of Kham. He often wonders why Gesar spirit is not coming to avenge for them.

Dolma, born in Shigaste was sent to Kalimpong at her uncle's place, as the political scenario in Tibet continued to deteriorate further, though her family stayed back in Tibet. She is a university student who is ever aware of her refugee status. As a result, she attempts to help the refugees in their plight. She doesn't disrespect the religion or The Dalai Lama but doesn't even have much regards for either of them. The viability of the betterment and mobilisation of refugees, as an essential goal in her life, recur time and again in the narrative: "We are not on a picnic here. No time for meditation and Buddhist gods. We're refugees!" (Barua, 69) For both these characters life and situation have taken their gods and beliefs away from them.

It is only Norbu who has a conscious regard for The Dalai Lama. He has been to Lhasa only once in his childhood. There he was gifted a photo of His Holiness by his grandfather who asked him to keep it close, and even in his youth he follows that diligently. He is also seen questioning religion and the divine powers of The Dalai Lama, yet his affinity towards rituals makes him look at the photo every morning. Norbu resembles the protagonist of Larkin's poem *Church Going*, who because being brought up in a god-fearing environment performs the rituals. His thoughts oscillate between his

¹⁰ Gesar is epic hero of Kham origin. See the Epic of King Gesar of Ling. He is also worshipped as Gesar Dorje Tseyal "the *Vajra* Lord of Life"

beliefs and rationality which continuously intersect each other. This is evident enough from his actions. His excitement on hearing that The Dalai Lama is residing in Mussoorie, a one night journey from Delhi is highly contrasted with his questioning mind: “I had no idea he was so close,” said Norbu. ‘We should go to see him’” (Barua, 72) and in the very next sentence he dismisses him as a man-made God: “I know he’s man-made...Enough people know he’s an image... He’s only providing a map. Maybe I don’t need his map... But maybe I do” (Barua, 72)

However, while Dolma taunts him for his supposed Indianness; he firmly expresses himself as a Buddhist. Norbu, exemplary of second generation diasporic citizen exhibits a stark contrast with Dolma who is a first generation refugee. Norbu unlike Dolma and Lashang doesn’t adhere to a singular identity. Instead, he is susceptible to multiple identities. The very notion of multiple identities as manifest in Norbu epitomise Stuart Hall’s idea of ‘plurality’. Hall substantially argued that diaspora communities are not only characterised in terms of nostalgia, dislocation and alienation, but also embody the different forms of plurality as a discernable element behind identity formation. Norbu is a supposed Indian because of being born and brought up here. He is similarly, a supposed Tibetan because of his Tibetan ancestors. At the same time he is ‘othered’ at both the places. His Indian roommates Vikram and their friends tag him with the North Eastern students because of his facial features. While Dolma, Thubten and other refugees treat him separately owing to his background. He is a non-conformist Buddhist, as well. His physical and psychological distance from Tibet helps him to mythicize the land without any original perturbation about the land or the people. These factors make nationalism for him an intriguingly complex subject, as nationalism often demands complete conformation to a singular identity. Therefore, he keeps oscillating among his multiple identities.

The other characters and references in the refugee camps like Missamari, Majnu ka Tilla, Dharmshala or Bylakuppe; help the author to establish the heterogeneity among the refugees. People here have assembled from different parts of Tibet with all their existing sub-ethnic differences. However, in this foreign land with ‘deterritorialization’ of culture, they became dislocated adhering to a greater identity. They become members of an imagined nation which is yet to be fully constructed. They consider themselves as continuation of a singular group in distress; and create what Anderson stated as an ‘imagined community’. Thupten, who leads the rebel’s organisation, was once a rich merchant and lost his only daughter, Dechen in the Lhasa revolt of 1959. But he is a

trader whose honesty of intentions is questionable. The novelist provides us with enough hints to doubt his motives behind grouping these men and organizing a rebellion. It can be merely for profit or for genuine concern - “*Was Thupten a thief? Or was he the shadowy leader of the new resistance?*” (Barua, 179) Next in the list is Ratu, who was accompanying Lhasang and his family from the Lokha village and through the Himalayas, was the lone survivor of a rebel group quashed by the Chinese; Athar was monk from a monastery in Lhasa. He had denounced his vows of non-violence and ‘gave up his prayer wheel for a gun’; and Sonam, a highly sought after musician for whom “*whole villages would wait for hours while he cleared his throat*” (Barua, 146). Last in the list was Tenzin, he belonged to a renowned noble class family of Lhasa. His clan members held positions in the Kashag¹¹, the Tibetan cabinet of ministers and in all the three important monasteries. Kaushik Barua describes his wealthy background as the one who even as a refugee wore an imported watch. Thus, there is nothing common between them except for the oppression they had faced in the hands of Chinese army. These differences exhibit layers of the society where individuals with their differences converge towards a common goal. This trauma of oppression, with all its limitations, is constitutive of the formation of ‘race members’ which successfully creates a brotherhood, a predecessor of future nationhood.

Again these individuals who under the trope of hyper-nationalism agree to fight for Tibet in an impossible and unsanctioned mission become agents of power enforcement. Lhasang realises home was the entire nation and for the first time he gets the feeling of a nation Tibet; something bigger than his community, tribe or village. Foucauldian ‘biopolitics’ defined power as something abstract which needs agents for its establishment, enforcement and existence. These individuals as foot soldiers become those agents in a similar way as are the Chinese soldiers on the other side of the border. The state as power machinery uses these individuals to assert itself and they become the scapegoat of state politics. This unified movement for the nationalist cause echoes what Hastings argued: ‘Nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity’. (Hastings, 3)

Barua’s novel *Windhorse* is an attentive politico-historical research with life reimbursed in it. The novel captures the discursive elements of Tibetan identities in exile among the refugees who after being deprived of their fundamental rights is unified by

¹¹ Even in the Vajrayana tradition. See Samuel, Geoffrey (1991) ‘Some Tibetan Ritual Texts about King Gesar’.

their common grieves and quest for survival. This survival is essentially the survival of an entire community with the mutual assistance as Pema points to Lhasang: 'If she wants to keep her family together then we should help her. Isn't that what we are doing too? Going through all this so we can be together' (Barua, 110). Pema's words are very metaphorical, as they refer to the whole community and not to any individual existence. The steady narrative is deluged with the atrocities, faced by the innocent people; the sordid details of psychological, spiritual and physical setbacks and traumas. Despite the optimistic views and relentless efforts of His Holiness, the hope to reclaim the lost motherland wanes with time. But the growth of a consciousness, a proto-nationalism provides life force to the community's successful existence, preventing them from assimilation and acculturation people. A feeling of deep-rooted nostalgia pervades the psyche of those people, living in a foreign land. They continue their fight for the land where these stories are born and enshrined; making it a land of all, those who reside there and those who have their roots in Tibet.

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