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## LANDMARK

### ‘On the Move’

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#### Abstract

This article emerges from the ongoing global experience of the pandemic when all of us, but especially children, are most acutely in need of empathy. It explores from multiple perspectives the world of emotions, evocative description and imagination in select contemporary works, focussing on fiction about Tibet, in India and in the diaspora. What are the many narratorial and pictorial strategies with which artists bring to life the otherwise abstract concepts of loss, displacement, violence and trauma experienced by children? How do they treat the subjective worlds of individual children? Is it possible to creatively draw on traditional expression forms common to the Indian subcontinent to address our difficult present? Who is the migrant in our midst? This piece may be read as notes on a beginner’s journey.

**Keywords:** migrant, Tibet, diaspora, stories, nomad, Dharma, children

*Poetry is the migrant: it travels.*

*Poetry is the witness: it notices.*

*Poetry is the survivor: it lasts.*

These lines from Michael Rosen *On the Move: Poems About Migration* encapsulate the human condition (Rosen & Blake, 2020). In particular, they mark the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries which have seen the greatest number of people displaced and, often systematically killed, in the known history of humankind.

Through all the physical suffering and the invisible and inter-generational trauma that such movements entail, there is the desire—almost a need—to observe and record. And, so, to create. Words and images, music and

melody, carry lived experiences and memories, sometimes on behalf of those who did not get a chance to express.

Lest we forget, barely a year ago within India, the 'migrant labourer' became a tag for millions of citizens who have been migrating internally across states, and sometimes across porous national borders, for livelihoods.

There are children too who are migrant workers. Many died walking home (Thakur & Painkra (2020).

### **Bearing Witness**

Rosen's lines pulse with an internal temporal rhythm, accented by the pause of the colon: the subject(s) set in motion the verb. Even in the last line, the word 'lasts' embodies movement and generation. The lines resonate with the vulnerability and strength of all expressive forms. They raise questions that haunt all literature:

- How do we express or preserve something that we have experienced as being unique to us, as individuals or as a collective?
- How do we bring in 'others', with their own experiential worlds, to share something of our worlds?
- How do I begin to notice, to familiarize myself with something that seems distant or foreign, or that seems to me not worth knowing?
- Does literature give us a glimpse of other worlds that may seem strange, unfamiliar and distant?
- And, if *we* are displaced and dispersed, scattered across strange or new environments ... as in a diaspora, what do we carry with us? what do we absorb and internalize from our new homelands, even if we consider them to be temporary resting places?
- So, how do we keep alive our language or languages? The script, the sound, the stories and the memories? The losses?

These reflections will accompany us as we move into a handful of stories about Tibet, of Tibet in India and in other lands.

### **The Diaspora**

The writers come from a range of backgrounds, with different language and artistic skills. Perhaps they work with different imperatives, but

they seem to be primarily inspired to explore the central question of displacement and the need to remember. Some writers are more explicitly linked to the global Tibetan cause, i.e. in response to the takeover of Tibet by China from 1959 onwards, and the hope of an eventual return. Others alert us to those who appear to have been 'absorbed' in this vast diverse and multilingual subcontinental nation. More than half a century has passed and new generations have grown up in India and elsewhere in the subcontinent (as in Nepal), even as there are newer flows of migration.

Translation and illustrations will always be central to this process of travel, of representation and internalization by generations who have no lived memory of the homeland.

In the blurb to *Dorje the Yak* (2018), Hartman says, "A small yak goes on a trek through the Tibetan mountains searching for the legendary snow leopard hoping he'll help Dorje discover his strengths".<sup>1</sup> The internet reviews suggest most adult readers have no problem linking the yak's search with the struggle of Tibet to maintain its identity against an onslaught of rapid ecological and economic change.<sup>2</sup> Hartman's own website links her exposure to India, Nepal and Tibet as a scholar and traveller, and her commitment to the Tibetan cause.<sup>3</sup>

A child reader or listener would have a more complex and affective relationship with Dorje the yak as a protagonist, even if she was not aware of Tibet's recent past and her present (M. Sen, personal communication, October 24, 2021).<sup>4</sup> As a bilingual book written by Hartman, collaborating with her translator and illustrator, the visual effect of the Tibetan script would appear as beautiful calligraphy for most non-Tibetan readers, perhaps even evoking a mysticism that many associate with mantras.

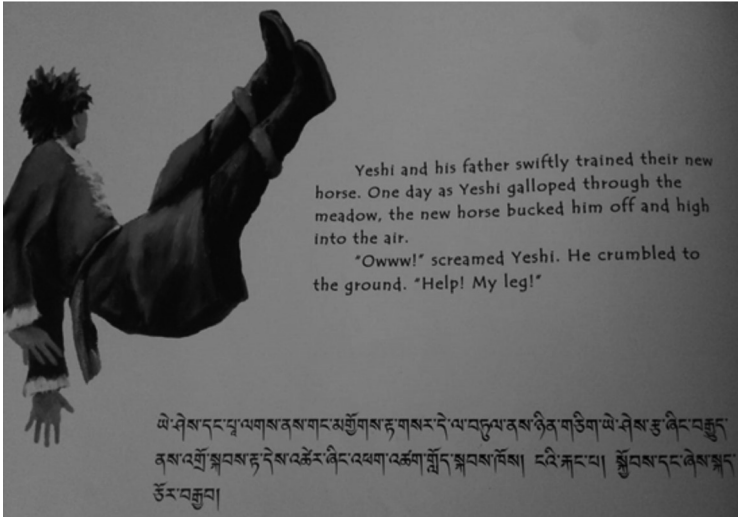
For the translator, however, there is a broader objective, i.e. to make the distant familiar:

Gangkar Lhamo is the pen name for this translator. She was born and raised in Eastern Tibet of Kham and attended an American University. It is her goal to increase cultural understanding and curiosity in the hearts of *all* readers (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

Naomi C. Rose's *Tibetan Tales for Little Buddhas* (2004) also features horses, yaks, a yeti and a sow who is actually a *dakini*, a Tibetan female deity. As the title indicates, the stories have a religious undercurrent

with the Buddhist message of compassion and quiet courage offered quite unembarrassedly. The language of the retelling (in English, at least) is so lively and contemporary that it does not freeze the stories in an exotic and archaic world. The lively speech patterns are complemented by double-spread illustrations in bold and vibrant colours with great attention to facial expressions and dynamic bodily movements (Picture 1).

**Picture 1: Yeshi Takes a Toss!**



Naomi C. Rose, N.C. (Book design and illustrations) & Tenzin, P (Translation). (2004). Yeshi's Luck. In *Tibetan Tales for Little Buddhas* (p.14). Clear Light Publishers.

(For other works of Naomi Rose: <https://www.naomicrose.com>)

Humans and animals appear in a landscape that for many of us may not seem to be the Tibet that we 'know' through photographs, but with many of the iconic identity markers of 'Tibetan', such as the silhouette of yaks grazing, or a string of prayer flags. Rose introduces these before the stories begin as 'words to know' with references to the page numbers where they appear in the illustrations, rather than in a glossary at the end. This experimental many-layered approach defies any easy categorization of the book being secular or religious. Not surprisingly though, the Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data in the book describes it as 'Tibet (China)-Religious life and Customs-Juvenile

fiction.’ The parenthesis and hyphenation are reminders of the geopolitical stake involved in these apparently objective classifications.

In contrast, in the foreword, the Dalai Lama writes of the author and the book:

In it she retells simple stories *that were once told in Tibet and that children anywhere* will find fun to read. Because the stories are set in Tibet, readers in other lands will naturally become aware of the existence of our country and of the values that *we hold dear*” (emphases added).  
(Rose, 2004, Foreword)

The desire here is for a cross-over to happen, for the retold stories to gain a new life in a new language in a new land alongside the traditional script for those displaced and dispersed, and for those shared values (Buddhist but universal) to spread across the world.

### **The Diaspora in Our Midst**

How do I familiarize myself with the unfamiliar or marginalized within my orbit? How do I choose to know more, or not to know?

The two Lama Mani books that I have read by Aravinda Anantharaman are intriguing in that they take on a decidedly non-romantic topic: The Tibetan refugee camps spread across India, particularly in Karnataka. The inside back cover tells us: Aravinda Anantharaman was introduced to the Tibetan community in exile a decade ago, following an interview with a sweater seller.’ Interviews inform and inspire; the stories do something more.

First, they map, in the body of the protagonists, a north-south axis of the subcontinent: in *Dorje’s Holiday at the Gyenso Khang*, the boy travels with his father from Dharmshala to the first Tibetan old age home in India, set up at the Doeguling refugee camp, Mundgod in Karnataka (Anantharaman & Tashi, 2009a).

In *Dolma Visits the City*, male Tibetans from the Phuntsokling refugee camp in Chandragiri, Odisha travel to Ludhiana in the summer months to buy sweaters (on loan) which they then sell in big cities like Bangalore in the winter months (Anantharaman & Tashi, 2009b). They are refugees and also people whose livelihood depends on seasonal migrations to different cities, outside the seclusion of the camps. The seller’s wife and his daughter, Dolma, join him in Bangalore towards the end of his stint.

In both books Anantharaman foregrounds an inter-generational cross-over with Tibetan children born in India who will become, especially in the case of Dolma, quite literally, the voice of the future. It is subtly mentioned that refugees do not have much of a choice about their livelihoods. Her father perhaps had not imagined a life where he would be selling sweaters in stalls on the pavements of a city, something that *his* father had started off with:

Dolma imagines her father as a young boy. She knows that he too had loved to sing when he was younger and wonders if he really wanted to be a sweater seller when he grew up. She knows that she doesn't (Anantharaman & Tashi, 2009b).

The portrayal of the community has an incipient tension: while the refugees support each other and shown in caring relationships, very little of the interaction with 'India' is shown. Dolma observes that while her mother has to be very careful bargaining with prospective customers, many of them are indifferent and some abusive. We will be struck by the phrase that rings across the world, in many tongues, western and eastern, '*vapas jao apna desh*'/ Go back to your own land. It shocks Dolma. The phrase is in Hindi and not in Kannada: does this indicate that the speaker hurling the abuse is herself or himself a migrant from northern India? Or, is Hindi here a *lingua franca* that does not bring together people but throws out people, selectively. There is further irony in the interloping circles of outsiders-insiders. For many decades now, 'the city' has witnessed strong attacks, verbal and physical on people from adjoining Tamil Nadu, escalating with the more recent flow of migrants into the 'tech city' (Engineer, 1994).<sup>6</sup>

Is this why the author chooses to end the story with a comforting circle of community celebrations, albeit in a city that is outside the refugee camp, and outside of the homeland, Tibet? The celebrations are traditional in every way and marks the moment where the baton will be passed on. Dolma has learnt songs that a certain grandmother (used as a term of respect here, rather than indicating biological ties) has taught her and the celebration of Losar, the Tibetan new year, is when "Dolma's clear voice rings out singing the tale of the warrior king of Tibet who will always protect his people".

*lu ala lamo ala len*  
*lu thala lama thala len*

The reader is left to decide if this is a happy ending, or a kind of nostalgic pause, while the future remains uncertain.

### Mobile Storytelling

At the end of the story, Dolma is recognized as inheriting something of the skills of the traditional male Tibetan storyteller: “*Bhuchen* or *Lama Mani* is the storyteller who goes from place to place singing and narrating legends and stories. He carries bundles of rolled-up *thangkas* to illustrate his stories”. It made sense now why the publishing house for Anantharaman’s books is called *Lama Mani*. The gloss led me out of the world of print to the virtual world of YouTubes.

I knew nothing of the *Bhuchen* tradition and wondered how different or similar it was from India’s numerous itinerant narrative traditions which work a continuum of sound-image-performance, as with the *pata-chitra* or painted scroll tradition from Bengal. Several decades ago, a small group of us had created ‘play-texts’ in Bangla from the scroll tradition for children in government schools (Bhattacharya 2012). This art has now entered into a niche print market with *patuas* (painter-tellers) illustrating contemporary as well as mythic stories in English language books.

An excerpt from the description to the film reveals a momentous transition:

It used to be a common sight in Tibet to come across *Lama Mani*, also known as *Bhuchen*, who would preach the Dharma with the aid of scroll paintings...Unlike the formal lamas, a *Bhuchen* would mix informally with the lay people thereby bridging the gap between him and the masses/listeners.

When in 1999, the President of Tibet Fund’s found out that there were ‘only two *Bhuchens* left in the entire community of 130,000 exiled Tibetans...one of the two surviving *Bhuchens*, Gyurmey, in his 70s, was invited from India to teach the art to some young nuns in Thukje Choling Nunnery in Nepal.<sup>7</sup>

In the film, we see many *thangkas* hung on a wall as the teller moves around with a stick which is pointed at characters and their journeys (there a few close-ups of the *thangkas*). He also turns the leaves of a book from time to time. As in many recitative traditions, he deploys a range of narrative strategies: expositions, interjections, questions, innuendos and humorous admonitions...ensuring a direct appeal to the audience. As



one of the nuns iterate, the stories are to be recited 'at a leisurely pace' and with 'a sweet tone'.<sup>8</sup>

The young nuns who are being trained by the last of the traditional storyteller will certainly bring other ramifications to the tradition. They are living in a community outside the homeland; the reception context has completely changed, and the nuns themselves represent a first instance of a woman story-teller entrusted with the task - they are the new 'lama manis'! How will they take on the role of the male storyteller who could be irreverent, scold, even make fun of or joke along with the audience!

Most traditional forms did not work with age-segregated listeners or viewers. I couldn't spot children in the audience, although there were a lot of deeply engrossed old people. "Old people are attached to this tradition...but the youngsters don't seem to bother," remarks the storyteller in the film as well.<sup>9</sup> Is there an inherent comfort in going back to the familiar world of their childhood that we see reflected on the faces and in the words of the elderly audience? The vulnerable faces show a tremendous identification with the sad stories of the characters who have suffered so much, gone through so many trials...most of the older women were constantly wiping away their tears. "When people come to listen to me they get absorbed in the story and momentarily forget their problems. That is Dharma," says Gyurmey.<sup>10</sup>

Since the young nuns cannot simply imitate or 'recreate' the older participative context, they will have discover and establish a new set of relationship between the stories, the images and their own mode of narration for a new generation of listeners. The stories will last, but differently.

### **'Mobile Livelihoods'**<sup>11</sup>

*Nomad's Land* (2020) by Paro Anand works with an intriguing proposition: *what if* two displaced young teens were thrown together in a big city and, *what if* they forge a friendship despite completely different cultures, languages, temperaments and looks?

So, there is Pema, who belongs to an imagined community of nomads (imagined, but drawing on the histories of many criminalized and denotified tribes as well as other pastoral communities), and Shanna from the Kashmiri Pandit community whose father has been killed.



Anand pushes the *what if* across generations carrying their own memories of land, water, and air. She lets the messy and somewhat ‘gap-strewn’ scenario lead the reader to a narrative of commonality that may be found in relationships heightened by violence, loss and silence. The narrative hones in on the human body and aging, of slow pollution in choked urban spaces, as well as the absent or missing clean air that we know is measurable. But ‘forever skies’ may also be a metaphor for the violently displaced families.

*Nomad’s Land* (one is tempted to read it as no-man’s land) is an exploration of emotions of loss, of buried hopes and explicit desires. It has a wish-fulfilling end where past and present come together for a harmonious future. Is there a rather simplistic tying together of conflictual threads? Do the resolutions seem impossible, especially in relation to Kashmir and the new geo-political realities in the region, the specific trajectory of the Indian state in the last decade? What is undeniable is that all families in ‘conflict zones’ are victims of violence, suffering deep losses. Literature is formed as much on what we chance to hear, choose to notice and internalize, as it is about dreams that permeate our subconscious.

### Stories that Stay

In terms of sheer numbers, more children read and perhaps remember stories they find in their textbooks. I turn to a short paper written by one of my students, Londhen Phuntsok (2020).<sup>12</sup> He focuses on a story ‘*Why is Buffalo Looking Up?*’ in a Class III Tibetan primer (Parkhang, 1988/2013). This traditional tale, with many variations, has a yak as the nephew of ‘uncle buffalo, with the yak ‘borrowing’ the warm coat of the buffalo for a visit to Tibet. Once there, delighted with all that the high altitude pastures could offer, he never comes down to the plains again. The buffalo awaits the yak’s return in vain.

The story could fall into the genre of entertaining ‘expository’ tales of why a certain animal or bird or plant looks or sounds the way it does. These may be hand-me-downs or newly minted, like Rudyard Kipling’s playful ‘*The Elephant’s Child*’ in *Just So Stories* (1902). But this story takes on other dimensions for one who has grown up in exile:

It deals with the deferral of a promised future, as buffalo waits for his nephew’s return... [for] Tibetan schools in India include students with mixed histories of migration; the ones who are born in exile and

the ones who have migrated from Tibet. The common link between the flight of the yak in the story and the Tibet-born students, who were themselves participants in such migration, is the search for a better future. (Phuntsok, 2020, p. 3)

The [retold] stories are ... crucial in enriching the different experiences of the children who are effectively taught to see themselves as temporarily displaced people who are like the buffalo looking up, in hope to achieve their ultimate goal of returning to their homes in Tibet. (Phuntsok, 2020, p. 8)<sup>13</sup>

More than a millennium ago, Buddhist jataka tales travelled with merchants, monks and artists to distant places over land and sea. Along the Silk Route, in the oasis town of Dun Huang in Northern China, the caves are still illuminated with vivid murals depicting the jatakas. Once we move beyond the nation-bound monolingual templates of 'children's literature' the journey is unending, the insights illuminating.

## Notes

1. *Dorje the Yak* received the 2019 Nautilus Book Award Winner for Children's Fiction Picture Book and special honors for Best of Children's Books
2. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43069719-dorje-the-yak>
3. <https://carynhartman.com/bio/>
4. My niece, Mrinalini Sen recalled that she heard the story from her class teacher, in Class III. Her (army) family was then posted in Ladakh, which would have given her a sense of affinity with the landscape and the people, with an abiding love of animals, especially strays. As we know, reading/listening contexts also define and drive meaning making at a subjective level
5. <https://carynhartman.com/dorje-the-yak/>
6. This 'othering' is by way of an example: most metropolitan and other major cities in India, which are purportedly open to all Indians, turn jingoistic at the slightest provocation, with generic 'anti-socials' always held responsible for spreading 'rumours'.
  - <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/exodus-of-north-easterners-subsides-in-bangalore-113641-2012-08-18>
  - <https://www.firstpost.com/india/northeasterners-continue-to-face-racist-attacks-in-bangalore-8416251.html>
  - <https://theprint.in/india/bengaluru-has-seen-8-major-riots-since-1986-including-two-over-prophet-muhammad/481085/>

- The harassment and targeting, even to death, of people from the north-eastern region of India in Delhi continues:
  - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/northeast-citizens-faced-racial-discrimination-amid-covid-19-outbreak-says-govt-study/article34303162.ece>
7. Film in Tibetan, with English subtitles, titled *Bhuchen Gyurmey - Lama Mani* (1999/2000) screened at the Festival of Tibet, December 13, 2020. Producer: The Tibet Fund, New York; Editor/Director: Tsering Rhitar Sherpa; Camera: Rajendra Saman, Tsering Rhitar Sherpa; Sound: Rajendra Saman, Rajan Rajbhandary.  
<https://www.facebook.com/festivaloftibet/videos/bhuchen-gyurmey-lama-mani/236737644540923/>
  8. *Ibid.*, at 10.17 minutes.
  9. *Ibid.*, at 21.10 minutes.
  10. *Ibid.*, at 12.05 minutes.
  11. Joshi, G (2021, October 20). 'South Asian populations have historically been highly mobile...the categories at our disposal do not fully do justice to the sheer range of mobile livelihoods.' Lecture on "Nomads' and 'The State': South-Eastern Panjab, c. 1750-1850", Ashoka University.
  12. Phuntsok, L. (2020, January-May). The Yak and the Buffalo' for MPhil. seminar on 'Children's Literature: Childhood, Pedagogy and Expressive Forms'. Department of English, University of Delhi. For variations of the story see, <https://www.pestalozziworld.com/post/the-story-of-the-yak-s-fur>; <https://www.tibettravelers.com/two-friends-yak-and-buffalo/>
  13. Phuntsok, L 'The Yak and the Buffalo'.

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<https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/jamlos-last-journey-along-a-locked-down-road/>. Also see, Mishra, S. (Author) & Aziz, T. (Illustrator). (2021). *Jamlo walks: An illustrated book about life during lockdown*. Puffin.

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