

Distilling Joys and Woes: An Appreciation of Contemporary Tibetan Women's Writing

སྐྱིད་སྐྱུག་བསྐྱེལ་པའི་དེང་རབས་བོད་མོའི་བརྒྱམས་ཚུལ་ལྟོང་རོལ།

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Abstract With the exception of a few remarkable female luminaries, traditional Tibetan literature hardly has any room for the public voice of Tibetan women. Women have been mostly excluded from and totally marginalized in the Tibetan republic of letters, which has been a men's world for an extremely long time. The Tibetan intellectual scene and Tibetan language literary production are unfortunately still dominated by men. However, Tibetan women writers are making welcome inroads into these exclusive male reserves. In recent decades there has been a refreshing proliferation of Tibetan women's literary voices. By giving artistic utterance to the many joys and woes of Tibetan women from all walks of life, contemporary Tibetan women's writing not only diversifies and enriches Tibetan literature, but also helps us appreciate Tibetan history, religion, culture and society anew through fresh and critical perspectives and insights.

This lecture will give an overview of contemporary Tibetophone women's writing and highlight some of its predominant themes that critique major socio-cultural norms and complex repressive structures. Through the exploration of specific poems and short stories it will demonstrate how Tibetan female writers address exploitative relations between men and women, domestic and other forms of violence against women, and the marginalization and exclusion of women from education, employment, artistic production, political power and the economic system. Alongside bestowing delight and insight, in their creative hands literature functions as a mode of redress that gives expression to the repressed and counters oppressive forces and injustices.

What follows is the keynote I delivered at "Tibetan Women Writing Symposium: A Celebration of Tibetan Women's Literature," University of Virginia on Friday April 8, 2022. I am extremely grateful to the organisers and the funders for their efficiency, hospitality and generosity, and to the speakers and attendees for their eloquence, insight and kindred spirit.

ཨོ་བདེ་ལེགས་སུ་གྱུར་ཅིག།

ཚུ་འཛིན་དཀར་པོའི་སློག་ཕྱིང་ཏུ་བ་ཅན།།

མཁའ་ཡི་མངོས་བྱེད་འདྲ་བའི་ཡིད་འཕྲོག་མ། །
དྲི་ཟའི་ན་རྒྱུང་དབྱུང་ན་འཛོལ་སྐྱེག་མཁན། །
རིང་ནས་བརྗེ་བའི་ལྷ་མོ་ད་རྒྱུར་བྱོན། །

པདྨའི་བཞིན་ལ་གཡོ་ལྷན་བྱུང་བའི་མིག །
མཐོན་མཐིང་རལ་པའི་རྗེ་ན་འོད་དཀར་ཅན། །
རོལ་སྐྱེག་གར་གྱིས་འགྲིང་བའི་དབྱངས་ཅན་མ། །
ད་དུང་བདག་ལ་ངག་གི་དབང་ལྷན་སྦྲུལ། །

རོལ་རྗེད་གར་གྱི་ཉམས་ལྷན་རི་དྲགས་མིག །
མིག་གིས་བལྟ་བས་མི་ངོམ་ཡིད་འཕྲོག་མ། །
མ་ལྟར་བརྗེ་བ་བྱེད་གྱིས་བདག་གི་ངག །
ངག་དབང་ལྷ་མོ་ཉིད་དང་མཚུངས་པར་མཛོད། །

སྟོན་ཟླ་རྒྱས་པའི་དཔལ་ལས་ལྷག་པར་མངོས། །
ཚངས་དབྱངས་སྟོན་པའི་གདངས་ཀྱང་ཟེལ་གྱིས་གཞོན། །
ཟབ་ཡངས་རྒྱ་མཚོའི་འཛིང་ལྷར་དཔག་དཀའ་བ། །
དབྱངས་ཅན་ལྷ་མོའི་སྐྱ་གསུང་ཐུགས་ལ་འདུད། །¹

Let me begin with Je Tsongkhapa’s sublime poetic praise to Yangchen Lhamo, Sarasvati, the Goddess of Melody. May she bless us and our symposium with her grace, compassion, wisdom and eloquence!

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the magnificent organizers and the University of Virginia for pulling off this unprecedented symposium against all the odds. As one of the initiators I have been privy to the incredible amount of time, energy and hard work you have put into it over two years. We owe you an immense debt of gratitude. I would also like to say a heartfelt thank you to the organizers for inviting me as a keynote speaker to such a rare and novel occasion.

1. Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa 2018 kha, “Sgra dbyangs lha mo spyan drangs nas bstod cing gsol ba gdab pa”, 259–260.

Introduction: Silencing Women

In recent decades there has been a refreshing yet long-overdue proliferation of Tibetan women's literary voices. By giving artistic utterance to the many joys and woes of Tibetan women from all walks of life, contemporary Tibetan women's writing not only diversifies and enriches Tibetan literature, but also helps us appreciate Tibetan history, religion, culture and society anew through fresh and critical perspectives and insights.

Today I will be focusing on a few dominant critical themes that relate to the female condition. However, it must be stressed that contemporary Tibetan women's writing is neither confined to these topics nor consumed by merely female related issues nor finding faults with Tibetan social reality. It covers a multiplicity of subject matters including many aspects of the Tibetan civilization worthy of celebration. These include Tibetan history, shared myths and memories, religious practice and wisdom, cultural riches, language, sacred landscape, and of course, women's artistic creativity and intellectual acumen. My contemplation of the critical dimension is by its nature reductive, but it does bring into sharp relief some of the serious socio-cultural challenges we Tibetans must address.

As in most cultures and societies, the silencing of women's voices in the public and private space was and is still a common phenomenon in Tibetan communities. It pains and shames me to acknowledge this, but with the exception of a few extraordinary female luminaries, traditional Tibetan literature hardly has any room for the public voice of Tibetan women. Women have been mostly excluded from and totally marginalized in the Tibetan republic of letters, which has been a men's world for an awfully long, long time.

Sharing the sexist attitudes of many traditional societies Tibetan women have been ordered not to speak in public. Women—especially new brides—are frequently instructed: མི་མང་ནང་ནས་ཁ་མ་མང་། “Don't run your mouth in public!” མི་མང་ནང་ནས་ཁ་མ་གྲགས། “Don't open your mouth in public!”² Tibetan maxims advise men: བུ་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁ་མ་རྒྱགས། བུ་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁ་མ་ཉན།, which can be translated literally as: “Don't run after women's mouths!”³ “Don't listen to women's mouths!”

Even the cherished མི་ཚོས་གཙང་མ་བསུ་བྱུག *The Sixteen Pure Human Laws*—highly influential ethical codes attributed to the Emperor Songtsen Gampo (srong btsan sgam po)—contains a principle that proclaims: གྲོས་ཀྱི་ནང་དུ་བུ་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁ་ལ་མི་ཉན་ཅིང་རང་རྒྱལ་འཛིན་པ། “In deliberations one should uphold independence and should not listen to women.”⁴ Elsewhere, this code is for-

2. All the translations are by the author.

3. A less literal rendition would be: “Don't follow women's words!”

4. Cited in Tashi Tsering Josayma 2017, 117. Varying ways of listing the Sixteen Pure Human Laws are found in Tibetan historical sources. Some of these different enumerations neither contain exactly sixteen codes nor feature a specific principle advising against consulting women. On the origins of these famous laws and a comparative analysis of their variations see A tsar+ya khang dkar tshul khriims skal bzang 1985, 250–262 & Roesler 2015, 389–409.

mulated more palatably as ངན་པའི་གྲོས་མི་ཉན་ཞིང་རང་ཚུགས་འཛིན་པ། “One should uphold independence and should not listen to the counsel of bad people.” But even then, “bad people” are often conflated with women in subsequent interpretations.

The silencing of female voices in public speech and the exclusion of women from collective decision-making go hand in hand with the downright misogynistic portrayals of women as deceptive, dangerous, untrustworthy, and ruinous, (e.g., མྱ་རིང་མ་དང་སློ་ཐུང་མ། “Woman has long hair and a short mind,” བདུ་མེད་ལ་སློ་མ་འདྲི། “Don’t consult women!,” བདུ་མེད་མོ། “demon/devil woman,” ལྷ་ནག་མ། “inauspicious/ruinous woman,” etc.) that pepper Tibetan literary works. Contradictions abound in the Tibetan production of stereotypical images of women. Often in barely one textual breath, women are celebrated as paragons of liberating love and wisdom and simultaneously represented as seriously detrimental to men’s spiritual pursuits and as a powerful samsaric trap.⁵ Revered spiritual masters give out instructions such as: མྱ་མང་བདུ་མེད་འཆལ་བས་སློ་མཚུ་ཉུང་དུ་གྱིས། “Moderate your chattering lips, for chatty women are wicked!”⁶ Overall, such language and ingrained prejudice against women are on the wane in the 21st century, but they do still persist in both Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora.

The Tibetan intellectual scene and Tibetan language literary production are unfortunately still dominated by men. Tibetan women writers are making welcome inroads into these exclusive male reserves, and we gather here today to celebrate this auspicious fact! The silencing of Tibetan women’s voices and sustained generation of negative stereotypes are, of course, intermeshed with and enabled by major socio-cultural forces and complex repressive structures. These include exploitative relations between men and women, domestic and other forms of violence against women, and the marginalization and exclusion of women from education, employment, artistic production, political power and the economic system.

Contemporary Tibetan language women’s literature addresses all these aspects of the male subjugation of women as well as other concerns and creates a powerful female public voice. In their creative hands literature functions—to borrow from Seamus Heaney—as a mode of redress that gives voice to the repressed and counters oppressive forces and injustices.⁷ In what follows I will first present a very brief overview of recent Tibetan women’s literary production in Tibetan. Then I will introduce you to some of the recurrent themes and issues by employing Palmo’s (དཔལ་མོ།) thought-provoking poem ང་ཞིང་ང་ཡིན། “I Am Who I Am” as a framing device.⁸

A quick note of caution and qualification—Tibetan literature still remains an uncharted territory that is unfathomably vast and varied. Although I am supposed to be an expert, my knowledge of it is woefully limited. The current flourishing of Tibetan women’s writing enriches and

5. For examples of such negative stereotypes of women see Tashi Tsering Josayma 2017, 116–117.

6. From a piece of advice to women attributed to Padmasambhava. Quoted in Tashi Tsering Josayma 2017, 118.

7. Heaney 1995.

8. Dpal mo 2020, “*nga ni nga yin*.” <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IDLfKUeNdWHwBqS-8WABYA>

further complicates this ever-evolving field. What I offer here is a short and imperfect appreciation of contemporary Tibetan language literature by women. I apologise if I fail to do justice to their intellectual and emotional richness, imaginative fecundity, technical excellence, and perceptive observations of life.

Works: The Milking Toggle

Ever since the 1980s, female Tibetan intellectuals have been making their presence felt within the sphere of literary creation. Their substantial contributions to today's Tibetan literary production display both literary continuity and creativity, and reflect the rapid socio-economic changes taking place in Tibet and elsewhere. More and more female writers and poets are questioning and challenging the male domination of Tibetan society, culture and literature. In recent decades this reinvigorating female literary presence has become more accentuated with a flurry of creative activities either initiated or inspired by women writers. Different forms of publication including traditional print media, e-books and social media have facilitated and accelerated the production process and broadened the reach of literary works.

There are far too many publications to list here but I will mention a few landmark examples. In addition to countless individual contributions, since 1996 popular literary journals such as Drangchar (*Light Rain*, ལྷང་ཆར།) and Gangyen Metok (*Snow Flower*, གངས་རྒྱན་མེ་ཉོག།) have set up occasional special sections for women's writing. Palmo—an esteemed professor and poet whose poem I will be presenting soon—edited the first ever anthology of poems by contemporary female Tibetan poets evocatively named Zholung (*The Milking Toggle*, བཞོ་ལུང་།), which was published in 2005.⁹ Palmo immediately followed this up by editing the first collection of women's critical essays in 2006.¹⁰ In 2011 she expanded *The Milking Toggle* and produced two more compilations of women's writing covering prose and fiction.¹¹ Palmo has continued to publish her own and other women's works in book series dedicated to Tibetan women's writing.¹²

Paltsek Böyik Penying zhimjuk khang (Palzek Research Institute of Old Tibetan Scriptures, དཔལ་བཟེགས་བོད་ཡིག་དཔེ་རྒྱུ་ཞིབ་འཇུག་ཁང་།) launched an anthology series called Samthö Bumo (*Plateau Daughters* ས་མཚོའི་བུ་མོ།) in 2008 dedicated to the female writers working for this pro-

9. *Bzho lung* is a traditional milking device attached to a woman's sash which latches onto the handle of the milking pail. It is also an adornment accessory and an auspicious symbol that signifies, among other things, life-sustaining female labour and the abundance of dairy products.

10. Dpal mo 2006. *Dpyad rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*.

11. Dpal mo 2011. *Snyan rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*, *Sgrig rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*.

12. Palmo is a prolific poet and prose writer. For collections of some of her exemplary writings see Dpal mo 2014 & 2012.

lific publishing and research organization.¹³ Another truly monumental contribution is Khandroi Chödzo Chenmo (*The Great Dharma Treasury of Dakinis*, མཁའ་འགྲོའི་ཚལ་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ།). A committee of Larung Gar nuns collated and edited this 53-volume collection of works mostly by Tibetan Buddhist women, which was published in 2017. This trailblazing compilation is a treasure trove of great socio-religious, historical and literary texts. As such it is an invaluable and unavoidable resource for the exploration of Tibetan literature in general and Tibetan women's literature in particular.

It is almost impossible to keep track of online and social media literary activities, but judging by my own reading experience cyberspace is the most vibrant, fertile and innovative ground for Tibetan literature. In 2013 when I was completing my PhD thesis there were at least two websites and two newspapers established for the specific purpose of publishing Tibetophone women's writing. Since then some of these platforms have become defunct. However, they have been replaced by a mushrooming of forums for Tibetan women's writing on social media.

For instance, many WeChat literary platforms either publish only women's writing or frequently facilitate the posting of only female authored works. One Tibetan literary website that I should mention here is Chömé bökyi tsonrik drawa (*Butter Lamp Tibetan Literature Website*, མཚོན་མེ་བོད་ཀྱི་ཚུམ་རིག་དྲ་བ།). This popular website with an international readership has promoted special selections featuring works by individual female writers as well as separate collections of women's poetry by different groups of poets. There are other events that supplement this flurry of literary activities such as well-publicised and well-attended conferences and awards ceremonies dedicated to the literary voices of Tibetan women.

Contemporary Tibetan women's writing disseminated through all these mediums feature a variety of genres, ranging from poetry and fiction—including short stories and novels—to factual prose writing such as literary and academic essays and social commentary. Whilst displaying innovative modern qualities this diverse body of works bears the influences of Tibetan literary and oral traditions. With regards to content, it is unique in its attention to subjective female experiences and in its acute sensitivity to the issues affecting Tibetan women.

Themes: “I am Who I am”

A wide range of themes and issues engage contemporary Tibetan women's writing. Allow me to underline only a few of these here through Palmo's thought-provoking poem Nga ni nga yin (“I Am Who I Am,” འ་ནི་ང་ཡིན།). On top of being an acclaimed poet and a distinguished professor of Tibetan literature, Palmo is an influential feminist cultural critic and social activist for women's

13. This anthology series is formed of four volumes published between 2008 and 2012.

health, education and empowerment.¹⁴ As I have noted already, she is also an accomplished and prolific editor of Tibetan women's works. This fine poem is more apt for a female voice, but this is how an appreciative male reader recites and translates it:

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་སྐྱེ་དམན་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ
 སྐྱོན་རྟགས་ཆེ་བའི་འགྲོག་མོ་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 ངས་ཁྲིལ་གཞུང་གི་སྤངས་ཐང་ཡངས་པོའི་ངོས་སུ
 ལས་ཀྱི་མེ་ཉོག་རང་བྱོན་དུ་བཞད་པར་ཕྱ་ཚུགས་བྱས་མྱོང
 ངའི་རྐང་སེན་ལ་མེ་ཉོག་གི་བཀྲག་མདངས་བྱགས་དུས
 ང་ནི་དྲུངས་གཙང་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་སྐྱེས་མ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ
 སྐྱིང་སྟོབས་ཞན་པའི་བོད་མོ་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 ང་རང་ཉི་འོད་ལ་སྟོགས་ཏེ་བཞད་མྱོང་ལ་གང་ངར་ལ་རྒྱལ་ཏེ་འབྲུག་ཀྱང་མྱོང
 བྱམ་མཁའའི་འཇའ་ཚོན་བག་གོས་སུ་འཐག་པའི་སྟོང་སེམས་བཅངས་ཏེ
 ངའི་ལང་ཚོ་ལ་མཛེས་སྡུག་གི་རྒྱབས་ཤིང་འཕྲོ་དུས
 ང་ནི་ལུ་ཉིག་ཅིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་མནའ་མ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ
 སྐྱོན་གཤིས་ཟབ་པའི་གཡོག་མོ་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 འཁོས་རྒྱུང་བའི་རང་གཤིས་ཀྱི་མཚོའུ་རྒྱུང་ནང་དུ
 བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱི་པད་དཀར་ལྷམ་མེར་འབྲུངས་པར་རེ་སྟོན་བྱས་མྱོང
 ངའི་མི་ཚོ་ལ་རྒྱུང་མ་ཞེས་པའི་ཁ་བྱང་གིས་དུས
 ང་ནི་འཆིང་ཡིག་ཅིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་བྱད་མེད་ཅིག་ཡིན་ལ
 ཚིས་ཐང་ཉམས་པའི་འཕྲོན་མ་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 འདོད་ཆགས་ཀྱི་གད་སྐྱིགས་གང་དགར་བྱོ་སའི་ཡོལ་གོར་ངེས་ཚོག་ལ
 དྲག་སྟོན་གྱི་རལ་གྱི་བྱབས་ནས་སྤང་སྟེ་དམར་གསོད་བྱས་ཀྱང་ཚོག
 ངའི་ལུས་རྟེན་ལ་རྩེར་སོན་དང་འཕགས་ལམ་མེད་ཅེས་ཐམ་ག་བརྒྱབ་དུས
 ང་ནི་ཚོང་བོང་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན

14. For an introduction to Palmo and her social and intellectual work see Robin 2015, 153–169.

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་བཅུན་མོ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ
 བུ་སྟོན་གྱི་གསེར་བུམ་ལ་རིགས་གྱི་བྱེད་བཞད་པའི་སྐྱེད་ཡུམ་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 བུ་སྟོན་གྱི་གནའ་སྟོལ་བཟང་བོ་སྟེགས་དུས་གྱི་སྐྱེན་ལམ་ལ་མི་འཚོར་བར
 ལྷག་བསམ་གྱི་གདུང་ཀ་མི་འགྲེལ་བར་གྱེན་དུ་འདེགས་པར་བཟོད
 ངའི་ཚོ་སྟོག་ལ་ཁེ་དབང་དང་འདྲ་མཉམ་སྤྲད་དུས
 ང་ནི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ཅིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན

ང་ནི་ང་ཡིན
 ང་ནི་མཇོང་མོ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ལ
 རིགས་རྒྱུད་གྱི་ས་བོན་འདེབས་སའི་གཤེན་ས་ཞིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན
 ཉེན་འབྱུང་གི་ལས་འབྲས་ཚོལ་དུ་མ་བསྐྱར་བར་དྲང་བོར་བསྐྱུངས་ན
 བཙེ་དུང་གི་དུས་ཚོགས་ལ་འགྱུར་ལྡོག་མེད་པར་དྲོད་ཁོལ་སྟོལ་ཅིང
 ལྷང་སྟོང་ཟུང་འཇུག་གི་འཁོར་ལོ་གསང་ཐབས་གྱིས་འཁོར་དུས
 ང་ནི་ཤེས་རབ་ཅིག་ཀྱང་ཡིན¹⁵

I am who I am
 I am an inferior sex
 And also a very foolish nomad woman
 I have hoped against hope that the flowers of karma would naturally bloom
 On the surface of the vast grassland of loyalty
 When the brilliance of the flowers is painted on my toes
 I am also a pure thing

I am who I am
 I am a childbearing mother
 And also a fainthearted Tibetan woman
 I have bloomed facing the sunshine and have also frozen swimming in the bitter
 cold
 When the beautiful waves of my youth surge
 Fantasizing about weaving the rainbow in the sky into my wedding dress
 I am also a pearl

I am who I am
 I am a bride

15. Dpal mo 2020, “nga ni nga yin.” <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IDLfKUeNdWHwBqS-8WAByA>

And also a servile maid
I have wished for the vibrant blossoming of the white lotus of karmic merit
In the little pond of my humble nature
When my life is labelled as the little mother¹⁶
I am also a contract

I am who I am
I am a woman
And also a disgraced prostitute
I can be taken as a platter for pouring out the waste of lust at will
And can also be murdered unsheathing the sword of violence
When my body is sealed asserting that it possesses no excellence and noble
path
I am also a commodity

I am who I am
I am a queen
And also a nurturing mother within whose gold vase womb blooms the
young of the race
I dare to hold up the pillars and beams of altruism without letting them fall
And without losing the good ancient traditions of Tibet to the killing of the
degenerate times
When my life is given rights and equality
I am also a country

I am who I am
I am a female lover
And also a fertile field for sowing the seeds of the lineage
If the karmic justice of dependent origination is not feigned but justly upheld
I bestow warmth without the season of love suffering any change
When the wheel of fused appearance and emptiness revolves esoterically
I am also wisdom

Palmo's subsequent explanatory note makes it apparent that the poem was inspired by the age-old

16. *Chung ma* is another word for wife. Here a more literal translation is adopted so as to underline its contrast with the matriarch of the family—*a ma*. It can also be rendered as “little women” and “little wife.”

Tibetan practice of male discrimination and violence against women.¹⁷ The horrendous murder of Tsewang Lhamo by her estranged husband in 2019 in Tibet breathes horror through it.¹⁸ Palmo's poem also shares some of the common themes and issues that make contemporary Tibetan women's writing stand out. The Tibetan women authors expose and amend many silences and shortcomings of Tibet's masculine literary tradition. Among other issues, Tibetan female poets and short story writers tackle motherhood, including maternal love, pregnancy and child rearing, the untimely loss or deprivation of youth, domestic violence, lack of education and employment opportunities for girls, male dishonesty and fickleness, the betrayal of love and dereliction of paternal obligations.

Motherhood: The Gold Womb

As evident in Palmo's poetic image of "the gold vase womb" one predominant theme is motherhood, treated in its entirety as a complex spectrum that includes pregnancy, birthing and child-care. One of the earliest Tibetan writers to pay nuanced and sustained attention to these issues is the acclaimed writer Dekyi Drolma (བདེ་རྒྱུད་སྒྲོལ་མ།). Her famous poems on her own pregnancy ལྷོ་སྐྱོ་མོ་དགུ་མདུད། "Nine-eyed Knot: A Monthly Record" and on the infancy of her child ལོ་ལོ་བཞེ་བའི་ཞགས་ཐག "Lasso of Love: A Record of a Year" are exemplary.¹⁹ These motherhood poems are rich in their poignancy and a sensibility lacking in works by male writers. Displaying the poetic imprints of the past they are deliberately crafted and written in the style of classical metrical composition. However, the detailed treatment of the intimate experiences of a pregnant woman and a first-time mother is totally unconventional.

Dekyi Drolma's pregnancy poem is probably the first Tibetan poetic text that describes minutely the physical and psychological changes a woman undergoes during pregnancy. It chronicles nine months of intense happiness, pain, fear, anxiety, uncertainty and wonder, bracketed within the cessation of menstruation and the onset of contractions. It introduces male Tibetan readers to a range of experiences throughout pregnancy from morning sickness and loss of appetite to constant hunger, crushing weight, and cramps and pains.

Dekyi Drolma's infancy poem is equally detailed in description as she gives a vivid personal

17. Palmo released "I Am Who I Am" as a social media post first on its own. Following its popular reception, she reposted it accompanied by an explanatory piece entitled "*snyan ngag 'da'i rgyab ljongs greng ba* (On the Background of this Poem)," Dpal mo 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IDLfKUeNdWHwBqS-8WABya>

18. Tsewang Lhamo (a young Tibetan nomad mother) was mutilated and stabbed to death by her runaway husband on October 23, 2019, when she refused to accept him back into her life. This callous murder sent shock waves across the Tibetan language social media and generated a passionate conversation about Tibetan male violence against women led by Tibetan female intellectuals including Palmo.

19. Bde skyid sgröl ma 2011, 43–47, 48–65.

account of caring for her baby boy. Throughout day and night she guards the newborn baby with eternal vigilance and gets little sleep. His incremental growth is noted with tireless attention and joy. The baby's every movement is monitored and his behaviour examined for signs of distress. It is a poem that vividly paints maternal love, patience, self-sacrifice and the constancy that entail motherhood. Tellingly man as father or husband is absent in both of these poems apart from “the caressing hand of the husband” in the pregnancy poem.

Another highly original and illuminating work on motherhood is the 2019 award-winning short story རླུ་བྱུག་ “Birth Pangs” by the young emergent writer Karma Drolma (ཀམ་ལྷོ་ལ་མ།).²⁰ It is unique and audacious in its candid and explicit treatment of childbirth at a modern maternity unit in Lhasa. Through consummate blending of the literary and spoken Tibetan word, Karma Drolma makes us feel the fear, pain, hope and joy of an expectant mother as she is subjected to the Foucauldian medical gaze. She directs the readers' gaze to the birthing scene in an impersonal medical setting that reveals both the power and the powerlessness of the young mother. I have just finished reading this with my second year MPhil students, who are all male. We were delighted and very relieved with the happy ending and were in total awe of the new mother after witnessing what she had to endure, confirming the empathy-deepening quality of contemporary Tibetan women's literature.

Marriage: Souring of the Rainbow Wedding Dress

Another common theme that preoccupies contemporary Tibetan women writers is marriage and all the challenges and issues it entails. To borrow Palmo's imagery—the dream of the rainbow wedding dress turns into a nightmare when the new bride is “labelled as the Little Mother” and forced into “a contract” of domestic servitude. I will use Dekyi Drolma's work again to demonstrate this point – this time drawing on a short story of hers called རྒྱུ་མ་ཞིག་འཆི་ཁའི་སློང་བརྗོད། “The Tragic Statement of a Dying Wife”.²¹

In this fictional suicide note of a young mother called Drolma, the protagonist gives the reasons for taking her own life. As a young teen Drolma leaves school and marries her lover disregarding the advice of her parents and teachers. Her unnamed husband, who is a government official, then abandons her as soon as she gives birth to a girl. He returns home only once, which results in a further pregnancy and the birth of a second daughter. Drolma is left nursing her sick mother-in-law and toiling in the nomadic countryside. Constant overwork and single motherhood take its toll and she is hospitalized. As a result, the family has a fleeting reunion in the county town. How-

20. Karma sgröl ma 2019, “Skye zug” at https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/d-SmjIbSI-t-ZSWQT_by2aw

21. Bde skyid sgröl ma 2008, 42–49.

ever, one night the husband returns drunk and subjects her to severe beatings. He yells at Drolma and her daughters: “Get out, you bitches! What’s the point of a wife who can’t bear sons!” The following day, Drolma, covered in wounds and caked in blood, returns to the pasturelands with her daughters. Her husband subsequently has an affair which results in an out of wedlock son.

Drolma finds the situation unbearable when she learns that her husband has gambled away their livestock, herself and their daughters. After suffering nine years of hardship working for her husband’s family this becomes the final catalyst for her suicide. The traditional misogynistic notion of preferring the birth of boys to that of girls forms the ideological linchpin of the short story. Through the last will of a mistreated and overworked bride it exposes the alcohol abuse, gambling addiction, spousal abandonment, dereliction of paternal duties and domestic violence that plague Tibetan communities. It hammers home an observable social pattern in Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora where many wives or brides almost singlehandedly undertake childcare, household chores and agricultural work whilst suffering verbal, physical and mental abuse from their husbands and parents-in-law.

The Sword of Violence

Male violence against women—what Palmo’s poem with sinister sexual undertones refers to as “the sword of violence”—is another recurring theme. All forms of violence committed by men, including rape, are increasingly tackled in Tibetan women’s poetry and fiction. Yet few Tibetan male cultural or literary critics draw our attention to this most serious social issue. The depiction of rape and sexual abuse might be fleeting in some cases, but male dominated social structures and masculine norms that permit such aggression lurk deep within many female authored texts.

Just to mention a few standout works by some of the Tibetan writers from Tibet and India we are fortunate to have with us today: Chimay’s (འཆི་མེད།) poems འབྲོག་གྱི། “The Tibetan Mastiff” and དེ་བྱིད་ཉིད་ཡིན་ནམ། ལྷོ་ལ་མ། and “Is that you, Drolma?” address domestic violence, servitude and imprisonment;²² Tsedronkyi’s (ཚོ་སྣོན་སྐྱིད།) short story ལྷ་སེམ་པའི་ས་སྤོང། “The Silent Dusk” treats arranged marriage, marital abandonment, and sexual abuse;²³ and Nyimatso’s (ཉི་མ་འཚོ།) chilling short story ཟུར་ཞིག་ “A Fragment” deals with the abuse of the teacher-student relationship and a drug-facilitated rape that results in pregnancy.²⁴ These and similar daring works might make uncomfortable reading for some, but they form a timely critique of the Tibetan patriarchy. They open the eyes of us male readers to the ingrained masculinity that has negatively impacted women’s bodies, speech, and minds for so long, causing so much suffering and so many injustices.

22. 'Chi med 2012, 129–202, 180–183.

23. Tshe sgron skyid 2014.

24. Nyi ma 'tsho 2009, 12–19.

I hope I have managed to show today, be it only in glimpses, that contemporary Tibetan female writers weave their art out of the raw material of their lives. As such, an appreciation of their creations makes us see and feel aspects of Tibetan life that lie behind male-induced silences. In her extraordinary novel *Middlemarch*—which, according to Virginia Woolf “is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people”²⁵—George Eliot alerts us stony hearted mortals to the roar of tragedy that frequents, numbs, and silences our ordinary existence. At one point she directs our attention to the heroine Dorothea weeping six weeks after her wedding with these immortal words:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.²⁶

Contemporary Tibetan women’s writing opens our hearts and minds to common sufferings that trouble ordinary lives. It awakens readers—especially male readers—to the hardships, challenges and sufferings experienced daily by women, thereby giving new insights and engendering empathy.

Conclusion: The Wisdom Women

Palmo’s poem “I Am Who I Am” ends on a profound note with the last line proclaiming: “I am also wisdom.” This is an apparent allusion to the feminine dimension of Buddhist esoteric wisdom. But it can also serve as a declaration of Tibetan women’s worldly wisdom. Tibetan literature is an artistic mode of expression that imparts Tibetan women’s unique experiences of and sharp insights into life and their many and varied ideals, joys, and woes.

If we Tibetans desire individual, national, and universal liberation—which I believe we do—then it is high time we men started to listen to and learn from the public and private voices of Tibetan women including their literary creations, which we are here to appreciate this weekend. Until we are ready to do so with humility, openness, and humanity, our collective thinking, words, actions, and wisdom will remain impoverished and incomplete.

25. Cited in Byatt 1999, v.

26. Eliot 1999, 216–217.

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