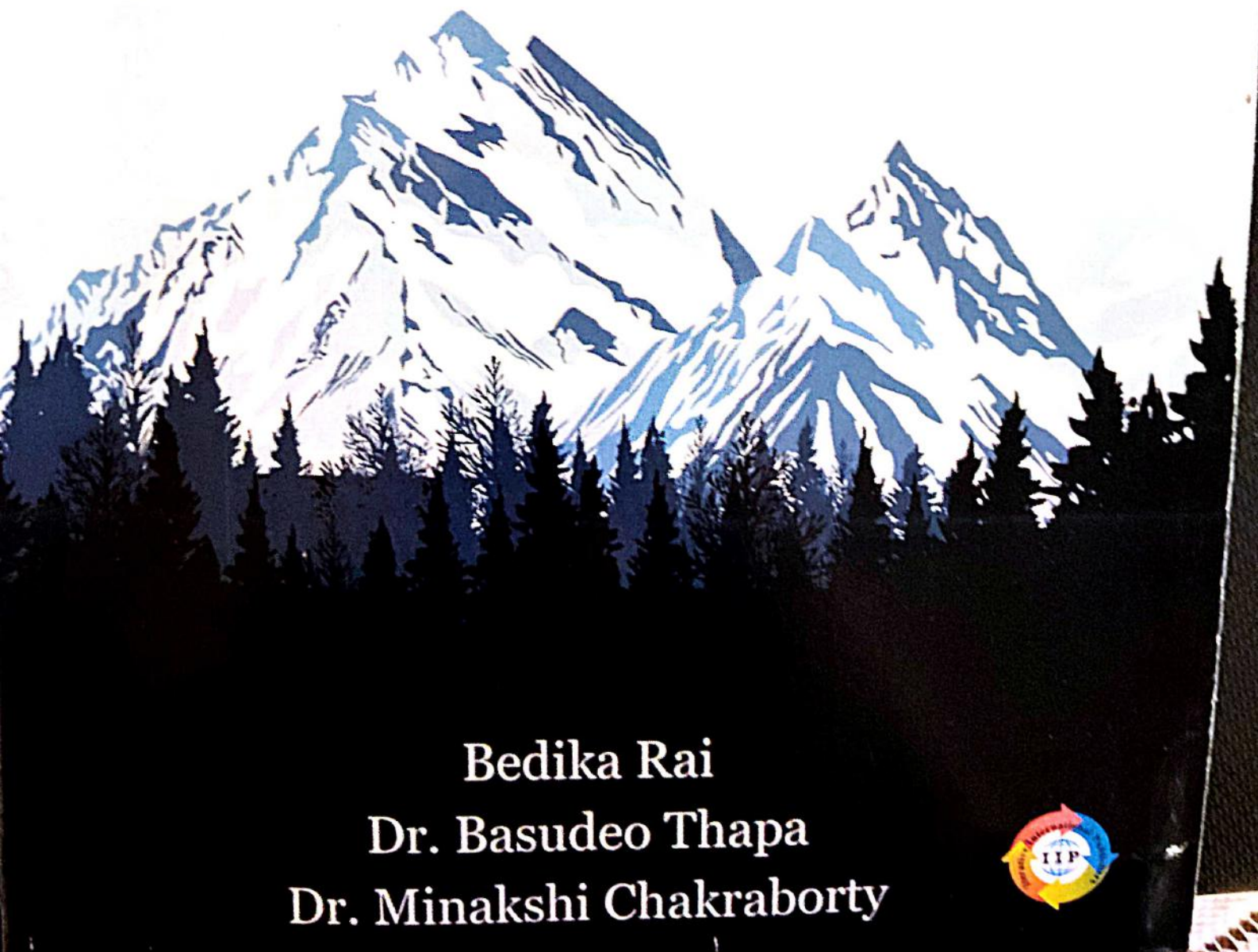


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Eastern **HIMALAYAS** **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**



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Khortsa's 'The Tibetan Suitcase', a Himalayan Story: Symbolic Boundary of the Tibetan I

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Abstract

Border literature and border-crossing in literature are the postmodern literary explorations. Border study in literature does not limit to geographical landscape but incorporates psychological mindscape as well. Richard Pine in the introduction 'Borderlands, Metaphor and Meaning' proposes meaning to the word border on spatial, conceptual, spiritual and psychological grounds. Border and boundaries, borderlands and displacements are viewed originally from a geographical and later from a political standpoint accompanied by the economic factors leading to good state of border issues. In literature, these issues stand more as a metaphor, a symbol that evolves the idea of transgression, displacement and identity. The history of migration and the politics of immigration are an integral part of border study. It offers a study of border conflicts and a huge human displacement in a single historical moment of migration. One such historical event is the migration of the Tibetans. China's political exploration and annexation of Tibet, changed the history of Tibetans forever. Thousands of Tibetans longing for their homeland, residing all over the world, are good specimen of the border conflicts and the identity issue. The study here intends to explore Tshering Namgyal Khortsa's only novel 'The Tibetan Suitcase', 2019. The research questions that the study puts forward are- what is symbolic boundary and how well is it linked with the Tibetan diasporic identity? The objectives are finding symbolic boundary to the Tibetan identity, Tibetan diaspora, and psychological mindscape of the novel. The study uses secondary resources.

Keywords: border, borderland, boundary, Tibetan identity, diaspora

I. Introduction

The terms 'border', 'borderlands' and 'border crossing' in literature refers to an exploration of existence and survival between past and present. Geographers and Historians pioneered in the study of Borders tracing the difference or shift between past and present. Alan Dowty in his 'Closed Borders: The

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Contemporary Assault on the Freedom of Movement' at civilisation arose with heavy migration and these newcomers with their ideas and change", contributed to taxes and services of the new land they migrated. Therefore, the geographical study of a territory and a political study of a nation led to the existence of borders and borderlands. Constantine Cavafy, the Greek poet of the 20th century, in his poem titled 'Walls' brilliantly expresses the theme of isolation which in the issue of borderlines fit well. He writes:

"Without considerations, without pity, without shame,
they built around me great and towering walls.

And now I am sitting and despairing here
I think of nothing else: this fate is gnawing at my mind;

For I had many things to do out there.
When they were building the walls, how could I be not aware?

Yet never did I hear the clatter of builders, nor any sound
Imperceptibly, they shut me off from the outside world."
(The Collected Poems P. 13)

In literature, focus lies on the difference between reality and literature. Richard Pine in an introduction to 'Crossing the Line(s): Borderlands, Metaphor and Meaning' writes that the borderlands are the "in-between space" which becomes home to the migrants. Such space becomes home for the "homeless mind" (P.2). As a metaphor 'border' refers to a state of mind and crossing the line metaphorically refers to a state of polity and mind. Pine also brings in two types of landscapes with reference to the issue of border, one being the physical or geographical contours of the landscape and the other being the metaphysical contours of the landscape. On a geographical term, border, basically refers to a line on the ground and on the map across which one cannot or should not move. On the other hand, metaphorically, it refers to a line in the mind which can be easily travelled to and fro. Geographical transgression of the border lines signifies violation of the border policies and can lead to political disruption. Transgression of borders affects the very meaning and perception of landscape. However, borders, are spatial, conceptual, spiritual and psychological where the transgression questions the sense of identity in a longer run.

In literature, as a metaphor, transgression of borders is more about the mindscape. Pine writes that, "All border crossings involve, to some degree, political, ethical, moral or cultural choice and that choice will lead to inclusion, love, creativity and understanding as much as to exclusion, fear, hatred, violence and destruction." (Borders and Borderlands, P. 11). Violence reaches

its height when registered as a political violation of border |
country establishes its geographical frontiers. Such border cross |
a sense of belonging. Such belongingness could be an experience within shared |
geographical space or within each individual. Border crossing has given rise to |
the concept and existence of hybridity at large. Bhabha writes, "The beyond is |
neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" rather it is finding |
ourselves in a transit phase "where space and time cross to produce complex |
figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion |
and exclusion." (The Location of Culture P.1). Complexity aroused by |
displacements are both geographical and metaphorical. This complexity often |
leads to identity crisis and a sense of lost home. Lhasang Tsering, a Tibetan |
poet, writes,

"If to my homeland I could return
Could end my lonely exile.

If one would deprive me of freedom
The Chinese no longer my enemy.

If only to free Tibet I could return!" (under the blue skies, P. 196)

Here, one can sense a voice of lost home and a desire to be back home. In the process of finding a homeland, one begins naturally to create imaginary homelands.

Bhabha writes that in the cases of displacements "the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (The Location of Culture P. 9). It is the spaces-in-between that ultimately provides and initiates "new signs of identity" (Ibid P 1-2). This gives rise to cultural, social and economic transformation. Cultural hybridity therefore emerges as a grand new historical moment for the immigrants and those in exile. Nevertheless, the longing for one's home remains a strong link between their reality and the imaginary. This now directs us to the study of Khortsa's 'The Tibetan Suitcase' and the issues of border, borderland and homeland so closely knit in the novel.

Khortsa is a Tibetan writer known for short story 'The Season of Retreats', short fiction "The Journal of Indigenous Culture, Arts and Literature" and other books such as 'Little Lhasa: Reflections on Exiled Tibet', 'His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Ogyen' and 'Tirley Dorjee: a Biography'. 'The Tibetan Suitcase' is the only novel to his credit published as an e-book in 2013 and in print version in 2019. In his interview taken by Kaushik Goswami from the Muse India tells

that, "Tibet was a nation before the communists came. Not a nation." (Interview, Muse India 2020). This statement can be seen in his life in exile. Similarly, he speaks of virtual nations growing out of the dislocation of the Tibetans world wide. His description of his second home is 'Little Lasha' where exiled Tibetans in the historical time and geographical landscape settled as the immigrants and grew as the netizens of the region. He said that in the Himalayan range "there are linkages and affinities amongst the population scattered around the Himalayas" (Ibid) which has led to the diverse settlement in the borderlands of the Himalayas. Khortsas writes about Tibetan in exile.

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II. Critical Analysis of the Border Issue in the Novel

'The Tibetan Suitcase' is written as an epistolary novel. It has six parts. Part 1 begins with a prologue where we are introduced to the protagonist Dawa and the history behind his presence in Hong Kong when the novel begins. The story of Dawa revolves around the concept of border, borderland and displacement. Political conflict between Tibet and China and India as a second home to the diasporic Dawa is also the center of the novel. He describes himself as a struggling writer, "an artist of a floating world. I am neither a famous literary critic, nor a scholar but someone who just tries to write a few pages, or a poem, or a long letter whenever I feel inspired. Nothing more, nothing less – a storyteller." (The Tibetan Suitcase 186) Dawa's association with other characters such as Professor Khenchen Sangpo, Iris, Brent Rhinehart, and Pema reflects the issue of home and homeland frequently in the novel. In his journal, Dawa notes, "There is no objective reality outside our minds. It's all a creation of our own minds, a figment of our imagination. The world is a movie or, if you prefer, a novel of which you are the author." (P 22)

Tibet is described by Dawa in his application to Appleton University dated 26th January, 1995, as, "Tibet Is a landlocked Himalayan nation currently under the rule of the People's Republic of China." (P 27). Writing about his identity he writes, "Though I was born in India, I did not become an Indian citizen – only a very "welcomed and an honoured guest." I grew up as a foreigner..." (P28). Considering himself as belonging to minority in India he writes, "... who is not a minority in India, the land of a thousand dialects and ethnicities?" (29) Some basic information regarding Tibet is given such as football being introduced to Tibet by the British like Cricket to India.

From Dawa's journal entry we sense that in-between space, a home to migration closely addressed when he says, "What have we inherited from our parents and forefathers – nothing but trauma, sadness and loss, all wrapped in a beautiful language." (35). For he lives in a 'homeless mind' where home stands more as a

metaphor than as any geographical space. Dawa's affinity to India is presented when his application is accepted by the Appleton University and he is asked to leave India, the land where he was born, to live his dream. Dawa elaborately writes, "And I miss the milk tea, the gulab jamun, Mr. Nowrowjee's store, beer at the McIloss Bar, the dal and the wonderful breakfast of parantha on Jogiwara Road." (36) Further he also points how Dharmasala metaphorically represents Tibetan spirit in particular to him, he writes, "I will miss the Tibetan folk dance and music, and I will miss the Tibetan New Year celebrations. I will, off course, miss the protests, the dissent and demonstrations, which have been perfected to a high art by my countrymen. I will miss Bodhgaya and Benares and the beautiful women who come there. I will miss everything about it: the centuries- old temples, the verdant fields, and the rivers that flow from the highlands of Tibet to the Indian ocean." (36). He brings up spatial, conceptual, spiritual as well as psychological borders of his existence. This physical shift from Dharmasala to America is a huge transgression not just geographically but psychologically as well.


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Interestingly, Dawa accepts India as his 'borrowed homeland'. His acceptance of two different identities which he balances can be found expressed in his journals. He writes, "Himalayas! I will really miss you. This is the hardest place to leave in the world. But don't worry. I will come back. I will return to this borrowed but beautiful homeland of mine." (37) In a letter to Brent, Dawa writes, "... and whenever I am in America, I would start missing India. And when you are stuck in India, we start missing Tibet, which seems to have given us this beautiful present, this gift of nostalgia, and the license to dream and yearn for a fabled land of our great forefathers that always seem out of reach, eternally elusive." (113). This symbolic boundary of the Tibetan identity speaks aloud throughout the novel. There's a sense of belonging with India. But the essence of a home is provided by the lost land Tibet.

Dawa's understanding of home and homeland is separated by the land where he was born, India, and the land where his forefathers belonged to, Tibet. In such a situation Dharmasala with Buddhism at its center functions as a hope for him. The very fact of border crossing by his ancestors allowed a movement both in time and space which gradually transitioned Tibetans like Dawa in the process. While writing about how much he misses India, he symbolically speaks of a renewed experience of shared space with India. Hybrid psyche leads him to travel across to discover himself free from all borders and boundaries. Vladimir A. Kolosov is of the opinion that, "The history of mankind is largely a history of wars, and the ultimate goal of most of these wars was the changing of borders." (Theoretical Approaches in the Study of Borders 33). In the case of Dawa the 'changing of borders' provided him shared space and a hybrid identity.


In one of Dawa's letters to Iris dated 22 November, 1995, difference between home and homeland- "You know India Tibet is my homeland. Since I cannot return to my homeland, I India. How interesting it is that I have to borrow a homeland so that we can at least have the pretense of returning?" (59) As a Tibetan refugee his respect to India is quite apparent when he writes, "Indeed, sitting here today in this rather modern-looking shop, I would say I am quite enthralled by the strange mixture of melancholy and exuberance." (61) In his conversation with Erik he says, "Let the creative juices flow. When you do not have a home, you must learn to seek asylum in pages." (82) In a journal Dawa is often found to be ruminating about home. He writes, "I also learned much about what it means to be a Tibetan in India, the joys and sorrows of life as an émigré – belonging to no place, or belonging everywhere." (188) Tibet stand as a "collective consciousness" rather than a geographical landscape to Dawa.

Regarding creative writing, Dawa journals Professor Khenchen's talk. Professor Khenchen explains the relation between meditation and poetry or any writing as, "Technically, during the meditation, you are not supposed to chase your thoughts. But they do continue to appear, these silly thoughts. The beauty of these monkey thoughts is that they are often filled with insights, pregnant with possibilities..." similarly, Khenchen says that, "when you are writing you are so touched or moved by certain things that you literally burst into a carnival of words, a symphony of sentences, to break into a literary break dance of sorts randomly putting words and images together ..." (121-122) Dawa himself believes that, "Writing is a form of meditation, of being in touch with oneself, one's inner self. And there is no better way of being in the moment than putting pen to paper." (189)

Professor Khenchen visits his homeland Tibet with university students. It is described in the following words, "What a joy there is in the embrace of such heavenly beauty! Yet what a paradox that such a beautiful land should endure such oppression and destruction! The land of singing nuns and prostrating monks, roaming yaks in verdant valleys, apple-checked shepherds, endangered antelopes, the land of dreams and fantasies, which had inspired some of the greatest sages and scholars..." (155) Professor Sangpo gets arrested in Tibet by the Chinese forces and on his death, obituaries flood in his honour. The Economist writes, "Tibetans rightly held that life and death are simply two sides of the same coin." It refers Professor Sangpo as "a man of simple tastes".

From Brent's journal we come across the parental history of Iris. She was adopted by American parents in the late 1970s. Her biological parents' history goes back to a landlocked region far from Kathmandu, Hitmaan Gurung and his family. Gurung with his wife came to India and settled in Himachal Pradesh.

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Their daughter Durga fell for Pasang and gave birth to a young girl. The union was unaccepted at Pasang's family and the new born girl was sent to an orphanage in Dharmasala. It was from here that the girl was adopted by a couple. Iris. From Dawa's journal we come to know that Iris's biological mother, Durga, later went to Hongkong and was now called Dolma. She is the mysterious woman selling momos in the world that Dawa had encountered earlier in his visit to Hongkong. The issue of borderland and homeland is found not only in relation to Tibet but also in relation to human relations developed in the progress of the story. Dawa writes that, "Life provides enough indicators along the way, some would like to call it omens, and we need to test them and follow them. We need to trust to our intuition and it will lead you to the right path." He says, "This paradox so full of joy, wonder, sadness, love, sacrifice, and disillusionment, but that which is, like everything else in life, ultimately empty, except for the meaning you attach to it." (220)

III. Conclusion

Khortsas's *The Tibetan Suitcase* metaphorically presents longing of a home from a diasporic sentiment. The title itself composes the element of a need to release like that of Pandora's box which overflows possibilities and challenges of finding a home in one's mindscape. Dawa mentions in his journal the significant place that his suitcase plays in his life, "You know, I love that suitcase. I've had it for almost 15 years. It has travelled with me all over India. Delhi, Dalhousie, Mussoorie, Dehradun, Dharmasala, Oxford, London, Paris and Appleton." (193). It develops a mystery that he carries with him all over the places he's been to. And it isn't any ordinary suitcase but a specific 'Tibetan' one which carries its history, migration, diasporic sentiments, longing for a home, and a psychological space. When the content of the suitcase is revealed in the form of a novel, it forms a metaphoric space for all the Tibetans. Iris in her writing states that Dawa had "this nice little suitcase where he used to deposit all of his writings." (200). His writings bear the testimony of border issues, borderland, home and homeland of Tibetans.

One of the striking points that the novel direct at is the issue of identity as a migrant. The border standing as a wall between Tibet and India for the protagonist in the novel speaks specifically on the geographical wall. Blache believed that geography was only "a science of places and not a science of men" (*Annales de Geographies* 22). Hence, Dawa's understanding of the border wall goes beyond the physical space. Professor Sangpo asserts the importance of mindscape when he says, "The goal is to free the Chinese mind first. You cannot have a Free Tibet without a Free China" (*The Tibetan Suitcase* 18). The exploration of mindscape rather than geographical landscape as one's homeland can be traced as the central concern in the novel. Richard Pine rightly writes,

"The cruellest walls are those within the heart, with
from reality, sense from hope" (Borders and Borderlands)

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Boundary of the Tibetan Identity
dividing line

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