Tsering Namgyal Khortsa’s *The Tibetan Suitcase*  
(Blackneck Books, 2019. 248 pp, Rs. 300)  
*Sharon Koshy*

The Tibetan Suitcase is Tsering Namgyal Khortsa’s first novel, thus becoming the fourth exile Tibetan to publish a novel in English. It was first self-published in April 2013 and now by Blackneck Books, an exile publication house based in Dharamsala. Tsewang Pemba’s “Idols on the Path” published in 1966 happened to be the first English novel by a Tibetan exile. While Jamyang Norbu’s 2002 novel “Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years” follows Holmes’ journey through Tibet, Thubten Sampheil’s 2009 novel “Falling through the Roof” follows the story of a reincarnation in exile.

The Tibetan Suitcase, on the other hand, explores contemporary questions and contradictions of Tibetan exile life. It captures the aspirations and challenges of breaking free of the liminality of refugee-life and uncertainties pertaining to the question of homeland. While addressing these issues, the author manages to juxtapose the experiences of exile life and the much coveted immigrant life in the West as a moral dilemma.

The novel largely follows the protagonist of the story Dawa Tashi, a Tibetan born in exile and his life in India, the United States, and Hong Kong. The novel revisits Dawa’s past who is presently working as a spiritual guru in Hong Kong, a profession far from his dream job when he was much younger. However, an unexpected visit from a friend from Dawa’s past re-introduces him as an ambitious student at Appleton University in the US and later his occupation as a journalist in a Dharamsala-based Tibetan journal. The other protagonists of the novel enter the landscape through journal entries or letters sent between Dawa and them over a period of time, all of which are collected in a leather suitcase by the narrator. However, the narrator is not the usual
omniscient third-person informed about the entire storyline, but someone who gets familiar with the trajectory of the characters as the story unfolds.

The story reflects the anxieties of belongingness, multiple identities, the question of validation, and, above all, as highlighted in the novel, contradicting representations of Tibet in the West. The story is set in three worlds: the West, the exile and Tibet, each of which is personified by characters in the novel. It is quite apparent that the exile context only gives a necessary backdrop to Dawa’s upbringing and life goals rather than posing as a quintessential character by itself. Instead, attention is given to Dawa’s life in America as a student and his experiences of Tibetanness away from exile. When Dawa emphasises that life in America is closer to his dream and passion, it reflects the wider acceptance among Tibetan refugees that immigration to the West is their window to more opportunities and better life. However, this comes at a certain price as emphasized by Dawa’s experiences in the US arising from their stereotypes of Tibet and the question of authentic Tibetanness.

Dawa’s meeting with Iris is a turning point in the story as well as Dawa’s journey as a Tibetan. Iris here embodies the academic intrigue of Western Tibetan scholars, laudable for her passion in the language and ancient scriptures. However, the author felt the need to justify this intrigue as more than academic interest by tracing her own adoption story back to McLeod Ganj and her Indo-Nepalese heritage. The trajectory of Iris’s character projects the quintessential question of Tibetan identity, the validity of Tibetan experiences in exile. Iris belittles Dawa for his lack of writing skills of Tibetan language and undermines his identity for not having experienced the hardships of a Tibetan under Chinese occupation which is represented by Pema, a young poet born in Tibet who escaped to India. Iris’ question to Dawa in one of the letters is rather a reflection of the question an average Tibetan in exile is faced with: “How long could you continue luxuriating in melancholy and nostalgia?” In fact, Iris is the personification of the Western academia’s invalidation of nuances of exile life while evaluating “Tibetanness” relative to extent of one’s loss in direct confrontation with the Chinese.

On the other hand, the novel presents characters like Prof. Khenchen Sangpo, a well acclaimed Tibetan scholar who himself is a symbol of preservation of Tibetan language, culture, and memory. He is also the meeting point of old Tibet and Tibet under Chinese occupation, a world lost and conquered, a land the exiled Tibetans yearn to return to. His renown and popularity as a spiritual and erudite leader can be compared to that of the Dalai Lama as evident from the scale of welcome he receives in Tibet upon a visit. The Chinese state also figures in the typical role of the oppressor, a position usually found in readings of Sino-Tibetan histories. However, rather than only blaming the Chinese occupation for personal and collective loss, Khortsa ultimately transfers the attention to how certain images of and opinions of Tibet are manufactured, perceived and represented in the West. The latter could almost be considered the invisible villain of the novel besides China whose expansionist policies were carried out at the expense of an independent Tibet.

The novel sets itself apart as a fictional reconstruction of issues that many exiled Tibetans face as refugees, however finds seldom discussed.