Interview with Tsering Yangzom Lama

JTL Editors

Tsering Yangzom Lama is the author of *We Measure the Earth with our Bodies* (2022), which has been translated into French, Italian, Dutch, Polish, and Tibetan, and nominated for over a dozen prizes across four countries, including The Giller Prize, The Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize and The Carol Shields Prize for Fiction. She is a co-founder of *Lhakar Diaries*, a leading Tibetan youth blog.

Journal of Tibetan Literature: Our conversation begins with your essay "Feeling, Knowing, Interpreting: On Tibetan Lives and Objects," which opens the recent edited volume *Among Tibetan Materialities*. Partway through, you write that "stories perform a kind of magic." But you also suggest that Tibetan storytellers today are often "troubled" by the twin obligations of navigating "a reading public that insists on receiving a story of suffering as something dignified, affirming, even triumphant," while also responding to "the national narrative." Could you expand on how you understand this magic, and on the tension between those two pressures? How does that push and pull shape your writing today?

Tsering Yangzom Lama: I think stories are a form of magic, or perform a form of magic, in the sense that they are constructed means of creating meaning, structure, order, and narrative arc.

Tibetan people are involved in a struggle. It is a struggle against an opponent, but it is also a struggle against a narrative. We have our own narrative that we are putting forth, one shaped in large part by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is a story of a form of spiritual warfare, a story of moral leadership. Despite the agonies and cruelties Tibetans have faced, and continue to face, we are led in a direction in which we refuse to inflict that same cruelty back or to harden our hearts. So I think that, in a sense, is a narrative proposition that Tibetans are making.

I think it has largely been rejected, because we have been caught between empires. But I also think this is a profound moment in the world. When I look at the explosion of compassion and concern for people in Gaza, or the new generation that has learned the language of colonization and decolonization, or the kinds of composite movements we are seeing in different places, I feel this is an interesting time. So many people are suffering, and Tibetans have been suffering for generations, but there is also a growing awareness of long histories of Indigenous struggle, especially in the Americas. Writers have helped make that part of public consciousness.

So, there is a sense in which Tibetans are suffering and in pain, dealing with daily grief when we look at the news, and at the same time our message is more important than ever. It is a message I see emerging across the world in different spaces. We are both part of a project and living through the thing itself.

JTL: So, when you say that stories perform a kind of magic, it is a constitutive magic—the power of stories not only to shape meaning but to shape reality.

TYL: Yes, and I think that is something each of us experiences daily. When I talk to people who have certain narratives about especially important moments in their lives, they assign meaning to all kinds of circumstances and find symbols everywhere. That is a form of storytelling that performs magic. It doesn't really matter whether it is "true" in some objective sense; it is true because they deem it true.

I think that is something we are doing as a collective as well as individuals. Whenever I go to different cities, one of the first things I do is ask: what is the Tibetan presence here? Usually, it is shops that sell things, or restaurants. Tibetans are interfacing with the public through culture and material objects, and there is a lot of storytelling happening there. That is where I see Tibetans performing our collective narrative.

I happen to do it through this form, but ordinary Tibetans have been doing storytelling in all kinds of spaces—at home, at work, at school. That is what has kept the narrative of the nation, and more importantly of the struggle, alive.

JTL: In *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*, Dolma is a budding Tibetan academic who becomes increasingly struck by the dissonance between Tibetan lived experience and Tibetan representation in academic discourse. We were especially struck by her heated exchange with Professor Horowitz, where she tells him: "The occupation doesn't begin and end on the edges of my country. It lives in the words you select when you write about us." You studied creative writing and international relations at the University of British Columbia and later received an MFA in writing from Columbia University. How did you navigate questions of representation—between Tibet as it is written about in institutional and academic spaces and the realities of lived Tibetan experience—during your time in those programs? And how do those experiences continue to shape your writing practice today?

TYL: I feel like I was of a certain generation, and I hope things have changed a little bit. There simply were not as many Tibetans in colleges when I was there. I took Tibetan studies courses at UBC, and while I was not literally the only Tibetan, I often felt isolated. The texts we were reading

were largely by non-Tibetans, and I frequently found myself up against perspectives that felt more distant than I expected in those spaces.

At the same time, I was deeply enticed by what I encountered there. I took a class with Gen Tsering Shakya, that was quite transformative for me. It led me to read more Tibetan literature and to pursue those interests further. At Columbia, during my MFA, I took many elective courses in Tibetan studies, art history, and women's studies. I was fortunate to be able to study across those spaces and to spend time in museums in New York, which were incredible.

But I also felt that my perspective as a Tibetan who grew up in exile was, in some way, doubted or less valued. In the hierarchy I perceived, white perspectives came first, then Tibetans from Tibet, and then Tibetans from exile. That was the hierarchy I understood, and it made me feel quite alienated from academia.

That turned out to be okay, because I think I went in the direction that was right for me. I did teach in academia after my MFA, in rhetoric and writing, which I enjoyed, though it was exhausting. Now it is heartening to see so many young Tibetan scholars rising in all directions. That gives me hope, though I know the space remains fraught.

One of the things that surprised me most after my book came out was how many young Tibetans—many of them scholars or people moving into those worlds—related to it. I think they responded not only to the experience of encountering our obvious opponent, the Chinese government and its violence, but also to encountering that violence through the West: through Western empire, and through what it wants and does not want.

JTL: Are there moments in your own past that you look back on as formative experiences of storytelling, listening, or reading—moments that helped make you who you are as a writer?

TYL: Many. Growing up in Kathmandu was hugely formative. It is a very cosmopolitan city. I grew up around people from the West, from Nepal, and from many different communities within Nepal. And as a Tibetan, you grow up with a certain consciousness that you are not at the center. That is quite useful if you want to be a writer or some kind of artist.

Being in Nepal exposed me to a lot of the world while also making me conscious that I was not in the center of it. I read literature from America, India, and Europe. I grew up reading *Asterix and Obelix*, Archie comics, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and all the little classic literature books I could find. My family was very encouraging in terms of helping me access the world.

We also had satellite TV, so I watched a great deal of television—not just Western television, but television from Singapore, all over India, Bollywood films since I was a child. Having so many books may have been somewhat unusual, but much of the rest was not. There was something about growing up in Nepal, in a space made up of so many little spaces, that was very helpful to me. Navigating between languages, cultural references, and worldviews shaped me profoundly.

JTL: Were there moments when that global narrative and media began to intersect with your desire to write as a Tibetan or about Tibetan issues?

TYL: It is interesting, because I did not really want to write about Tibetan issues at first. My early stories were not about that. They were about characters I found interesting. To be frank, I first wrote about white people, then Chinese people, Nepali people, and Tibetans. It took me a while to get to the center.

That was part of an internal process. I think many people who do not come from the kinds of experiences we come from do not need to spend years giving themselves permission to tell stories about themselves. But I did. That slow process of becoming someone who would tell stories about Tibetans was not a single conscious decision. It just became the thing I was most interested in.

That happened in creative writing classes. It was not always easy. I do not think those spaces necessarily communicated how valuable or necessary Tibetan stories were. So even there, insisting on writing Tibetan characters felt like a kind of defiance.

JTL: You mentioned that your study of Tibetan literature stayed with you. Were there particular texts that mattered deeply?

TYL: For me, a lot of it came through direct access to the consciousness and narratives of different saints. Kurtis R. Schaeffer's *Himalayan Hermitess* was especially important. I read that book many times, and I wrote about it a great deal in the first novel before cutting almost all of it. I had given Dolma the same obsession I had. I was trying to force it into the novel, and it did not belong there. It was taking up space the story did not need. But that was certainly a text that mattered to me.

There were many others. I read a book by a Tibetan Rinpoché on *terma* and treasure texts countless times, and it gave me such a useful entry into the philosophy and understanding of *terma*. I attended a weekend retreat on *chöd* in the Hudson Valley. I did so many things to study for the novel. It was not that I intended to become so engaged with Buddhism or Buddhist metaphysics; it all happened simultaneously. I had also been to silent retreats, and at some point, these strands began to intersect and feed one another.

So, it started with texts. It started with spending time in the stacks at Columbia, basically a year of reading on top of coursework. And then it expanded into other experiences—retreats, travel, whatever it took.

JTL: We understand that your novel has been translated into several languages, including Tibetan. What has it meant for you to see the book enter Tibetan literary space in that way?

TYL: Yes, it has been translated into Tibetan. It came out with the Library of Tibetan Works and

Archives. The Tibetan edition is quite substantial—about 665 pages. I had a launch in Dharamsala and connected with readers there, as well as artists and writers at a festival taking place around the same time. Meeting monks who had read my novel in Tibetan was wild.

In terms of how that changes my relationship to the book, I do not think about it too much, to be honest. I feel somewhat disengaged from the book now. When people say nice things about it, I feel grateful, of course, but I do not really feel like I wrote it anymore, because it belongs to another time in my life. The book has become something else, which is as it should be. It is not mine anymore. It belongs to many more people now, including Tibetans who read in Tibetan. That is extraordinary.

I feel grateful that the story can be refracted through so many different lights, conceived of in so many different minds. In terms of readers, I still find it surprising whenever I meet someone who has read the book. I am simply grateful, and then I think: this is theirs now. I am trying to write the next book.

JTL: What did the translation process look like? Were you closely involved with the translator?

TYL: Usually, with translations, there is not much interaction. In my experience, you often get one email with a series of extremely precise questions, and you answer them. I had that with my French translator, my Italian translator, and others. Sometimes they catch things that even your English-language editors did not catch.

With the Tibetan translation, I did exchange a few emails with the translator. What I found out later, when the book was about to come out and I was in Dharamsala, was how involved their process had been. He had run a workshop on the book, had it read by multiple senior readers, researched various quotations, and checked historical details. LTWA clearly has very strong translators.

We also went back and forth quite a bit over the Tibetan title. In that sense it was a transnational effort. But every translation creates a new book. My French, Italian, and Dutch editions all have different titles. They are different entities.

What that process did affirm for me was the importance of research. My Tibetan translator emailed me asking, for example, what a specific riverside ritual in the book was. I was able to send him the exact video I had watched while researching it. I did not attend a Tibetan school growing up, and while I grew up in the Tibetan community, there were still rituals and forms of knowledge I had to study to approximate my characters' consciousnesses. They grew up in a refugee settlement; I did not. So, I had to learn how to see the world from their perspective.

I am glad I did that work, because translators will check everything: rituals, place names,

landscapes. Thankfully, I had been to the places I wrote about in Mustang, so I could stand behind the research. If you are going to write a historical novel, that kind of work matters.

At the same time, it is also beautiful to see how translators carry the text into other languages. I read a little French, and when I looked at the French translation, I was struck by how precisely she had carried over even the rhythm. It is very moving to become connected to this wider ecosystem of literary people.

JTL: Looking ahead, what kinds of literary projects or themes are you most interested in exploring now?

TYL: Right after I turned in my first book, I started thinking about what I wanted to write next. Writing about magic in that novel opened my interest in mysticism and in things we have lost touch with—things that belonged to our ancestors.

For about a year I was just reading: different traditions along the Silk Road, travelogues, histories of civilizations that rose and disappeared. I spent time at the British Library reading accounts of people traveling through Tibet and the Silk Road. I became interested in everything I did not know. I suppose I became a history buff.

Over the last year and a half, I have narrowed things down somewhat. I wrote about 20,000 words of another novel set a thousand years ago on the Silk Road that I am no longer using. Then, while traveling in Ladakh and visiting monasteries and old sites, I became very interested in Milarepa. He kept appearing everywhere, visually and imaginatively, and he began to invade the book I was trying to write.

I started reading and writing around Milarepa. I also became interested in ogres, in the rock ogress or *srinmo* figure. It is a slightly unhinged book right now. It has a lot going on. But I am enjoying that. It feels like a different kind of challenge.

The first book attempted to tell a very large story of recent Tibetan experience through a small set of characters. What I am doing now is less about the nation and more about cycles, disillusionment, and the kinds of experiences Milarepa's story tells us about: petty ambition, the disillusionment necessary to move forward, the alienation on the other side of liberation. I am interested in the fact that someone can be both saint and poet and simply a human being who misses his mother.

So, I have gone from a very large canvas to a specific time, but more importantly to a specific mood, or series of moods. Structurally, too, I want to allow the book to become whatever shape it needs. My first novel had a fractured but interwoven structure that reflected its content. This new book will be different, and probably less traditional as a narrative.

JTL: Does writing in the distant past give you a kind of freedom that writing in the contemporary moment does not?

TYL: In some ways, yes, but I also think the emotional and moral questions are not really different. Milarepa's story is compelling because it is so human. Someone described it to me the other day as a bit like *Cinderella* and *Harry Potter*, and I understood what they meant: betrayal by family, losing everything, black magic, and some kind of transformed ending. I am interested in recasting that story in a way that is very different, weaving together things that do not obviously belong together.

JTL: Do you think about the challenge of creating an internal life for a character set nine hundred years ago—someone who is not modern, yet who must still feel emotionally legible?

TYL: Of course. That is part of why writing a novel about Milarepa is difficult, and probably why it has not come easily. But the novel is a very free form. There are very few rules. My process is to read a great deal, to absorb history and texts and access other people's consciousnesses and perspectives through them, and then to make up the rest. That is one of the great pleasures of being a novelist rather than a scholar. I exercise that freedom.

JTL: Are there particular models of fiction that have been inspiring you as you think through this new work?

TYL: I do not really think in terms of "historical fiction" as a category I am especially invested in. What inspires me are books like Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Yes, it is set in the court of Kublai Khan, but it is also talking about contemporary cities. It is playing with past and present at once. There is a logic inside that novel that feels eternal.

That is the kind of thing I love: books that are playing with the past and the present in interesting ways. I do not actually read a great deal of what people conventionally call historical fiction. In a sense, though, so much fiction is historical fiction. *Ulysses* is historical fiction, because it captures a Dublin that no longer exists. Almost any novel set somewhere specific is preserving a time and place that is gone.

What is most inspiring to me at the moment is Tibetan philosophy. I have spent the last year listening to many of Chögyam Trungpa's lectures, which I find fascinating as a cultural moment but also for the way he talks about Milarepa, the *srinmo*, and disillusionment. The tragedy of his life is compelling too, and very Tibetan in a particular kind of way.

I also find museums deeply inspiring, especially art museums. Recently I visited an exhibition

at the Petit Palais in Paris, and simply seeing different forms of drawing gave me ideas for what I was writing. So, it is really a smorgasbord.

JTL: That openness seems important to your practice.

TYL: Yes. I try to be as free as possible and to try different things. I paint. I write poetry. The first thing I ever published was a play, and I would love to return to playwriting at some point. I love reading plays. I do not think of myself as a historical novelist. I think of myself simply as a writer.

JTL: To close, what do you see as the most urgent challenges—and the most exciting possibilities—for the future of Tibetan writing and Tibetan literature, especially in terms of publication spaces, circulation, and readership?

TYL: The reality is that the world is not talking about Tibet or thinking about Tibet very much. I work in a non-Tibetan space, and I am constantly confronted by how little people know. It shocks me, but it is the truth. That is a real challenge for all of us: continuing to bring awareness to Tibet.

At the same time, the deeper challenges are profound because of Chinese state policy. But the more Tibetans are oppressed, the more I think younger generations will reject that domination. If we look at Indigenous peoples in the Americas, we see a struggle that began five hundred years ago and persists today. It is long, powerful, and unfinished. I think Tibetans will wage a similar struggle for as long as it takes.

In terms of literature, we need to create more spaces for Tibetan literature to flourish within our own communities. That takes investment and resources. It means building a culture of patronage for artists. I have benefited a great deal from patrons, though they were American and Canadian institutions and individuals. Columbia University was, in that sense, a patron of mine, because I had a scholarship and could not otherwise have attended. These are the kinds of structures that support the creation of narrative and story. Tibetans need to build those, too.

A major challenge, as Tibetan writers reach wider audiences, is to avoid falling into the trap of giving hegemonic audiences what they want. Many artists from marginalized backgrounds in elite cultural spaces fall into that, because it helps them achieve success in a world defined by people who are not them. But that can produce narratives that Tibetans themselves do not recognize as our own.

I think it is essential for Tibetan artists and creatives to make work for us—work we can recognize. Once we start making work for the white gaze, or the Chinese gaze, or any external gaze that seeks to instrumentalize us, the work risks becoming instrumental too, rather than retaining creative value or truth.