

## Representation of Migrant Tibetan Intellectuals: Knowledge, Culture and Politics in Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel*

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### Introduction

As an exiled community, Tibetans have been searching for the recognition of their culture and values since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950. Being in perpetual exile, Tibetans have consistently attempted to express the richness of their culture and original homeland. Contemporary Tibetan writers, as Koushik Goswami observes, seek to map the memory of the displacement of their community from the homeland while also trying to “nurture a free Tibet in their national imaginary” (Goswami 2020, 1). Most of these writers, located in the West, are keen on representing their cultural heritage, but these representations are often influenced by the mechanism of production and consumption of knowledge. Dissemination of knowledge by migrant Tibetan intellectuals is an important issue that can be best understood by reading Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's novel, *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2013). Khortsa is a representative author of the Tibetan diaspora, and being a journalist by profession, Khortsa's experience of migrating from Tibet and settling in America has been fictionalised in the writing of the novel, *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2013). This semi-autobiographical novel portrays the relationship between two Tibetan diasporic intellectuals, a journalist and a creative writer. Their lives intersect in the city of Dharamsala, a place in the state of Himachal Pradesh of India, which is the adopted homeland of the exiled Tibetans. The creative writer, Dawa Tashi, narrates his experience of migrating to America from India, and this experience highlights the American attitude towards the migrant Tibetan intellectuals. In Dawa Tashi's narration, there is a reference to a great Tibetan scholar, Professor Khenchen Sangpo, who is a distinguished academic settled in America. Both Dawa and Khenchen are Tibetan intellectuals striving to popularise the significance of Tibetan art, culture, and values. Despite their efforts to disseminate Tibetan cultural values in American academia, American universities

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and government-sponsored agencies seek to use them as cultural signifiers meant for publicity and advertisement instead of endorsing their perspectives. This reading of the novel can be theoretically substantiated by referring to Edward Said's book, *Representations of the Intellectual*, which analytically studies the role and representation of modern intellectuals, and Hamid Dabashi's critical volume, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, which explains the author's perspective on the circulation of knowledge in the post-orientalist world. Reading Khortsa's novel from Said's and Dabashi's perspectives is imperative in the present scenario as many Tibetan intellectuals dream about either studying or teaching in American universities. This essay interrogates the representation of Tibetan intellectuals in America through a critical reading of Khortsa's novel, *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel*.

### The Narrative and the Theoretical Premise

Khortsa's novel begins with reference to a suitcase that Dawa has sent to his journalist friend from America. This suitcase contains letters Dawa wrote during the early years of his academic career when he aspired to study at a reputed American university. Apart from these letters, there are also several editions of a particular magazine in which Dawa's creative prose writings were published. When Dawa's journalist friend opens this suitcase, the trajectory of Dawa's academic career is revealed by reading these letters, situating at the centre of the narrative a Tibetan intellectual who has successfully established a promising career in an American university. When Dawa applies to study a course on creative writing at Appleton University, he introduces himself as someone who lives in the "Himalayas along the Indo-Tibetan border" (Khortsa 2013, Location 127 of 3051) and who is a "perpetual tourist" (Khortsa 2013, Location 131 of 3051). In the absence of a permanent homeland, Dawa's claim in his application certainly evokes a sense of rootlessness, and he configures a sort of identity that is connected to the borderless Himalayas. Himadri Lahiri, while commenting on the migrations of the Tibetan, Nepalese and Bhutanese people, states that "the pattern of their movements" is slightly "different because of the age-old practice of uninhibited movement across the Himalayan spaces" and also the ancient idea of a deterritorialised space lingers in their mind (Lahiri 2017, 70). This pattern of movement evidently renders a fluid concept of homeland, which is reflected in Dawa's explication of subjective identity. In the case of Tibetans, the inability to return to their original homeland has encouraged most of them to look at the West as a final destination of safety, success, and comfort. The West, with its glamour and grandeur, seems to offer the Tibetans a promising bright future, unlike the Indian city of Dharamsala which is just a shelter for the exiled community. Dawa believes that there is nothing "alluring about sitting in a monastery reading Tibetan texts" (Khortsa 2013, Location 161 of 3051). Instead, one should think that "paradise is not in Tibet but in an American college campus" (Khortsa 2013, Location 165 of 3051). Khortsa's narrative, therefore, primarily represents a strong desire of a Tibetan intellectual to situate in America and achieve the desired goals.

Considering Dawa's academic merit, the administration of Appleton University selects him to study a course on creative writing. During his stay on the American campus, Dawa is enlightened by the academic resource and is also inspired by the work ethics of the Americans. Dawa learns to write creative pieces, and the course proves to be very useful. His life changes because academia encourages him to perform better, but this life-changing experience also intervenes in his creative writing career, seeking to transform him into an agency for expressing a specific kind of Tibet. On one occasion, when Dawa visits India, he is approached by the editors of a magazine – sponsored by an American Buddhist family – to write stories about Tibet. The editors suggest Dawa to write “Tibetan love stories” (Khortsa 2013, Location 712 of 3051) which must be “more than anthropological”, preferably “autobiographical” (Khortsa 2013, Location 723 of 3051). Further, the editors also advise him to write “short stories” in which the plots should portray the relationship between Tibetan men and Western women and such stories will be “very interesting” (Khortsa 2013, Location 717 of 3051). These pieces of advice symbolically refer to the act of representing Tibet and also Tibetan intellectuals. Dawa, a budding writer pursuing a bright academic career in America, is encouraged by the American editors of the magazine to write “love stories”, ignoring the plight of the Tibetans; their history, their exodus, and their homelessness are not suitable subjects for creative pieces. Their advice to avoid “anthropological” references to Tibet is suggestive of the strategy to marginalise acts of protest and activism. Indeed, since their expulsion from their homeland, Tibetans have been actively raising their voice against the Chinese and other corporate powers for liberating Tibet from colonial subjugation. Representing protests in short stories is not advisable as it may generate anger and hate against the colonial power. Hence, “love stories” are acceptable, and if possible, incorporating “autobiographical” elements is also encouraged. After suggesting methods for writing short creative pieces, the editors finally state that if Dawa can produce a series of interesting stories about Tibet, he may become a permanent contributor to their reputed magazine. In the context of this incident, one may critically approach the strategies used by the American editors to influence the creative spirit of a migrant Tibetan intellectual. Dawa is an exiled intellectual, and his representation as a writer is manipulated by American academia. Hamid Dabashi, in his seminal critical volume, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, has described the condition of “exilic intellectuals” (Dabashi 2009, 1), particularly those who have adopted America as their home. In fact, Dabashi refers to Edward Said's *Representations of Intellectual*, Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*, Bruce Robbins's *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics*, and many other critical thinkers, to emphasise the diminishing role of “intellectuals as a community of counter-interpreters” (Dabashi 2009, 4). Explicating Jacoby's and Robbins's scathing attack on the role of American universities in controlling the intellectual outputs of individual artists and critics, Dabashi underscores the “crucial problem ... of the professionalisation of the intellectual” and also the “radical pacification of the urban intellectual” (Dabashi 2009, 3). Thus, the strategy of professionalising an intellectual includes modes of controlling and channelising the creative and critical energies for producing works that may be appropriate for maintaining the status quo. Dabashi criticises

this dominant practice of moulding an intellectual mind and claims that this has reduced the significance of intellectuals as critical thinkers. In such a scenario, the community of intellectuals can fail to offer counter remarks, counter arguments and counter hegemonic thinking (Dabashi 2009, 3-4). The way Dawa is being advised to write stories clearly indicates the “professionalisation of the intellectual”, ensuring in the process that he never emerges as a writer with an activist standpoint. It is true that the publishing industry plays a vital role in the production and consumption of creative/critical writings, but the most important aspect is the method of representing intellectuals in the literary market. In Said’s *Representations of Intellectual*, there are references to several critical thinkers, especially Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci, who believe that “real intellectuals” are motivated by “metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth” and they must accuse “corruption”, wrong practices and “oppressive authority” while they support the “weak” (Said 1996, 6). But, intellectuals are no longer performing these roles. They have been, as Said argues, “reduced simply to being a faceless professional”, someone who knows his job and therefore does not bother much about his social responsibility (Said 1996, 11). In light of these critical arguments, I would like to argue that Dawa is an “exilic intellectual” whose training as a creative writer moulds his personality to such an extent that he forgets his social responsibility and becomes a “faceless professional”. His encounter with the American editors of a magazine propels his mind to write about “Tibetan life” and “Tibetan spirituality”, but nothing about politics (Khortsa 2013, Location 845 of 3051). When Dawa tells the editors that he can also write political essays, he is discouraged because the editors claim that they have an abundance of political essays written by eminent scholars. Thus, Dawa’s conversation with the editors evidently explicates the perspective of the American academia on a Tibetan intellectual, which aims to transform an exiled Tibetan into a professional writer.

### Two Tibetans at America: Different Perspectives

While studying at Appleton University, Dawa meets a renowned Tibetan scholar, Professor Khenchen Sangpo. He is addressed as a distinguished scholar in American academia and is respected for his deep knowledge of Tibetan culture, Buddhism, and Tibetan art. When Khenchen visits Appleton University to deliver an invited lecture, he meets Dawa and advises him to write “a ‘non-fiction novel’”, and for this, he suggests Dawa conduct “research” and experience the “story in real life”, which can later be turned “into fiction” by stepping into “the plane of imaginative flight” (Khortsa 2013, Location 862 of 3051). Though this suggestion is quite helpful for a budding writer, this does not actually motivate Dawa to think about the real problems of the exiled Tibetans. The approach to writing a “non-fiction novel”, as advised by Khenchen, is aesthetically exciting but socially demoralising because Khenchen does not share his views on the problems experienced by thousands of Tibetans across the world. No doubt, Khenchen is another instance of a “professional” intellectual who is aware of his class position and not keen on critically responding to Tibetan exile, diaspora, or homelessness. This fact is reflected on one occasion when Khenchen disapproves of the use of terms like

“exile”, “diaspora”, “dispersion”, and “globalisation”: “What is this nonsense about ‘exile’, ‘diaspora’, ‘dispersion’ and ‘globalisation’? Why can’t people just say ‘exodus’ or, easier still, ‘escape’?” (Khortsas 2013, Location 888 of 3051). Khenchen’s viewpoint foregrounds his avoidance of discussing those terms which may unsettle his comfortable position in American academia. These terms are likely to invite discussions on politics, colonisation and the global crisis of Tibetan refugees, which Khenchen does not want to deal with. Adopting a professional outlook, he is a happy “exilic intellectual” possessing a green card which allows him to permanently reside and work in the United States. Indeed Khenchen’s attitude is that of an intellectual who, according to Said, has been “co-opted by governments or corporations” and who has failed to voice those “issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said 1996, 11). Quite remarkably, in one of his conversations with Dawa, he even expresses his dislike of the term “Tibetan Diaspora” (Khortsas 2013, Location 888 of 3051). Instead of denouncing the role of capitalist powers responsible for colonising Tibet, Khenchen is satisfied with lecturing on Tibetan spirituality and Buddhism. His lectures are well-received in American academia because there are no references to the activism and discontent of the Tibetan people across the globe. Khenchen’s recognition as a “great” Tibetan scholar rests on his non-activist position and tremendous knowledge of Tibetan culture and Buddhism. Dawa idolises Khenchen and believes that the American academic environment has encouraged Khenchen to become a scholar of such repute. A product of American academia, Khenchen’s confidence in and knowledge of Tibetan culture and arts inspire Dawa to become an intellectual like Khenchen. He realises that America is his “second home”, a place where all Tibetans must aspire to reside (Khortsas 2013, Location 1319 of 3051). With his “Tibetan knowledge and wisdom”, Dawa believes that he may soon become a professor like Khenchen and teach in any “Ivy League School” (Khortsas 2013, Location 1766 of 3051). Dawa’s uncritical attraction to American academia, along with Khenchen’s acknowledgement of the role of American institutions in shaping the young Tibetan intellectual minds, clearly reflect the mechanism of representative politics and control of knowledge production.

When Khenchen visits Tibet carrying an American passport, he is arrested by the Chinese government for possessing a “rare, sacred text” (Khortsas 2013, Location 2246 of 3051) which the Chinese believe was stolen from a monastery. Though these are false allegations, Khenchen is detained for more than a couple of months before he is finally allowed to return to the United States. During Khenchen’s period of detention, the American government accuses the Chinese government of labelling false charges on a reputed Tibetan scholar, but these accusations are mild, failing to make any serious impact on the Chinese policy of detention. Only a handful of noted critics and historians voice their protest against the Chinese government’s decision to arrest Khenchen. American academia remains mute on this issue, avoiding direct confrontation with China. The reason for the indifferent attitude of the American government to Khenchen’s detention is primarily a monetary issue, as aptly expressed by Iris, Dawa’s American friend. She tells Dawa that the American legal administrators are not

interested in dealing with Khenchen's case because there is no available sponsorship. Under such circumstances, Khenchen, a reputed Tibetan professor, is ignored by the American academia and relegated to the status of an ordinary citizen fighting for his own cause with no support from his adopted homeland. This devastating experience, however, does not transform Khenchen because after arriving in America, he is again co-opted into American academia. A conference is organised at Appleton University to pay respect to the "great" Tibetan scholar, and Khenchen gladly accepts to preside over the conference. Dawa and the other conference participants present papers on various themes related to Prof. Khenchen Sangpo's creative output, celebrating the genius of a renowned academic. This academic exuberance is a façade meant to hide the real intentions of the American institutions that use the knowledge of "exilic intellectuals" to advertise their contribution to academia. In doing so, these intellectuals are desensitised to their community's anxieties, troubles, and pains. An intellectual like Khenchen or Dawa can never adopt an activist outlook, as the entire academic environment conditions the mind of an intellectual to speak for and of America. After spending several years in the United States, Dawa perceives the impossibility of assuming a true Tibetan self in his adopted homeland, "But can I be myself in America?" (Khortsas 2013, Location 2892 of 3051). This is indeed a philosophically deep question, and at this point in time, when Dawa interrogates himself, he is at the crossroads of his academic career. Either he can fulfil his dream of joining a reputed institution in America or spend the rest of his life in a monastery in New York studying religious texts and scriptures. Though the narrative does not let us know his final decision, the complexity of configuring his subjective identity is effectively articulated in Dawa's situation. At this juncture, the Heideggerian distinction between "Being" and "entity" can provide a theoretical framework to perceive the significance of this philosophically deep question. Pieter Tijmes describes Heidegger's distinction between "Being" and "entity" by providing a beautiful example of a "tree", which has "branches", leaves, stem and "roots", and these are collective signifiers of "entities", whereas, the "ground" is the "Being" because it is responsible for the existence of a "tree" and its "entities" (Tijmes 1998, 203). The "Being", Tijmes opines, "cannot be objectified, but it may be experienced as the source of revelation" (Tijmes 1998, 203). If this Heideggerian distinction is amplified in the context of this discussion, the "Being" is the invisible source of human life that sustains and preserves its existence. "Entities" are the material things or associations humans form with objects. In Dawa's and Khenchen's lives, the "entities" are visibly associated with their lifestyle, but the "Being" is elusive. The American lifestyle symbolises "entities" as it offers material success, visible in the form of achievements, whereas Tibet is the "Being" because it is an invisible, amorphous, and imagined notion. Thus, Dawa's question philosophically signifies the dissociation of "Being" and "entities". A tacit reference to this distinction is to be found in the topic of the conference organised by Appleton University, "Having and Being: A Difficult Divide" (Khortsas 2013, Location 2409 of 3051). While celebrating Khenchen's intellectual output, the conference organisers draw attention to the problematic divide between "Being" and "Having", as the notion of "Having" is connected to the Heideggerian concept of "entities". Academic achievements and recognitions, institutional

affiliations and material success are “entities” in Khenchen’s life, and these have alienated him from the notion of “Being”, his actual home and source of his life.

It is interesting to note that Dawa and Khenchen adopt two different perspectives on Tibet. In America, Dawa is in a state of exile; thinking about Tibet, his mind is rooted in the culture of his homeland. His passion for writing stories about Tibet and his desire to become a part of the intellectual community producing knowledge about Tibet exhibit Dawa’s deep connection with his homeland. However, Khenchen is a cosmopolitan one who is currently settled in America and may migrate to some other nation in the future. Khenchen discourages discussions on Tibetan politics and diaspora, as his interest is in Buddhism and spirituality. Khenchen is detached from his homeland, not even psychologically rooted in Tibet. In his mind, Tibet is one among the many homes with which he is associated. Khenchen travels from one nation to another, he delivers lectures on Tibetan spirituality at different universities in America, and his professional work motivates him to migrate from one part of the globe to another. This method of migration renders a cosmopolitan identity to Khenchen; therefore, his conception of Tibet is remarkably different from Dawa, whose migratory pattern is limited to the dual notions of home and exile. Unlike Dawa, Khenchen does not perceive a sense of exile in America; he represents the spirit of “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999, 6), which Aihwa Ong defines as “a flexible notion of citizenship” that inspires “subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (Ong 1999, 6).

### **Tibetan Man and an American Woman: A Love Story?**

Can a Tibetan man and an American woman really fall in love? This question can be critically analysed by studying the relationship between Dawa and Iris. At Appleton University, Dawa’s first meeting with Iris happens in a library where she is engaged in reading a Tibetan religious text. Because of her serious interest in Buddhist studies, Iris decides to discuss some topics with Dawa, and these discussions lead to a very good friendship between them. After completing her studies at the university, Iris accepts the offer of “a full scholarship, a teaching assistantship” and also a good “fellowship to spend the summer in India and Nepal” by the Religious Studies Department of Appleton University (Khortsas 2013, Location 337 of 3051). On one occasion, when Iris visits Dharamsala to conduct research under the fellowship program offered by the university, she is immensely helped by Dawa. While conducting research and collecting primary materials for study, Iris adopts a thoroughly professional attitude which is noted by Dawa. He knows that Iris has come to India for academic “research” and not for “activism” or “social work” (Khortsas 2013, Location 951 of 3051). Thus, Iris, as a product of American academia, is a “professional” intellectual engaged in academic work without serious interrogations or critical interventions. Dabashi notes this lack of active research work in American institutions while observing a deficiency of “a culture of counter-professional, counter-institutional, and critically questioning imagination” (Dabashi 2009, 7).

In the letters that Dawa writes to Iris, there are extensive accounts of Dawa's understanding of Tibet, his feelings about India, and his desire to become a great writer. Iris considers Dawa a good friend, and their bonding strengthens with time. However, quite tragically, this bonding fails to develop into a relationship of love and trust. At the end of the novel, Dawa is surprised that Iris has decided to tie the knot with a successful American businessman. Hence, the relationship between Dawa and Iris, in reality, fails to develop into a love story. Bonding between a Tibetan man and a Western girl, as suggested by the editors of an American magazine, can be imagined and scripted in the form of a short story, but this can never happen in real life. Dawa's despondency and disillusionment are reflected in the evocation of Kipling's famous phrase: "East is East and West is West, Never the Twain Shall Meet." (Khortsa 2013, Location 2876 of 3051). Though East and West can never establish an intimate relationship (Dawa and Iris) in actual conditions, writers often create narratives that romanticise affective bonding between culturally diverse individuals. While portraying an intimate relationship between the East and the West, such narratives often fail to look into the politics of cultural transformation. As an "exilic intellectual", Dawa realises the fallacy of acquiring knowledge in a reputed American institution at the expense of eroding critical thinking. He learns, though very late, that his American degree is of no use in representing the real Tibetan condition of exile and diaspora. His creative writings will represent his absence of "critical questioning imagination". Real knowledge, Dawa believes, comes from within the self and also from the "Being", and this is beautifully evoked in the final realisation: "I have failed to recognise what I had been looking for is already within me. Life has come full circle" (Khortsa 2013, Location 2899 of 3051).

Iris's view of Tibet differs remarkably from Khenchen's and Dawa's perspectives. She considers Tibet an academic subject meant for conducting research and collecting anthropological/sociological data. This data will help American academia form an idea about Tibet, significantly contributing to Tibetan Studies. Iris's knowledge about Tibet is anchored to her factual data, which is the outcome of her understanding of the place and its culture. In Iris's study, Tibet's culture and idioms seek to establish a comparison between American and Tibetan modernity. In his discussion on the production of "anthropological knowledge" in the West, Aihwa Ong notes that Western researchers usually employ the "comparative method" to "measure" the "modernity" of the "West" "against which other societies must be measured" (Ong 1999, 31). This discursive practice is probably the guiding principle of Iris's anthropological research. In fact, Ong cautions the Euroamerican critics by emphasising the need for analysing Non-western "places" and cultures differently, without assuming that "they are immature" replicas "of some master Western prototype" (Ong 1999, 31).

### Conclusion

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard discusses the mechanism of production and consumption of knowledge in postmodern societies. He states that



knowledge is generated for the purpose of selling, and the consumers of knowledge are entrusted with celebrating it (Lyotard 1984, 4). Lyotard further claims that knowledge is “an informational commodity” which is used by powerful countries to “control” the minds of people around the globe (Lyotard 1984, 5). Khortsa’s novel elucidates Lyotard’s standpoint; the mechanics of controlling knowledge production and consumption by the American academia is amplified in the narrative. Also interesting is the concept of studying specific fields of knowledge. In the novel, Iris, Dawa and Khenchen are directly or indirectly associated with the discipline of Tibetan Studies. American academia encourages research and field studies in areas like “India Studies”, “African Studies”, “South Asian Studies”, and “Australian Studies”, and these disciplines are sponsored by the American government to control knowledge production. While discussing America’s practice of dominating all forms of area-specific studies, Dabashi refers to the field of “Middle East Studies” (Dabashi 2009, 211), which appears to him “as a case of *epistemic endosmosis*” that appropriately functions to produce “a field of public knowledge” with no reference to any singular “all-knowing (Kantian) subject” (Dabashi 2009, 213). This sort of knowledge spreads slowly in the “public domain” and is “manufactured” by the “think tanks” (Dabashi 2009, 213). The “think tanks”, according to Dabashi, are the Americans interested in manufacturing “public knowledge” meant to create a general impression about a particular event or an area of study. This discursive practice of producing knowledge is amplified in the narrative of the novel, particularly in the form of creating awareness about “Tibetan Studies”. Khenchen, Dawa and Iris are the nodal points of disseminating knowledge about Tibet and Buddhism, while the “think tanks” at Appleton University are successfully engaged in manufacturing ideas about Tibet and its culture. Organising a conference to honour Khenchen’s contribution to Tibetan Studies without sensitising the public about his disgrace during his detention in Tibet is a strategic move to create “public knowledge” by American academia. Khortsa’s novel is, therefore, a significant text that draws attention to America’s policy of representing Tibetan intellectuals, and in doing so, it also tacitly indicates the close nexus between the politics of knowledge production and cultural studies. I would like to end my discussion by referring to Thubten Samphel, one of the renowned contemporary Tibetan writers, who believes that Khortsa’s novel projects a “world of academia” which has very “little of the smell of sweat and the sound of the groan of the daily struggle of refugees eking out a living in a grounding world” (cited in Lahiri 2017, 75).

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