

Memory and Longing for Home (Tibet) in the Nepali Short Story “Bihan Huna Na Sakeko Raat” by Sanu Lama

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Abstract:

Nepali is one of the official languages in Sikkim and is spoken by 62% of the population. The other official languages are Lepcha, Sikkimese (Bhutia) and English. Apart from these languages such as Limbu, Tamang, Rai, Sherpa, Tibetan, Hindi are spoken in certain areas. This diversity of languages spoken in Sikkim is mostly a result of the migration of the different communities to this Indian state. Since Sikkim shares its border with Tibet in the north and northeast, Bhutan in the east, Nepal in the west, and West Bengal in the south, the migration to the state from these surrounding regions is natural.

In my paper, I will closely study the Nepali short story titled “Bihan Huna Na Sakeko Raat” (A Night With No Dawn) by Sanu Lama. The story revolves around a father-daughter duo, where the father, as a Tibetan escaping persecution, found refuge in Sikkim many years ago. The forced displacement that carries with it the burden of trauma, memories, pain and unresolved questions is poignantly described through the character of the father. The author vividly captures the father’s longing for his homeland and transports the readers to Tibet through his memories. He is haunted by the images of that fateful night when he suddenly had to leave his home and his parents. While the loss still lives on, yet all the memories are not entirely painful. The landscape, for instance, is still unblemished and beautiful in his mind. In my paper, I will be looking at the role of memory as a tool that sustains this longing for home not just for the father but for the daughter as well, who has only heard about it in her father’s stories.

Keywords: migration, displacement, Nepali Literature, refugee, memory

Introduction

Nepali is one of the official languages in Sikkim and is spoken by 62% of the population. The other official languages are Lepcha, Sikkimese (Bhutia) and English. Apart from these languages such as Limbu, Tamang, Rai, Sherpa, Tibetan, Hindi are spoken in certain areas. This diversity of languages spoken in Sikkim is mostly a result of the migration of the different communities to this Indian state. Since Sikkim shares its border with Tibet in the north and northeast, Bhutan in the east, Nepal in the west, and West Bengal in the south, the migration to the state from these surrounding regions is natural.

In the current Indian Nepali literary scenario, Gadul Singh Lama popularly known as Sanu Lama is a writer whom perhaps every reader of the Nepali language has read at one time or another. Not only has his writings taken the short story writing genre in Nepali literature forward but the numerous accolades

received by him has thrown light on the Indian Nepali Literature both nationally and internationally. Hailing from Sikkim, Sanu Lama retired as Chief Engineer in the Rural Development under the Government of Sikkim. In recognition of his talents he was awarded the Padma Shri in 2005. Besides, Sanu Lama is the recipient of Bhanu Puraskar of Sikkim (1991), the national Sahitya Akademi Award for Nepali (1993), Dr. Shova Kanti Thegim Puraskar (2001) and Madan Byakhyanmala Puraskar, Varanasi (2001).

What is interesting in the writings of Sanu Lama is that though his stories reflect the socio-cultural life in Sikkim, yet the themes he explores are universal in nature. From migration, poverty, love to women empowerment, the themes will find a resonance with the readers in any part of the world.

A Night With No Dawn: Loss, Memory and Longing

In my paper, I have chosen to closely study the Nepali short story titled “*Bihan Huna Na Sakeko Raat*” (A Night With No Dawn) by Sanu Lama from his short story collection *Suryako Tesro Kiran*. The story revolves around a father-daughter duo, where the father, as a Tibetan escaping persecution, found refuge in Sikkim many years ago. The forced displacement that carries with it the burden of trauma, memories, pain and unresolved questions is poignantly described through the character of the father. The author vividly captures the father’s longing for his homeland and transports the readers to Tibet through his memories. He is haunted by the images of that fateful night when he suddenly had to leave his home and his parents. While the loss still lives on, yet all the memories are not entirely painful. The landscape, for instance, is still unblemished and beautiful in his mind. In my paper, I will be looking at the role of memory as a tool that sustains this longing for home not just for the father but for the daughter as well, who has only heard about it in father’s stories.

Sikkim is one of the many states in India where the Tibetans sought refuge during the mass exodus caused by the Chinese invasion. After 1959 invasion of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army into Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama and his government fled to India, followed by mass emigration of population toward the South of Tibet. In 1975, the Tibetan Welfare Office was established in Gangtok, to look after the socio-economic welfare of the Tibetans residing in an around the region. It serves as a link between the Tibetans in the region and the Department of Home, Central Tibetan Administration. The Tibetan Welfare Office estimates the current population of Tibetan refugees in Sikkim to be around 3240 (according to the population listing of 2015). It is estimated that c.200,000 Tibetans live now dispersed worldwide, half of them in India, Nepal and Bhutan.

The short story by Sanu Lama revolves around the life of one such refugee who fled Tibet as a child and settled in Sikkim, making a fresh start and eventually raising a family of his own. This paper seeks to closely study the role of memory and the trauma that lives on through generations, and how the longing to return to one’s homeland haunts the displaced character. The author vividly describes the memories that a Tibetan refugee has of his homeland. It is as if those moments are still clearly etched in his mind and he can summon those images every time he thinks of home. Every aspect of the landscape of Tibet, the monasteries, the mountains, even his first visit to Potala is narrated as if it was a recent event. The clarity of the memories, sharpened by constant remembrance, points to the desperate need to hold on to

what is sacred, what is lost. This holding on to the memory also accompanies the realization and the acceptance of the truth that he will never return to Tibet.

Here is my translated excerpt from the short story that highlights the significance of memory in overcoming the trauma of forced displacement and forge a connection with his homeland.

“After a while, stepping on the chest of Karponang, passing over Changu and Nathula, he would stop seeing even the thin line of road that was an entry to Tibet. During moments like these, it was only his body that stood on the edge of Gangtok’s Ridge-dara, while his mind and soul, reached Lingkhon, the village that turned warm in the shade of Potala. His small town in Lhasa city was beautiful...He could see the golden roof of Potala burn as bright as fire in the midday sun. His eyes wandered over to see the beautiful flowers blooming in the garden of Norbulingka.”

The image of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet in the memory of the father resonates with the description by Waddell, who produced a complete and fascinating history of the land during the administration of Lord Curzon. This is how Waddell describes his first impression of Lhasa: “At last, Lhasa, the Hermit City, the Roe of Central Asia! From first to last, from far and near this imposing pile on the Potala hill dominates the landscape and holds the eye. This palace of the Buddhist Pope which faces the east is a mass of lofty buildings covering the hillsides about 300 feet high with terraces from top to bottom of many-storied, many windowed houses, and buttressed masonry battlements and retaining walls, and forming the a gigantic structure of stately architectural proportions in the most picturesque of craggy sites.”

It is not just the visual memory of Lhasa that makes the father in the story nostalgic but also the auditory memory of his lost homeland. Like the calm sound of the Kichu river flowing or the sound of his mother’s voice. *“Ama was always soft spoken...He can still hear that soft voice and in his mind, he can still see Ama’s loving eyes”*.

Memory however is not only a reminder of what was pleasant. The event of the traumatic night when he was separated from his parents, his home, from everything that was familiar is as vivid in his mind. He remembers the night when his father returned home injured and bleeding, the hot blood dripping on the floor. *“The image of the ever smiling face of his father contorted by pain, left a mark in the heart of that twelve year old as if branded by a hot iron”*. The trauma of the memory of his father being taken by the Chinese soldiers, the image of the first and last time he saw his mother cry, the hasty send off in the middle of the night with a group travelling south, were all still fresh in his mind even after all these years. He was too young to question what was happening around him, too young to comprehend the consequences of that fateful night that changed his life forever. What happened to those left behind?

“Did his parents ever meet again? The yearning to know the answer to this question is as evergreen in the heart of the old man today. That is why he has not let the thought of whether his parents are still alive or not enter his mind”.

There is a hope, an optimism that perhaps his family is safe and together. This hope is further passed on to the next generation as we see in the story through the daughter. She is optimistic when she talks of a home in Lhasa, a home where perhaps her grandparents are still living. They have certainly aged but still alive for the child. She becomes the voice of consolation for the loss as she tries to explain to her father

how the wound that he saw that night on his father was not as severe as he imagines. He was after all a child then, younger than her, and witnessed it from afar.

The younger generation represented by the daughter in the story act as a consoling balm to the pain that is accompanied by forced displacement. Here the daughter is not only companion to her father on his daily walks, as he seems to be recovering from an illness. But she is also a companion who shares his memories and dreams. She is the generation born away from Tibet, growing up on stories about their homeland and having a hope, or at least a desire, to return to Tibet at some point. But what are the social consequences that will arise if the Tibetan refugees return to Tibet or not?

Tanka B Subba in his *essay "Social Adaptation of the Tibetan Refugees in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas"* addresses this very question. He writes "Let us first see what adaptations may be required if they return. Physical adaptation may not be much of a problem for those who have been living in the Himalayas but will definitely be a problem for those who are settled in the plains. Economically, they will have to adapt to the new economic system introduced by China while they leave a void in the region itself. It is also to be realized that the Tibetan refugees being exposed to the world and its hardships for almost three decades now have not only sharpened their faculties more than their native brethren but also acquired some new values, norms and cultural traits. Thus, while accepting the existing norms, values and institutions of Tibet, they may also successfully influence the native Tibetans to accept the new acquisitions made outside Tibet." On the issue of the Tibetan refugees not returning, this is what Subba writes "Physically, they have already adapted themselves to the various regions where they have settled. Socio-culturally, there may be more influence of westernization than Hinduisation in the time to come. Economically, they may bring about greater competition for the limited 'service' occupations. Optimistically, they will contribute immensely to the tourist economy of the region and the high-altitude economy which is rather neglected today. Politically, they may find themselves treated as second-class citizens without protection and patronage unless they get themselves naturalized and enjoy the benefits of a scheduled tribe as some of them have done in the region in question. But if they choose not to be naturalized, the situation may compel them to form a strong, politically well-coordinated ethnic group and thereby add a new dimension to the ethnic structure of the region. Consequently, the Himalayas where most of the Tibetan refugees have settled may grow more vulnerable to ethnic tensions and conflicts".

Therefore, while the return of the Tibetan refugees to their homeland or not, may have its own physical, socio-cultural, economic and political consequences, yet there is the presence of a common dream within all of them to see and live in a free Tibet. Along with carrying forward her father's pain and predicament, the daughter in the short story, also represents the generation that is born in a different country, with different sociological, economic, political influences than the generations preceding her. In the story, the language of communication between the father and daughter is Tibetan and Nepali respectively. While the father talks to the daughter in Tibetan, the daughter replies in Nepali. This was perhaps intentional on the part of the author to highlight the inevitable influences that the host nation, in this case Sikkim, will have on the next generation, where they will acquire "new values, norms and cultural traits". Here is an excerpt from a special report on Darjeeling and Sikkim areas by the editor of *Tibetan Review*, taken from Subba's essay *Tibetan's in Exile: Economic Pursuits and Ethnicity*. The

editor of *Tibetan Review*, Tsering Wangyalspeaks about the growing use of the Nepali language in Tibetan household. He writes:

“ The most distinctive feature of education- or any other aspect of life in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Gangtok- is all pervasive influence of Nepali culture, more specifically, language... In most Tibetan homes in this region you will find at least some of the members of the family chatting in Nepali. Even the tradition-conscious monastic walls have yielded to this linguistic onslaught... Now many Tibetans are trying to ban the speaking of Nepali at home, although it is difficult to maintain this enthusiasm for long. Invasion of Nepali language seems less successful in wealthier Tibetan homes.”

About this report, Subba in his essay *Tibetans in Exile*, comments that it throws light on the Tibetan-Nepali relationship in the Darjeeling-Gangtok-Kalimpong region as well as “this gives us an idea of how the Tibetan refugees feel about the numerically dominant Nepalese in the region”. Subba writes that Nepali language has an ‘all-pervasive influence’ on not just the Tibetans but “the same influence also pervades a host of other ethnic groups like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris, Biharis, and many other Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups like the Limbus, Newars, Rais, Mangars, and Gurungs, who are commonly subsumed under the Nepali community”. It is only through the use of the Nepali language by the daughter, can the narrator understand or make a sense of the conversations that takes place between the father and daughter.

Conclusion

As the title of the story suggests, “*Bihan Huna Na Sakeko Raat*” translated as *A Night With No Dawn*, there is perhaps no dawn to the darkness that accompanies the trauma of loss and forced displacement. Perhaps, the title points to that one night that changed the life of the displaced character forever, when as a child he had to flee from his home. The absence and the loss that displacement causes however desperately attempts to find solace in the memories that live on. The memories at times are too strong and the pain too much to bear that they overwhelm the father and pour out of him as stories. As these stories are accompanied by tears and smiles, they also become “*the pages of a wounded history for the daughter*”. The only way then of overcoming this trauma, so as to be able to live with it is to share it with the generations that follow and to make it a part of a narrative that holds on to what is beautiful and hopefully less painful.

“*Everything that he recalls now, he finds them all good. He could not find anything bad to say. He must have told her about the flowers that blossomed in summer and spring, about the story of the popular boy from the village whom everybody liked, when he didn't return home. He must have talked about how the sweet music from the bell of the ancient monastery sounded... About the days of terror that overshadowed his childhood and about the painful conversation that his parents had to have for their son. He must have effortlessly shared with his daughter, the unfair suffering that he experienced daily*”.

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