On Emptiness & Form:
Claiming a Tibetan Voice

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Abstract

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On Emptiness & Form is an introspection on the interdependent origination and sustenance of my storytelling. I explore my cultural identity and literary expression through the lens of my journey as a Tibetan political asylee. Excerpts from my memoir, *Vanishing Homelands*, where I chronicle my experiences navigating my three exiles in Nepal, India, and the United States, serve as scaffoldings for the essay by delving into the challenges of displacement, the enduring search for belonging, and the complexities of narrating my account in English. Intertwined with this personal odyssey are moments of meditation where I grapple with the very essence and structure of my craft. Inspired by the Buddhist concept of "Emptiness" from *The Heart Sutra*, the essay rigorously examines the intricate interplay between form and meaning: how does lived experience translate into narrative, and how does the writer's voice, particularly within the context of exile, shape and transform that experience? Literary dialogues through epistolary

exchanges with characters like Tambu from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition* and M. H. Kingston from her memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, explore the role of cultural heritage, diaspora, and foreign influences in shaping creative expression. Additionally, a letter to Lord Krishna, inspired by Jhumpa Lahiri's "Sexy," grapples with cultural appropriation, sacred obligations, and the complexities of self-discovery. Through a synthesis of personal reflection, literary analysis, and spiritual inquiry, this essay aspires to illuminate the transformative power of storytelling in reclaiming heritage and fostering cross-cultural understanding. It invites the reader to contemplate the subtle yet significant interrelatedness of heritage, identity, and belonging in an increasingly interconnected and yet inaccessible world(s), echoing the timeless wisdom of *The Heart Sutra*: "Form is empty. Emptiness is form."

On Emptiness & Form:
Claiming a Tibetan Voice

ཨཨ།	གཟུགས་སྟོང་པའོ།།	Form is empty.
	སྟོང་པ་ཉིད་ཀྱང་གཟུགས་སོ།།	Emptiness is form.
	གཟུགས་ལས་སྟོང་པ་ཉིད་གཞན་མ་ཡིན་ནོ།།	Emptiness is not other than form.
	སྟོང་པ་ཉིད་ལས་ཀྱང་གཟུགས་གཞན་མ་ཡིན་ནོ།།	Form is not other than emptiness.

– *The Heart Sutra* (1.6)

So it begins, in these tranquil moments …

Now, in Suite B-25, Padelford Hall at the University of Washington, “The Creative Writing Program”, I sit before my desk and stare at the bookshelves: *Nervous Condition*, *The Woman Warrior*, *The Interpreter of Maladies and Other Stories*. Each narrative is diverse, diasporic … like my many wanderings, my many sojourns that shape my prose.

Outside, it is bright and sunny. I jest. We are in Seattle, and it is grey, grim, and drizzly. Inside, I stare at a screen, a projection blank white, growing crowded with rows and rows of symbols I once found foreign. These symbols, letters, huddled to yield words; words juxtaposed to form sentences; sentences demarcated by “.”, birth paragraphs; paragraphs congregate on pages, pages that … mean. From the realm of ethereal thoughts and myriad reminiscences, it is thus transformed as I push buttons in combinations and their permutations. Every set of letters, words, interspersed by either one of my thumbs pushing the “spacebar” key, and new paragraphs heralded by pressing “return”.

These are tranquil moments…my quiet breathing, my thudding heartbeats… tranquil and intimate, for the light patter of rain against the window, the muffled clicks. To be truly worthy of such moments, to solicit them in the first place, I toil to still my wandering thoughts. I toil to remember. I am alone and present when I realise how my wandering thoughts, memories of

tribulations of the mind I am chronicling, I am scribbling in the Queen's English. These letters, words, sentences, paragraphs…all in English. Why? Why not my native speech? Because I was not born, nor raised, nor ever resided in Tibet? My dislocation, dispossession, my many displacements? My exiles in Nepal, India, America? Why am I writing my memoir, *Vanishing Homelands: from Asylum to Asylum*, in English? Why not Tibetan? And what form can hold these stories?

I seek answers.

~ ~ ~

I turned fourteen in my second exile.

The 2001 Nepalese Royal family massacre triggered a chain of events that changed everything for Tibetan refugees like me in Nepal. The new monarch, yielding to Chinese pressure, shut down the office of the Dalai Lama's representative in Kathmandu. Rumours began circulating that the Maoist insurgents were targeting us Tibetans. Though I was born in Nepal, the authorities saw me as the other, an outsider. My only recourse was to apply for political asylum in the U.S. In the meantime, I attended the Tibetan Children's Village School in Lower Dharamsala, India.

I know, in retrospect, it's the larger sum of the little things: road signs, business banners, advertisements, radio pronouncements, television broadcastings, posters, and the medium of instruction at school, me wishing my mother, "Good morning," me addressing my father, "Sir", all in the Queen's English, all in Kathmandu, Dharamsala, Portland, Seattle, which addresses my motivations, the subject of my strivings, my scribblings. But what of the form of my art, what of the form they assume, and how I am to transition the ethereal abstractions in my mind, the

incorporeal experiences etched into my memories onto paper? It is in such moments I remember to meditate, to find solace in prayers—the chronicled speech of the enlightened ones.

~ ~ ~

"Form is empty. Emptiness is form."

~ ~ ~

These verses I utter are the essence of *The Heart Sūtra*, a scripture I recite every day. *The Heart Sutra* explains how the Buddha once urged his disciple, Śāriputra, to seek counsel from the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara on training the mind to obtain an intuitive experience of the ultimate reality, or "Emptiness." Avalokiteśvara then explains that any aspiring practitioner must first understand the sheer absence of an inherent existence in any and all phenomena: "Emptiness is not other than form. Form is not other than emptiness. In a similar vein: feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness are empty. Śāriputra, therefore, all phenomena are Emptinesss" (1.6–1.7). I am now thinking about my craft, which, according to Avalokiteśvara, is empty. What I know about it and how I practise it, everything is empty of intrinsic existence. But what does it mean for it to be empty? Avalokiteśvara here assumes that Śāriputra is well acquainted with the semantic distinction in between the "Two Truths of Buddhism":

> The distinction between "The Two Truths" was initially developed to resolve seeming contradictions in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha teaches that persons should act compassionately, that persons will be reincarnated, and that persons do not exist [i.e. that persons are "Empty"]. The first two lessons seem inconsistent with the third. Consistency could be restored by distinguishing kinds of truth: the first and second lessons are conventionally true, but it is conventionally [and] not ultimately true that persons exist. (McDaniel 439)

In discussing the concepts of "Form" and "Emptiness," Avalokiteśvara has ontologically translated the semantic distinction between the "Two Truths" into two modes of existence, namely "Ultimate Existence" and "Conventional Existence." So following McDaniel's statement, persons have "Conventional Existence" but lack "Ultimate Existence" because they are "Empty." And an entity is "Empty" when, to paraphrase Kris Mc Daniel, it embodies any one or more of the three conditions (449): 1.) Its origin/existence is contingent on causes and conditions; 2.) It is composed of interdependent parts or phenomena; 3.) It lacks an eternally fixed and unchanging self.

So if my craft is "Empty," then three corresponding inquiries arise:

1. What caused it to be; what conditions sustain its continued existence?
2. What are its elements, what myriad experiences and literary influences shape it?
3. How has my craft changed, and how not over the years; and how might these reflect (or not) my artistic growth?

Metaphysical musings provoke more questions than they satisfy. What, indeed, are the elements singular to my craft? How is my writing, to paraphrase Emerson, but "part and particle" of the greater cultural landscapes I have traversed, the many literary traditions I have encountered? How do all and each of these enable me to find my voice, to situate myself as a writer? How do all, how do each, shape my writings? As I am writing *Vanishing Homelands*, my memoir holds a mirror where I see these pressing concerns etched within the lines on my forehead. I stare out the window, gaze at my desktop, then above at my books. I see why I have surrounded myself with these volumes. Like Śāriputra seeking counsel from Avalokiteśvara, I shall in turn solicit insights:

1. From Tambu in *Nervous Condition*… here in Tambu's ingenious endeavor to educate herself despite near insurmountable odds, I see how my craft came to be, and the motivations that sustain it.
2. From Maxine H. Kingston in "No Name Woman" … here I see how the elements of my craft began as mimicry of European writers.
3. From Krishna in "Sexy" … Jhumpa Lahiri's evocation of Hindu classics has me trace the evolution of my craft to the present; my voice has shed its Western accent for one more Tibetan.

Now I pause to explore, to meditate, to consider the sheer emptiness of my craft. I shall write to them, to Tambu, Kingston, and Krishna—speak to them from the heart for it was they who first spoke to me …

~ ~ ~

"Waiting for the Seeds": Cultivating Resilience & Growth

Dear Tambu,

It feels like just yesterday that I turned the final pages of your reminiscences in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *A Nervous Condition*. And yet, as I sit down to write to you this letter, I cannot help but attend to a moving image seared into my memory. I see you in your sacred garden, carefully cultivating your plot. You are not a day older than seven:

> By the time the sun rose I was in my field, in the first days hoeing and clearing; then digging holes thirty inches apart, with a single swing of the hoe, as we had been taught in our garden periods at school; then dropping the seeds into them, two or three at a time, and covering them with one or two sweeps of my foot; then waiting for the seeds to

germinate and cultivating and waiting for the weeds to grow and cultivating again. (Dangarembga 38)

How vivid your memories are, dear Tambu, of the infuriating circumstances that led you there. Remember, you were five when Uncle Babamukuru had to leave for England? An enlightened patriarch, so generous a benefactor he was to finance Elder Brother Nhamo's education. No wonder the Catholic mission was so keen to offer him and Aunt Maiguru with scholarships to study at a British University (Dangarembga 29). Do you also remember seeing Cousin Nyasha before she too left with them to England? Did you speak to her? In Shona? Did you quietly play games?

Regardless, in a good school with her in Umtali, Rhodesia, is where you rightfully belonged! I am still aggrieved when I think of how Uncle Babamukuru's departure hindered your dear dreams of learning to read, to write, to do arithmetics. You are seven and, as per Rhodesian Government policy, deemed fit to attend school (Dangarembga 27). Uncle Babamukuru would have sternly advocated for your education. But with him away, Mother Ma'Shingayi had to sell boiled eggs and vegetables at the bus terminus, an initiative that sadly only covered Brother Nhamo's fees, not yours. And what about Father Jeremiah? His words continue to sting me: "Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean." He hissed, "Grow vegetables" (15). These tribulations you faced impact me so profoundly, Tambu, not only because you were just seven. They trouble me also as I know what it is like to be denied what is rightfully yours.

I'm seven. I stare at a television screen. This is home in Kathmandu, my first exile where I was born. I see snowy mountains, vultures soaring high, and a monastery in a valley. Suddenly I hear the thunderous din of heavy artillery wreaking the monastery as an army charges uphill, flashes of gunfire piercing the air, giant red banners adorned with gold stars fluttering

ominously. Monks exit the ruins in two files to surrender, their faces bruised, their robes tattered. I hear my mother silently sobbing behind me, a muffled lament for a loss I cannot yet comprehend. I too am lost in this tumult of emotions. The first time I see Tibet, my vanishing homeland, I see haunting images flickering on the television screen. The first time I see Tibet, I see it without having been there.

Your genius in finding an island of hope in a sea of despair, dear Tambu, your tenacious resolve leaves me utterly astounded. You take your father's poison ("Grow vegetables!") to brew a rejuvenating ointment instead. You grow maize. And by Jove, you grow them well! Of course, you will recall Mr. Matimba's suggestion to sell the green maize to the "Whites" in Umtali rather than at the bus terminus in their village. "When the cobs are fat and heavy," he said, "[the Whites] buy them for as much as sixpence each" (Dangarembga 24). And how lucrative was your first sale: a crisp ten-pound note! Bless Mr. Matimba's good heart. Truly a dedicated teacher he was for ensuring that your savings were spent on your schooling, that they did not fall into Father Jeremiah's prying hands.

Likewise, I, yours truly, found myself in great despair when I was sent away to a Tibetan refugee school. I was thirteen. But here I left no stone unturned to achieve fluency in my native tongue. I committed myself to diligent study, through sickness and health, often rising early and retreating late in the day. Slowly it dawned upon me, dear Tambu, how devastating our shared colonial subjugation is when displacement is coupled with an ongoing erosion of native culture and heritage. Indigenous youths like ourselves have no alternatives but to rely on the perspectives and languages of outsiders to find ourselves. Believe me dear Tambu, only after studying the texts in their original Tibetan was I able to truly appreciate the concessions yielded in their translations.

In your sacred garden, I understand that you were not merely imitating Mother Ma'Shingayi. Pardon me kindly, dear Tambu, if I am being at all presumptuous. I do wonder if you were also honouring the traditional value attached to land in Shona culture where it "meshes with a [more] holistic cosmology [than in the West]" (Manley 27). Did you not evoke this deeply personal and overwhelming sentiment by "mumbling adoring, reverent prayers" to dear Grandmother Mbuya as you worked in the field (Dangarembga 17)? Do these prayers not assume the form of ancestral veneration here? Because you rightfully celebrate Grandmother Mbuya's continued presence, her influence, by remembering her and by abiding by her methods as you cultivated your plot:

> When I was too small to be anything more than a hindrance in the fields, I used to spend many productive hours working with my grandmother on the plot of land she called her garden. We hoed side by side strips of land defined by the row of maize plants each carried, I obstinately insisting I could keep pace with her, she weeding three strips to my one so that I could. Praising my predisposition towards working, she consolidated it in me as a desirable habit…
>
> She gave me history lessons as well. History that could not be found in the textbooks; a stint in the field and a rest, the beginning of the story, a pause… Slowly, methodically, throughout the day the field would be cultivated, the episodes of my grandmother's own portion of history strung together from beginning to end. (Dangarembga 34)

How fascinating, dear Tambu, that in my Tibetan culture we also revere our elders as the living reservoirs of our people's memories, and as living embodiments of our culture, our way of life. Though Grandmother Mbuya has long passed away, she remains very much alive with you and in you, her presence still manifesting through you. I am with you when you reminisce how

together you two tilled, and how much you learned about your history, that of your family, your kith and kin, from your wise grandmother.

I must, however, also confess to finding your choice of “corn,” or “mealies” as you call them in Shona, quite saddening. That was quite so, initially. With one wing rooted in traditional Shona wisdom and the other in modern English education, I am so happy that you have now already ascended to remarkable heights across such diverse domains of learning. And so by now, dear Tambu, I know you understand my initial trepidation at imagining those accursed cereals in your innocent hands, my absolute dread at the thought of the foreign invasive food grains overwhelming the native crops of your homeland. This unseen yet present spectre of British imperial oppression in Rhodesia manifests itself in your choice to grow corn.

Please correct me if I am mistaken, dear Tambu, but surely you know better than I that the very first kernels of maize were uprooted from the colonised Americas to be cultivated in a still-being-colonised Africa through slave labour dominated by the Europeans. And did the British South Africa Company's introduction of maize in colonial Rhodesia not bring about rampant food insecurity and irrevocably disrupt your people’s social relations of sustainable production (Tavuyanago et al. 1)? Furthermore, surely you can educate me more on how the introduction of maize in Africa was directly linked to an increase in population density, internal conflicts, and a higher supply of slaves during the slave trades (Cherniwchan and Moreno-Cruz 137). The mere fact that Father Jeremiah, who, forgive me for pointing this out, often struggled with unemployment and alcoholism, could still spare a few corn seeds for your garden surely must have made you aware of how deeply maize has permeated the Shona way of life to become a staple in your diet (Tikkanen 2). The issue, however, goes way beyond this disturbingly veritable cash crop. I believe it is about the entire colonial system – capitalist, racist, and

exploitative – that enabled the destruction of your people's traditional crops. This system has a lasting impact, contributing to modern Africa's dependence on foreign aid for food security (Tavuyanago et al. 2). Don't you think, dear Tambu, that the legacy of corn, intertwined with the larger colonial capitalist structure, is a key factor in this ongoing disruption of self-sufficiency?

Believe me, dear Tambu, I come here not to accuse you but to accord with the higher order of admiration I can offer. How perfectly does your unshakable resolve to seek independence by cultivating corn through traditional farming methods parallel your dilemma of reconciling your Western education with your Shona heritage? How subtly it hints at the hidden cost of colonial subjugation that clandestinely haunts its victims' psyche, so much so that even in our attempts to better our lot, we end up employing the very tools deployed by our aggressors to enforce our servitude. But your genius, my dear Tambu, is in extracting the very best from the depths of adversity.

Let no one downplay your agency in so successfully employing these very tools to transcend the great many limitations imposed upon you: a woman from a stubbornly patriarchal Shona culture, and a Black woman under imperial domination in Rhodesia. Dear Tambu, your efforts in liberating yourself, that too in spite of being subjected to the very worst of both worlds, ought to be the stuff of legends! Just like you bettered your circumstances by brandishing the very tools of your people's subjugation, I am inspired to write about characters who challenge their perceived disadvantages to instead find opportunities where others see difficulties. I shall write in English about Tibet, and Tibetans. I owe this great debt to you, dear Tambu, for showing me how best to reconcile my Tibetan heritage with my English-medium upbringing. In the act of choosing a language foreign to my cultural roots, I shall likewise echo, I shall likewise honour your yearnings for intellectual emancipation. In this great triumph, will you grant me the

permission of venerating our dear ones who sadly did not fare so well? Let us hold a moment of silence as we dedicate this space to their memories, and let us here venerate them by deliberately remembering their tragic lives.

Cousin Nyasha's words still echo in my mind, a stark reminder: "It's bad enough when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (Dangarembga 150). How sad I am, and how crestfallen, because her tragedy serves as the apotheosis of the dire consequences of linguistic and cultural estrangement. Raised primarily in England, such a brilliant and confident young woman Cousin Nyasha was when she first returned back home to Umtali, Rhodesia. But she unfortunately experienced the internal battles faced by many colonised youths who have acquired a Eurocentric education, but lose touch with their indigenous roots. For Cousin Nyasha, it was the profound sense of alienation from her community owing to her ignorance of Shona language and heritage that left her lost in the chasm between two worlds.

I'm eleven, seated in a classroom. This is a private school in Nepal, one of Kathmandu's finest. I sit still, utterly fixated on a sheet of paper, my 'Tibetan Language & Literature' finals. I feel ashamed of myself because I'm afraid of my native tongue. Feels like I'm afraid of myself. I cannot confess it out loud. I'm a wizard with numbers, with every class taught in English, and even Nepali. But in Tibetan I cannot speak well; I write with a litany of errors committed. Whenever my grandparents talk to me, I nod like an idiot hoping they do not see my incomprehension. When people admire my handwriting, I pray they never ask me to translate. I know I will pass my Tibetan finals with distinction. But I'm not celebrating. This cannot be a win. I feel inadequate, like I'm an imposter.

You see, I know near perfectly what it is like to have this unassailable chasm within oneself, a hollowness that voids the core within, that compelled Cousin Nyasha to decry, “Look what they have done to us? I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you” (294). Through Cousin Nyasha's plight, I now realise how fortunate and fruitful my painstaking efforts to learn the Tibetan language and embrace my roots were. My journey, unlike hers but so much more like yours, led to a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the world. It wasn't always easy, dear Tambu. There were days when the weight of cultural expectations felt heavy, days when I questioned my place in a world caught between two cultures. But just like you, I learned to find solace in the pursuit of knowledge, drawing strength from the wisdom of my elders and the resilience of my people.

I’m thirteen, and I have a sore throat. Lately, I’ve been waking up early at dawn to memorise quatrains from Sakya-Lekshey, a collection of philosophical maxims in Tibetan poetry authored by Rev. Kunga Gyaltsen in the 13th century. The great Sakya Lama forwards a series of verses advocating for proper conduct, rigorous scholarship, and, among other subjects, warnings against human folly. I never could read such advanced Tibetan texts in Nepal. I have therefore committed myself to diligent study. I’ve caught a cold; perhaps some vitamin deficiency, or a scarcity of vital minerals, all induced by insufficient sleep. But that does not worry me. I am delighted with the rapid progress I am making, and I enjoy working hard. So much so that I am excited to learn and discuss it in class.

You have made me proud of my inner journey of re(dis)covering my roots, dear Tambu. In your many struggles to liberate yourself by sowing corn, a foreign grain, I find inspiration to chronicle my exiles and to preserve the lived experiences of my people in English, a foreign tongue. I thank you, and I pray for us. May the rich harvests of our labour continue to yield

untold peace and prosperity, and may we continue to grow, to scale great heights, in our odysseys from the known to the great unknown.

Yours truly,

Tenzin Sangpo Godrukpa

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“Always on the Brink of Disappearing”: "No-Name Woman", Community, & the Art of Form Invention

Dear Prof. Kingston,

I pray this letter finds you well and, pardon the pun, in good spirits. I sit here an ocean away from your ancestral village, the setting of *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, your powerful memoir. The resonance it holds for my own literary journey as an aspiring Asian American writer is unparalleled, for I too am constantly navigating the myriad intersections of cultural heritage with creative expression, its preservation versus assimilation within a larger discourse.

I am reflecting on my initial foray into creative writing, how I was triggered by an eerily similar set of circumstances that forms the backdrop of the episode, “No Name Woman,” from your memoir. Just as this beginning chapter is based on a “talk-story” your mother once told you, my very first writing was deeply inspired by my late grandmother’s harrowing experiences from escaping Tibet after Chinese occupation. These narratives that I have inherited from her, I chronicled because I felt compelled, duty bound almost, to save it for posterity, and to do so in my own words. I feel it, deep in my bones, that this greater sense of urgency also motivates your

writings and mine. I feel a loftier notion of service to our underrepresented communities guiding us; we write not to be heard as individuals, but to give voice to our unheard and often silenced peoples. As you have said, the centre of gravity of our work, and possibly our lives, lies not within us, but in the midst of our communities:

> I think the standard autobiography is about exterior things, like when you were born and what you participate in big historical events that you publicly participate in and those kinds of autobiographies ignore the rich, personal inner life. I feel that it's a mission for me to invent a new autobiographical form [such as *The Woman Warrior*] that truly tells the inner life of women, and I do think it's especially important for minority people, because we're always on the brink of disappearing. Our culture's disappearing and our communities are always disappearing. One of the ways to keep ourselves alive is to recognize these invisible forces that are very powerful in ourselves. (Fishkin & Kingston 786)

It is hard to find a fellow author with whom one has such a great deal in common: aesthetic taste, literary influence, immigrant experience, multilingual background, and so forth; but harder still, dear Professor, is to find someone whose work and life is governed by the supreme principle of putting “Others before self,” to quote H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama. Because in my very limited capacity as a political asylee, I too have striven to do the greater good, and for the greater mass of humanity than for any one human, for yours truly in particular. It was never just to belong and to reclaim my identity that I laboured to rigorously learn the Tibetan language, but also to preserve it. It is likewise never to merely sustain myself materially, but rather to nourish my spiritual yearnings through service that I strive and strain to chronicle the lived experiences of

Tibetan diaspora in the hopes of preserving these for generations to come, so that our struggle for freedom may yet endure. In my own work, I have therefore toiled to most sincerely and authentically consider the trauma of exile, the legacies of genocide, and the wisdom in compassion.

I remember.

I am twenty-three. It's 2013. I now live in Portland, Oregon, my third and final exile. Literature has always been my sanctuary. Tinkle Comics and The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes made my sudden departure from Nepal, my equally sudden arrival in Dharamsala, India, seem blissfully eventful. Anna Karenina, Siddhartha, Midnight's Children, Resurrection, War and Peace: these have given me so many happy moments where I could forget the hardships of my impoverishment, my frequent famishments. But because of the dearth of Tibetans in the sciences, my elders discourage my interest in English literature in favour of the physical sciences.

In Fall 2014, I enrol in Reed College to study maths and physics. There I learn to operate the Reed Nuclear Reactor, fire X-rays on gadolinium nanocrystals at Argonne Labs, and in the summers translate computer programs as a Quantitative Analyst. I am almost always the first Tibetan to accomplish such cerebral feats. But then one day, three years in, when my academic advisor asks me what classes I have enjoyed so far, I do not have a ready answer. I pause. I have always felt uneasy about pursuing a lucrative career while Tibetans in Tibet are burning. All I have to show are some symbolic accomplishments. It dawns upon me how, in my deference to my elders, I have silenced my inner voice, my conscience. It tells me to seek solace elsewhere.

Perhaps it is the great many spiritual traditions that I encountered during my stay and travels in the Indian subcontinent. In many Hindu and Buddhist schools of thought, the notion of

“Self” or “Ego” is considered an illusion; it is essentially “Empty” as it lacks “Ultimately Existence.” It does empirically have “Conventional Existence” but lacks any ultimate reality because it is verifiably “non-substantial, lacks essence in the strict sense, and lacks a non-derivative intrinsic nature” (McDaniel 449). With any attachment to the “Self” thus abolished, all that is left is to dedicate oneself to alleviating the suffering of the greater mass of humankind. And just as charity begins at home, one begins by gradually expanding the circle of compassion beyond oneself to encompass one’s larger community, as you note:

> [A]s the years went by and I wrote more and more perfectly, and I wrote with more and more understanding, then I saw that I really needed to publish, and it was all right to publish, because in that story about the [titular] no-name woman, that punishment that happens to her is very terrible-all these villagers are taking a living creature and saying, we're going to wipe her out of the book of life, we're going to forget about her she never existed. I realised that by writing about her I gave her back life and a place in history and maybe immortality. And then I thought, it's a duty of mine to save her in this way. There's a redemption that takes place in art, and I had resolved questions that would not resolve in life. So of course I had to publish. (Fishkin & Kingston 785-86)

Given the sheer impact *The Woman Warrior* has had on the contemporary literary discourse, and considering how “No Name Woman” has been anthologized and mythologized in textbooks across the humanities, I know how often you have had to address inquiries regarding the veracity of Mother Brave Orchid’s “talk-story”, such as Jenny Wang’s contextual argument against the essential element of mob violence. A scholar of both Chinese and American Literature, Wang notes how unheard it is “that village raids were used to punish a family because a daughter committed adultery [because] it just was not a common practice in Chinese culture”

(Wang 23). As a reader, I can't help but question whether your mysterious aunt, whom you refer to as Aunt No Name Woman, did truly exist. But as an aspiring writer who often needs to likewise employ creative licences due to the sensitivity of my subject, I thoroughly enjoyed your response:

> You mean when the audiences ask me, 'Is it real?' - when students ask that? I think people ask me those things because I put the question in their minds. The people give me back the question I give them. I know why they do it. I meant to give people those questions so that they can wrestle with them in their own lives. You know, I can answer those questions, but then that means I just answer it for me. And what I want is to give people questions (which I think are very creative things)-and then when people wrestle with them and struggle with them in their own minds and in their own lives, all kinds of exciting things happen to them. I don't want people to throw the responsibility back to me. (Fishkin & Kingston 785)

"No Name Woman," however, also strikes a powerful chord in me for an altogether different reason. It is the intertextual connections Jennie Wang draws in between *The Woman Warrior* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings. She notes that your "all-too-familiar literary conceit" is actually drawn from him (29). She compares the beginnings of "No Name Woman" with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* where, not unlike Aunt No Name Woman, Hester Prynne is publicly humiliated before a crowd, and forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her chest for the rest of her life for bearing a child of unknown parentage. Wang observes how "both [Hester Prynne's] lover Dimmesdale and her husband Chillingworth 'mask' themselves in the crowd, watching her punishment, not daring to step forward to protect her" (Wang 28). You will surely agree, Prof. Kingston, that you do likewise wonder if the man who impregnated your aunt also

masked himself to join the crowd, or if he organised a raid when she told him she was pregnant (Kingston 6-7). If imitation is the highest form of praise, then I submit that your inspiration from Hawthorne's classic is surely the highest form of literary homage.

I pray, Prof. Kingston, that you will trust me when I share with you how I too, as a writer, initially found inspiration from white male authors who either wrote in English, or whose works were widely available in English. You have famously shared how you "feel that [you] descended from Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Virginia Woolf" (Fishkin & Kingston 790). For me, it was Tolstoy, Hesse, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolkien, Doyle, and of course, Shakespeare. You can see that my literary ancestors are mostly British, and all Europeans. The result of my upbringing in Nepal and India where the enduring legacy of the British Imperial Raj has left an indelible mark, particularly in the education of literature and languages. And having now lived in the United States for a decade, having studied American literature as a student, I find myself nodding along in agreement in your assessment of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

> I like the freedom that Walt Whitman was using to play with and shape the American language … I like the rhythm of his language and the freedom and the wildness of it. It's so American. And also his vision of a new kind of human being that was going to be formed in this country - although he never specifically said Chinese -- ethnic Chinese also - I'd like to think he meant all kinds of people. (Fishkin & Kingston 784)

I want to explore our shared admiration for the 'Bard of Democracy' because, though I am in perennial awe of Walt Whitman the poet, I have grown to be mindful of Walt Whitman the person. I believe this is where our differences begin, Prof. Kingston, because whereas you are a US citizen by birth, I was a political asylee for the first three decades of my life. I agree with you, wholeheartedly, on how profoundly moving his *Leaves of Grass* is with its unapologetic

spirit of reciprocity and inclusion, with the sheer cosmic scale of his vision, and his celebration of a new American spirit (Fishkin & Kingston 784-90). But I must pause and soberly reflect. How will his triumphant universalism, one conceived by a White man in the 19th century, accommodate my reality, and the realities of the many invisible, and the many silenced? Do we have a say in what his new America and his new American will be, or are we to simply celebrate him, sing to him, and assume what he assumes? Will our faces be seen, and our memories be cherished, or are we to simply merge into the collective, and concede our differing realities before the altar of "this new nation, under God" whose *Manifest Destiny* will, by all means, be affirmed?

This is true for my White literary forefathers from whose works I have gained so much, but of whom I have learned to be careful about, for they were all too human. In the end, good intentions, imagination, and empathy only go so far. If there is anything I have learned about the United States, it is that to be heard, one must speak and write loudly, and that to be seen, one must rise and struggle. This is especially true for us, writers and poets from underrepresented communities; and not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is necessary for literature to thrive. In the greater literary discourse, we have to claim our own space for our stories and experiences to be a glaringly visible-audible-inseparable part of the great American discourse. I am not removing or replacing their seats, but rather adding more chairs to welcome a plethora of fresh, vibrant, and electric narratives that will only add and contribute more life, which are, in deed and words, more representative of the United States today.

Your narrative weaves a tapestry of cultural reflections, mirroring my own trajectory as a writer and an individual navigating the intersections of heritage and creative expression. Especially when it comes to literary influence, your footsteps echo my initial foray into writing. My literary

pilgrimage reflects a phase of mimicry, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, wherein my prose and perspectives mirrored the dominant voices of Western authors (122).

I remember.

I am twenty-six now, and it is the Fall 2017. I have taken a hiatus from science in search for an alternate endeavor. I want to make a lasting difference to my people, to employ all my faculties to the fullest. I seek a worthy pursuit where all my experiences as a Tibetan refugee really matter to the discipline, rather than just serving as a token of diversity and inclusivity. I again seek solace in Literature and find it. But I find also a staggering abundance of stories chronicling the experiences of the Tibetan diaspora aching to be told, and preserved for posterity. Based on my grandmother's recollections of how she decided to leave Tibet in 1959, I write "Deliverance." In "Exile," I explore the horror of the 2006 Nangpa La massacre where Tibetan refugees fleeing Tibet for Nepal were gunned down by Chinese border guards. The CIA discontinues support for a band of Tibetan guerrillas in "Cold-War Orphans" after Pres. Nixon's 1972 visit to China. The evenings I devote to writing stories about Tibet and Tibetans, my land and my people, are among the most fulfilling.

Here in Suite B-25, Padelford Hall at the University of Washington, I sit before my desk. Now it is spring 2024. I revisit "Deliverance" and "Exile." At a fiction workshop, someone said "Cold-War Orphans" has a Western feel. This is interesting. It tells me that my initial foray, while about Tibet and Tibetans, decidedly has a Western gaze. I have been thus far imitating writers whose works have meant so much to me, almost all of them non-Tibetans. Now, I scribble stubbornly in my own voice, one that is mine. Now in these tranquil moments, now when I

meditate on the emptiness of my craft, now as I chronicle my reminiscences in my memoir, I must address these greater forces and traditions shape me as a writer.

I therefore seek to lighten myself off the heavy encumbrance of old habits, away from the confines of literary mimicry to seek authenticity, to find my distinct voice. All this, and a lot more to begin with, to hope they aid me in finding my own voice, to tell my story, to carve a corner for myself, a home. I have learned so much from you, Prof. Kingston. Thank you.

Yours truly,

Tenzin Sangpo Godrukpa

~ ~ ~

I pause, pause but do not quite cease.

The act of finding one's voice and breaking free from prescribed roles and forms is a struggle. Where am I to proceed, and how, to find creative emancipation?

With a prayer?

~ ~ ~

The Divine in the Mundane: Unveiling a Krishna Līlā in "Sexy”

Hare Krishna-Vasudev!

Obeisance to you, o’ divine trickster, o’ wisest Guru, o’ defender of Dharma!

How, within the pages of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Sexy," you so effortlessly weave this enlightening fable of desire, deception, and ultimately, a poignant journey of self-discovery for a young devotee, the woman Miranda! Disguised as Dev, a seemingly ordinary Bengali man,

how sublimely does your presence spark a whirlwind of emotions and contemplation, how suddenly you prompt a deeper reflection on the complexities of human connection across cultural divides!

In her initial attempts to know Dev better, not realising it was you all along, Miranda attempts to explore his heritage. Miranda is a white woman and her engagements, although driven by a relatively benign interest to learn, are ultimately superficial because they are kindled by her affair with Dev who is married, and primarily driven by her relationship with him. She is thus unable to truly appreciate and revere the cultural and historical significance. Her hollow performances equal cultural (mis)appropriation.

> [Miranda] walked all the way to Central Square, to an Indian restaurant, and ordered a plate of tandoori chicken. As she ate she tried to memorise phrases printed at the bottom of the menu […] The phrases didn't stick in her mind, and so she began to stop from time to time in the foreign-language section of a bookstore in Kenmore Square, where she studied the Bengali alphabet in the *Teach Yourself* series. Once she went so far as to try to transcribe the Indian part of her name, "Mira," into her Filofax […] It was a scribble to her, but somewhere in the world, she realised with a shock, it meant something. (Lahiri 106-107)

In this instance, her interest is clearly more about the novelty of her relationship with Dev, rather than a deeper understanding of the Bengali language and its importance in his cultural background. Alas, no wonder she fails to recognize you, hey Krishna. But I recognized you. Hence why, I dedicate to you this hymn of how hard I laboured to see you by first reading before the lines, then in between them before going beyond them.

Growing up in Kathmandu, I was steeped in local legends, both Nepali and Tibetan. Elders spoke of the valley's origin as a vast serpent-filled lake. Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom, cleaved a path with his sword, draining the waters and revealing the valley floor. A glorious city thrived for ages, only to be submerged by a malevolent demon who sealed the outlet. But then, o Krishna, you intervened! You vanquished the demon on the surrounding hills and with your divine discus, carved a new path through Chobhar Hill, draining the lake once more. Alongside your followers, mostly cowherds, you rekindled life in Kathmandu, re-building the city that thrives to the present era.

Nepal, then a Hindu kingdom and still the birthplace of the Buddha, celebrated a culture where Hinduism and Buddhism intertwined harmoniously. In the valley, we have Hindu temples with effigies of the Buddha worshipped, and monasteries with Hindu shrines within their premises. After all, isn't Gautama Buddha your spiritual cousin, Krishna, as you are the two avatars of Vishnu (Schneider 77)? And do we in Nepal not revere our Shah monarchs as another incarnation of Vishnu? As an imperfect yet dedicated believer of the Buddha Dharma, and your subject who holds Kathmandu in his heart as his home, I pray you grant me this much: that my reverence for you is genuine.

Little did I realise then, in my thirteen year stay in Nepal, that I had already been reading “before the lines”. I mean the years of studying the foundations of your philosophy that enable me to most appropriately contextualise, and hence honour, your actions in “Sexy.” How could I have missed this? Hey Krishna, I have travelled to the hallowed grounds of Kurukshetra, India, where before the great Battle of Mahabharata, you preached the *Bhagavad Gita* to the mighty Arjuna. Of the many stirring verses you have uttered there, I never forgot your divine promise, your prophecy, to the descendent of Bharata. How powerfully you proclaimed that you shall

incarnate to restore the balance of righteousness whenever the vices are ascendent (*Bhagavad Gita* 4.7 – 4.8)?

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।	Whenever the Dharma should subside, O Bharata,
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥	And a-Dharma should rise, I shall manifest Myself!
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।	To uphold virtue, to abolish wickedness,
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥	To restore the dharma, I am born from age to age!

How may I best express the sheer ecstasy of finally meeting you here, o' mischievous one? For years I have craved your wisdom, hey Krishna! I have read aloud your profound teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* and marvelled at your heroism in the *Mahabharata*, the greater epic of which the former is an episode. Of the former, are your transcendent verses in this *Song of the Universal Being* not rightly deemed the ideal elucidation of two millennia of Hindu philosophical thought? And of the latter, did a scholar not argue it to be more than merely a collection of stories, but "a world" (Doniger 4)? I do fully concur, and second the notion that the events in the *Mahabharata*, like your lessons from the *Bhagavad Gita*, may be found elsewhere; but what is absent here cannot be present anyplace else.

Lahiri is at the pinnacle of literary finesse when delving into these Hindu epics that sing your praises. Such a treat it was to find you in between her lines, such a revelation her intertextual evocations still are. The parallels between yourself, the omnipotent lord of the universe, and your chosen form, Dev, are as intentional as they are captivating. And it all begins with the name, "Dev." Meaning "god" in Sanskrit, this name instantly imbues this avatar of yours with an air of mystery and allure. This connection is further emphasised by Dev's dark complexion, a subtle echo to yours:

> The man (Dev) was tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles. He wore a flamingo pink shirt, a navy blue suit, a camel overcoat with gleaming leather buttons. In order to pay he had taken off pigskin gloves. Crisp bills emerged from a burgundy wallet. He didn't wear a wedding ring. (Lahiri 95)

How interesting that your name, "Krishna," comes from the Sanskrit for "Black" and "Dark?"

Miranda, captivated by the exotic, finds herself drawn to your enigmatic figure, you who embody a world she only vaguely comprehends. And what of Dev telling Miranda, as he follows her out of the department store, that a part of her name, "Mira," is Indian. Hey Krishna, does the name not remind you of someone? How about your most celebrated, most dedicated devotee?

> [Mira Bai] was the sixteenth-century daughter of a minor royal house in Merta, in the region now called Rajasthan […], promised to the ruling family of the kingdom of Mewar in southern Rajasthan in an arranged marriage of political alliance. Deeply devoted to God in the form of Krishna […], she refused to behave as a proper wife and woman of her caste and class should, rejecting the validity of an arranged marriage and its attendant privileges, refusing the seclusion required of royal rajput (warrior caste) women, and voicing and embodying her passion [for Krishna] in the company of devotees from every walk of life, male and female, low caste and high. She resisted all attempts to isolate her and to silence her, standing her ground in the face of social condemnation, familial coercion, and feudal domination. She refused to break under the pressure or to die in spite of repeated attempts on her life, and she eventually left her marital home to become a wandering and widely recognized Hindu devotional saint. (Martin 2)

How many devotional hymns did Mira Bai pen where she expressed her intense emotional attachment to you; how she employed everyday images and through easily accessible analogy of human relationships ranging from a mother's love for her child, to a woman's love for her paramour? Here's a translation by Robert Bly in which Mira Bai sings of abandoning all her worldly possessions and privileges to follow you:

> What I [sacrificed] was my social body, my town body, my family body, and all my inherited jewels.
>
> Mira-bai says: The Dark One (Krishna) is my husband now.
>
> Be with me when I lie down; you promised me this in an earlier life. (5-6)

Through your chosen form, Dev, you engage in a playful dance with Miranda, both alluring and ultimately challenging her cultural assumptions. However, the relationship between Miranda and Dev, like the relationship between Mira Bai and you, is not without its complexities. As Christopher Apap aptly observes in his article "Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Sexy' and the Ethical Mapping of Subjectivity," "Dev is utterly in control. Miranda's ignorance smacks of American chauvinism" (57). You wield your omniscience, your knowledge of Bengali culture, as a tool of power, leaving Miranda perpetually on the outside looking in. The scene in the Mapparium exemplifies this power dynamic perfectly.

You navigate the complexities of this earthly realm with such effortless ease, pointing out India and the deepest point on Earth. Miranda, on the other hand, struggles to locate even the Bahamas, a place she has actually visited. Apap argues, "The map forms one way of demonstrating knowledge" (57). In this instance, it is Dev who wields the power, and knowledge becomes synonymous with control. And in yet another display of this 'power,' he positions Miranda at the opposite end of the bridge within the Mapparium, telling her she would hear his

voice. She does not believe him. But despite the thirty-foot distance between them, she distinctly hears him whisper the words, "You're sexy," exactly as he had predicted, a claim she had previously doubted (Lahiri 101).

Miranda and Dev's ensuing romance so closely resembles Mira Bai's and yours. It is the women who are truly devoted to the men. And the two relationships are unequal because in both cases, it is you and your avatar "Dev" who exercise true control. Yet, with you working your magic behind the scenes, "Sexy" goes beyond this simple exploration of power imbalances. As the story progresses, Miranda's self-awareness blossoms. A pivotal moment comes in her encounter with Rohin, the child of Laxmi's cousin whose husband is having an extramarital affair. Laxmi, Miranda's co-worker, tells her about the affair at the very beginning of the story (Lahiri 92-3).

Hey Krishna-Vasudeva, you will surely recognize the name "Rohin."

Do you not remember how Lady Rohini supported Mother Yashoda to nurture you, and to raise you like her own son (Vemsani 233-34)? How about Queen Rohini, your royal consort, with whom you reigned as king and queen of the Kingdom of Dwarka (Venkatesananda 301)? These subtle details foreshadow the impact young Rohin will have on Miranda's journey.

When Miranda babysits Rohin, Laxmi's cousin's son, his childlike curiosity takes center stage. He becomes captivated by the silver dress Miranda purchased, a dress she purchased while imagining herself donning it when dining with Dev. Rohin's parents are divorcing because his mother has discovered his father's extramarital affair. That is probably why Miranda gives in to Rohin's stubborn entreaties to put on the dress in her room. The moment, however, takes an unexpected turn when Rohin, his eyes wide open, declares, "You're sexy" (118). Miranda is stunned, her heart skipping a beat, as she realizes just how uncannily Rohin's compliment echoes

the very same words whispered by your avatar, Dev, during their encounter at the Mapparium. Here however, in the innocent eyes of a child, the word "sexy" is stripped of its usual connotations, a stark contrast to how Dev used it for manipulation or flattery. And sure enough, upon Miranda's insistence that Rohin tell her what the word "sexy" means to him, Rohin says, "It means loving someone you don't know" (119). This prompts her to imagine the quarrels Rohin must have heard from his parents, the grief his mother is living through, and quite possibly the pain she is already causing Dev's wife (116-119).

Hey Krishna, was it your divine will to knowingly cause this event so that Miranda would be forced to confront the objectification she has so willingly participated in? The revelation here is that Laxmi's cousin is a real person, and this is another pivotal moment in Miranda's arc. How deceptive simple and sublime this truth you teach is, like $E = mc^2$, and yet how profoundly transformative and ground-breaking its implications? This revelation shatters Miranda's carefully constructed cultural stereotypes and fosters a sense of connection with Rohin's mother. Suddenly, Miranda sees beyond the fabricated narrative she created in her head. The "exotic extramarital affair" loses its allure, replaced by a sense of empathy and a recognition of shared experiences. This shift from superficial appropriation to genuine understanding reflects a turning point in Miranda's journey. It's within this context that Dev's words, "You're sexy," take on a new meaning for Miranda. Initially, they fueled her infatuation, serving as a confirmation of her exotic allure in his eyes. However, after her encounter with Rohin and the revelation about Laxmi's cousin, they begin to feel hollow. As Miranda reflects on Dev's actions, she realizes that the word "sexy" wasn't about her at all. It was about the power dynamic Dev cultivated, a way to keep her at a distance and maintain control.

Rohin's prophetic words, "Because we're never going to see each other, ever again," therefore cast a shadow over Miranda's relationship with Dev (Lahiri 115). They become a reminder of the inevitable end, a truth she has desperately tried to ignore for far too long. Furthermore, Rohin's insistence on Miranda wearing the silver cocktail dress, and the ensuing events, serve as a stark reminder of the unhealthy dynamic at play (Lahiri 116-117).

Hey Krishna, here, I see a parallel to your relationship with some of your devotees. While you are often depicted as a lover, your true purpose is to guide them towards spiritual enlightenment, for the greater good, to uphold the Dharma. This dynamic reminds me of the concept of "Līlā," the divine play, a core tenet of Vaishnavism, a branch of Hinduism that worships you as the supreme deity.

> [Viṣṇu] enters into the midst of an effect of His, He does so freely as an *avatāra*, by way of His *līlā*, to complete the number of entities of the particular category of effect in question, so as to benefit the world. So, through *līlā*, the Highest One completed the number of gods by becoming Upendra; again, the Supreme Brahman freely became an *avatāra* in the form of Daśaratha's son [Rāma] to complete the number of kings of the solar dynasty, and again the Lord freely became an *avatāra* [as Krishna] in Vasudeva's house to complete the lunar dynasty in order to relieve the burden of the earth. (van Buitenen 138)

Dev's actions, though seemingly romantic, are ultimately a means of challenging Miranda's erroneous presumptions. Just like Arjuna in the Mahabharata, you are testing her will by confronting her to choose between her desire and her Dharma. And by rejecting Dev's advances and embracing self-awareness, Miranda chooses her Dharma and therefore achieves a form of liberation. She breaks free from the controlling dynamic and transcends the limitations

of her initial cultural ignorance. Her story becomes a testament to the power of self-discovery and the importance of approaching cultural nuances with empathy, not appropriation.

"Sexy" is not without its ambiguities. The ending remains open-ended, leaving the reader to ponder Miranda's future. Will she continue to explore Bengali culture, now with a newfound understanding and appreciation? Or will she retreat into her familiar world, forever marked by this transformative encounter? These unanswered questions are what make “Sexy” so compelling. They invite the reader to participate in Miranda's journey, to reflect on their own cultural biases, and to grapple with the complexities of human connection across cultural divides.

You, Krishna-Vasudev, have gifted us with a līlā that is both intimate and expansive. “Sexy” delves into the depths of human desire while simultaneously prompting us to consider the broader themes of power, identity, and the yearning for connection. Through your chosen form, Dev, you offer a glimpse into the complexities of human relationships and the transformative power of self-discovery.

And what of my impressions as a writer, of how “Sexy” has me dwell on the evolution of my craft? A part of me acknowledges the West, another pays homage to the East. Writers like me born to first-generation immigrants in America, writers like me but before me—when I read your līlā, hey Krishna, I see not wholehearted imitation, but also sublime resistance. Here I see a narrative engaging with the twin-paradox of mimicry and decolonization, for though the story is narrated in English, the līlā is very deliberate in its evocations of Hindu classics and deities such as yourself, hey Krishna. Looking back on my writings, I am now able to better see how, during my initial forays in writing, I so eagerly sought to reproduce the voices of Dickens, Doyle, and company. Now, I wonder if this might have to do with me learning to write about my experiences with the convenient crutches of an outsider’s gaze, just as I did when learning about my heritage

through texts translated in English. And just as reading the volumes in the original Tibetan revealed the many concessions yielded in the translation process, stories like “Sexy” have me see the glaring blind spots when writing about Tibet and Tibetans with a Western gaze. I now see my craft is as ever changing as I am growing and my voice, though shaped by innumerable influences and my roots, is becoming distinctly my own. When I revisit my first scribblings, I often cannot recognize myself in the pages because in my more recent writings, in *Vanishing Homelands* and “Sharpa from Kathmandu,” my voice seeks independence, and my prose more critically engages in self-examination.

I am therefore grateful, hey Krishna, for these insights your līlā has solicited within me. With a namaste, I fold my palms to bow to the divinity that you are. I do so in gratitude, for reminding me also of the enduring lessons embedded in your timeless tales.

With reverence and reflection,

Tenzin Sangpo Godrukpa

~ ~ ~

Vanishing Homelands: From Asylum to Asylum, A Letter to Myself

What you now yearn to do is to remember, to remember so that you can write.

Now we are seated on a bench before our study desk.

Upon the desk before us, right at the middle, is a notebook. At its right-side is a green fountain pen and at its left, a ‘Royal Blue’ inkpot. The spine cracks and claps like weary knuckles, or like the muffled rumblings of thunderclouds high and heavy, when we turn the hardcover open. Every page we skim has rows of four lines: the ones on the top and bottom are bold and red, the two lines in the middle are blue and dim. The cool pages

smell fresh of crushed twigs, of paper glue and scented dyes warmed dry then hard-pressed. (Sangpo 4)

Ever so lightly guided by the impalpable hands of your memories, you labor to put pen on paper and scribble your memoir, *Vanishing Homelands: From Asylum to Asylum*. Why "Vanishing"? Because of how illusory your homelands are, how utterly empty that when the pall of false hopes is unveiled, they fade away, they disappear? Because your homelands were mere constructs of your mind, a desperate clinging to an idea of an ideal, and yet so delicate that a mere whiff of misfortunes blew them away, scattering you and your people far away? Is that why you write, so that your homelands attain some semblance of a form that can be preserved, cherished, and revisited even? Your wanderings as a Tibetan refugee are intricately woven into the narrative because your exiles have shaped your very identity, a constant search for "home" amidst the forced displacement of your family by the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. This journey is the core of your memoir where each encounter with a new language and culture becomes a step closer to self-discovery.

"Form is empty. Emptiness is form"

For the most part, *Vanishing Homelands* unfolds chronologically, tracing your journey across three distinct exiles: Nepal, India, and the United States. But why begin from the past? You are merely projecting how you think, a convenient template: beginning in Nepal, middle in India, end in the United States? And the interruptions by a more mature voice from the present complicating the otherwise largely conventional three-act structure borrowed from narrative fiction: setup in Nepal, confrontation in India, resolution in India? It is more likely the case that to make sense of your present, to do so before wading through the thick foggy and rugged terrain of the future, you seek to understand where it all began, to ascertain for yourself how it all

progressed to the present. It is now clear you are writing of yourself to and for yourself. You are your primary audience.

That is why *Vanishing Homelands* is divided into three sections which correspond to your three exiles, each roughly encompassing a decade of your life and a pivotal academic pursuit that intersects with your personal search for identity. The first section – the beginning, the set up – is about you growing up in Nepal where your English-medium education limited your Tibetan fluency. Your only avenue of exploring your heritage was through books and cinema about Tibet and Tibetans in English. The second section – the middle, the confrontation – about your stay in India finds you at the Tibetan Children's Village School. Here your efforts to learn your native tongue rekindles your awareness of your roots; it enabled you to learn about your roots through texts in their original Tibetan editions. Finally in the third section – the end, the resolution – you are here in the United States where you hope to share your experiences, your cultural explorations, and academic pursuits, by writing.

"Emptiness is not other than form."

You have chosen a first-person plural voice that allows both you and the reader to directly experience your exiles, your inner thoughts and emotions. This intimate perspective obliges the reader to connect with your struggles and triumphs as a Tibetan exile as if it were theirs. The narrative seeks to achieve this effect through impact, through the power in the brevity of small moments, each serving as a microcosm of larger forces such as exile, terror, displacement, invasion, cultural annihilation, and indigenous sovereignty. These fleeting glimpses, condensed into concise vignettes, become potent containers for a larger narrative, making the overwhelming complexities of such experiences more manageable and comprehensible. It is within these compact spaces that the gravity of the events covered become most pronounced, allowing the

succinctness of language to amplify the emotional resonance and thematic depth. Through these flashes of insight, *Vanishing Homelands* tightly weaves together the threads of personal experience and broader historical context, creating a tapestry of interconnected stories that resonate with enduring significance.

> *"Do you understand what they are saying?" we ask Acha, helpless, and unhappy with being so helpless. She slowly nods her head, her eyes and ears still affixed at the show.*
>
> *"What language is it?"*
>
> *"Tibetan," she says. (Sangpo 27)*

Beyond a shared personal narrative, you pray *Vanishing Homelands* will address the scarce representation of Tibetan voices in world literature, that it may serve as a testament to the indomitable Tibetan spirit, a celebration of our complex tapestry woven from exile, and a tribute to our relentless pursuit of belonging. Through an interplay of fallible memories, subjective reflections, and subjugated historical context, you labor to weave together an intricate embroidery of your life, one that blurs the line delineating the reader from the writer so that they almost become inseparable. Ultimately, you hope this memoir will spark contemplation about the nature of truth and authenticity, inviting readers to explore the essence of personal narrative and collective memory. The larger questions *Vanishing Homelands* will raise is about where in it does the truth dwell.

"Form is not other than emptiness."

So you reach into your satchel to find, then open a blank notebook. On the first page, you see Tambu's sacred garden. In her precocious little hands, one holds a fistful of corn, and the other carefully picks a grain and firmly presses it into the ground. Then you see yourself, a mere child of five, seated before a study desk and wielding a sharpened pencil, scribbling slowly some

verses from *Sakya-Lekshey* in Tibetan on the notebook open before you. How auspicious, you have just finished penning the ideal quatrain that you now translate, and dedicate to Tambu, to honor her, and celebrate her:

> When learning do scholars toil,
> yearning for ease you learn not.
> The allure of idle thrill,
> wisdom's bliss it contains not. (Jamspal 15)

Now you both look away from our tasks, Tambu staring beyond her plot as you do outside through the open windows of your classroom. Together you see friends happily playing games, together you wish you could join them but instead, you look at each other. Her kind eyes gaze into yours to see episodes, a great many, of your shared struggles. They then deliberately read, her eyes, the thin lines scarring your forehead, the numerous blemishes that mar your cheeks, you face. Many do but rarely will anyone understand what they see. You are old enough to know she understands you, better than you yourself ever could. Already you see fault lines deepening on your delicate forehead, the beads of sweat glistening in the afternoon sun. Unlike yourself, you see she is not one to dwell in her misfortunes for long. You thus regard one another, with compassion and in recognition. You bow to her, slightly, as she smiles at you and nods. Then you tend to the tasks before you.

You hesitate to move. More than anything, more even than the inertia of the past, is the familiar uncertainty of the future ahead. You close your eyes to seek solace in your memories, you appeal to logic and reason to predict, you pray to benevolent deities for guidance. You see nothing, you feel nothing. You are lost, and so you remain still and stiff when, suddenly, you hear a hymn from the *Gita* (2.47 – 2.48):

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।	Solely entitled to your duty you are, never the fruits.
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि।।	Let not the fruits be your motive, nor seek inaction.

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय |
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते॥

Steadfast when doing your duty, O' Arjuna, remain tranquil in victory & defeat. Such poise is Yog.

The stories you write onto your notebook, motivated as they are by a greater cause, will in time likewise open the doors to your heritage, and unfurl great mirrors. May the mirrors enable your readers see themselves in your stories and have empathy, and through the doors, may they enter a new world of your people's heritage!

May your shared trials against greater injustices yield successes dissimilar in their situation perhaps, but nevertheless shared in spirit! May these in turn leave proud precedents and decent legacies for generations that have yet arrived! May they yield purpose to lost souls wandering the dreary deserts of domination and despondency; may they be provoked and prompted to act on their resolve of reclaiming, reconstructing, resurrecting, and/or re(dis)covering their very own "sacred gardens" to self-emancipation! May they yield forms we have yet to imagine! May our meditations on their ultimate emptiness enlighten our higher appreciation of their conventional existence!

"गते गते पार गते पार संगते बोधि स्वाहा॥
Gone, gone, gone to the other shore beyond. O such an awakening, all hail!"
(*The Heart Sūtra* 1.15)

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