Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by "Fake" Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories

by Holly Gayley and Somtso Bhum

Rumors and talk about fake lamas and monks abound. This is how Tibetans refer to disreputable figures who wear Buddhist robes while pursuing illicit aims, whether traveling to distant Chinese cities to attract patrons under false pretense or chasing women in the name of tantric practices. The phenomenon is not new. A song condemning phony and lecherous lamas in the Gesar epic warns, "By the day he delivers corrupt teachings before his patrons, / By night he sneaks like a dog around girls' pillows" (Jabb 2015: 66). As Tsering Shakya points out, "Tibetans have always been well aware that there are people who wear the mask of religion to dupe the faithful" (1980: 81), and traditional Buddhist texts have recognized this possibility (Kapstein 2002, Jabb 2015: 60–62). Nonetheless, attention to distinctions between "fake" (*rdzun ma*) and "genuine" (*tshad ldan* or *rnam dag*)[1] lamas and monks has intensified since the revitalization of Buddhist institutions in Tibetan areas of China during the post-Mao era (Makely 2007: 266, Caple 2019: 61–64).

From the 1980s forward, towering Buddhist figures on the Tibetan plateau like the Tenth Paṇchen Lama and Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok endeavored to reform monasticism and publicly voiced their disapproval of monks who fraudulently posed as lamas without the proper qualifications. For example, in a speech given in Serta in 1985, the Paṇchen Lama warns monastics against "pretending to recite scriptures" or "pretending to teach Dharma in a fraudulent way" and likewise reprimands nomads for being naïve in treating lamas too reverently so that "monks will say they are lamas even if they are not" (Terrone 2021: 14). Fifteen years later, as Tibetan Buddhism was attracting a growing number of Han Chinese followers in the 2000s, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok complained of the proliferation of "more and

[1] With respect to terms for "genuine," *rnam dag* denotes that a lama or monk is "completely pure" with impeccable conduct, whereas *tshad ldan* implies a standard of authenticity, meaning someone who is properly qualified. Both are used in the sources under consideration in this article. Other terms in contemporary usage include *tshul mthun*, which has a more legal and ethical valence, and *dngos ma* (alt: *ngo ma*), meaning "real" or "actual," also used for for goods that are considered authentic.

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more phoney tulkus and khenpos" who travel around China and Tibet to gather disciples, touting construction projects at their home monasteries to raise funds (Smyer Yu 2011: 113). As part of wider concerns with monastic purification and ethical reform in Tibetan regions under Chinese rule (Germano 1998, Gayley 2013, Capple 2019), the discourse about "fake" lamas and monks provides a way to rhetorically distance "genuine" monasticism and tantric practice from instances of deception that otherwise threaten the reputation of Buddhist institutions altogether.

Yet critiques of named lamas and monks engaged in sexual misconduct remain largely taboo in Tibetan society outside the domain of gossip. In 2017, the #MeToo movement exposed sexual and other forms of abuse among Tibetan Buddhist lamas operating in Europe and North America (Gayley 2018, Gleig 2019). However, Tibetan women have been reluctant to engage, although other issues such as domestic violence have recently come to the fore in social media forums (Robin 2019).[2] Through print journals and efforts on the ground by NGOs like Machik and the Demoness Welfare Association for Women, a range of feminist expression is emerging on the Tibetan plateau that advocates for women's education, health care, and legal rights (Robin 2015, Hall 2019). Yet, as Hamsa Rajan has pointed out, this type of advocacy work involves a "contradiction [that] results from activists' attempts to improve women's status while at the same time attempting to preserve Tibetan culture, defend Tibetan culture against accusations of backwardness, and maintain Tibetan social unity and cohesiveness" as an ethnic minority in China (2015: 130). Nowhere is navigating the contradiction more precarious than with respect to Buddhist institutions, one reason that Tibetan nuns (even in exile) are more reticent than their ordained Western counterparts to associate with feminism (Gyatso 2010, Padma 'tsho 2021).

Perhaps because of this, a significant venue for critiquing fake lamas and sexual transgressions has been contemporary Tibetan-language fiction.[3] The favored style of social realism is particularly well-suited to delve into the messiness of human failings and call

[2] WeChat provides a venue for Tibetan women to share information and narratives, especially Jamyang Kyi's "Today's Women" (*Deng gi skyes ma*), a women-only forum which took off after reports in October 2019 of a nomad women's stabbing by her adulterous husband when she refused to take him back. As Francoise Robin relays, "The sharing of this piece of news opened the floodgates of online expression of grief in the usual forms of poems, but also with opinions, testimonies and reports about domestic violence and murder of one's wife" (2019).

[3] This essay focuses on Tibetan-medium short stories from Tibetan areas of China with reference to the wider context of contemporary literature by and about Buddhist women in Tibetan and Himalayan regions composed in Tibetan, Chinese, and English languages.

attention to exploitative social relations.[4] While not necessarily feminist in intent, short stories about such sexual transgressions—as a form of social critique of male depravity and the mistreatment of women—provide an important complement to more direct advocacy work for women's rights and access to education and health care. Indeed, a major concern of third wave feminism lies precisely in the performance and parody of gender roles as well as representation practices as important sites for the negotiation and subversion of gender norms.[5] In line with this orientation, in this article, we do a close reading of Tibetan-medium short stories that depict lamas engaged in sexual misconduct and abuse, comparing fictional accounts by celebrated male authors Döndrup Gyal and Tsering Döndrup with those by less well-known women writers, Tashi Drönma (abbreviated Tredrön) and Tsedrön Kyi.[6]

In particular, we analyze two main literary strategies in these stories: *parody*, which serves to delegitimize the behavior of errant lamas, and *pathos*, which recovers female victims as objects of compassion rather than gossip and scorn. For example, in Tsering Döndrup's "The Disparaging Laughter of the Tsechu River" (*Rtse chus khrel dgod byed bzhin*), the deceptive antics of a lama named Alak Drong Tsang is lampooned as the Tsechu River bears witness, laughing in condemnation. In this case, a male author focuses on the lama as protagonist in order to expose and mock his fraudulence, thereby delegitimizing him in a way that would normally be inconceivable given the respect accorded to Buddhist teachers. By contrast, when female authors write about sexual transgression, they center the experience of young women who are victims of the lama's deception and misconduct. Accordingly, the tone shifts to pathos. Take the protagonist of "Sister Dechen Tsomo" (*A shel bde chen mtsho mo*), a short story by Tashi Drönma that we recount and analyze in more detail below. After being sexually assaulted under a bogus tantric pretext, Dechen Tsomo is left pregnant and alone. But that's not all. She also bears the shame of thinking that she is at fault for defiling a "holy man" (*skyes bu dam pa*) and will be punished by rebirth in hell. In this way, she suffers from a double-stigma: first the assault itself, which the author explicitly depicts as against her will, and second the

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4 On trends in contemporary Tibetan fiction, starting in the 1980s, see Tsering Shakya 2008.

5 See, for example, Butler 1990 and critiques by Mahmood 2005 and Xie 2014.

6 We are indebted to Françoise Robin for consulting on this topic as we were gathering source material. Her mention of the short stories by Tsering Döndrup and Tashi Drönma in her essay on "'Oracles and Demons' in Tibetan Literature Today: Representations of Religion in Tibetan-Medium Fiction" (2008: 151) was a crucial starting point.

religious taint of imagining that she will bear the karmic retribution. The tragedy of the situation is palpable, and it is narrated in a way that evokes compassion and thereby counters a tendency in Tibet and elsewhere for women to bear the stigma for sexual transgressions by men and the unintended pregnancies that may result.

It is important to note that there are, in fact, esoteric practices that employ sexual union (*sbyor ba*) in Buddhist tantra. Such practices involve manipulation of the subtle body for specific religious aims, such as longevity and liberation, in addition to a distinctively Tibetan type of scriptural revelation.[7] Practiced mostly by non-monastic religious specialists in the Nyingma tradition, the tantric rite of sexual union routinely takes place in the context of longtime partnerships as evidenced in prominent twentieth-century examples (Jacoby 2014, Gayley 2016). However, this has not always been the case, and for that reason tantric practices involving sexuality have been controversial at different times and places in Tibetan history.[8] Part of the problem is, of course, their potential misuse in pursuit of mundane sexual gratification. The power differential between the young women who are sought out for these practices and the older male lama seeking to extend his longevity raises the issue of consent, even if the actual tantric rite is performed, let alone when invoked dubiously.

Despite the existence of tantric practices involving sexuality, the short stories we analyze in this essay portray circumstances in which such practices are deceptively invoked as a pretext for sexual gratification by men who claim to be lamas. The Tibetan term *lama* (*bla ma*), which means "teacher" and translates the Sanskrit *guru*, can refer to anyone who has completed the traditional three-year retreat, but more often connotes an accomplished Buddhist master who can guide disciples on the tantric path, such as the abbot of a monastery, a tantric adept and lineage holder, or a reincarnate lama or tulku (*sprul sku*). However, in these short stories, with the exception of Alak Drong Tsang, it is never clear whether those claiming to be lamas are associated with any specific monastery or religious lineage at all, let alone qualified to be teachers.[9] Instead, in charlatan fashion, they appear out of nowhere like the unnamed lama who appears one day in a mountain village in Döndrup Gyal's contemporary classic "Tulku" (*Sprul sku*) or Lama Nyima who operates in the urban setting of Xining in Tsedrön Kyi's more recent "My Sunset" (*Nga yi nyi ma nub song*). In the latter, a man dressed in monastic robes named Nyima

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7 See Sarah Jacoby, 2014: chapter 3.

8 For a prominent early example, see Samten Karmay 1998.

9 Traditional Tibetan texts have much to say about what to look for in a qualified teacher, especially one who transmits teachings and practices associated with Buddhist tantra. See, for example, Jamgön Kongtrul 1999.

simply introduces himself as a lama to Özer Tso, a prospective university student whom he meets in a restaurant in Xining and later seduces. In creating these dubious characters, contemporary Tibetan writers show a savvy awareness of the potential for misuse of a lama's privilege and authority. More importantly, they open a public space for social critique.

Fake Lamas in Contemporary Tibetan Literature

The efflorescence of contemporary Tibetan literature began in the 1980s as economic and cultural liberalization spread across China in the post-Mao era and the first Tibetan literary journals were created. *Tibetan Art and Literature* (*Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*) was founded in 1980 by the Tibetan Autonomous Region Writers' Association, quickly followed by *Light Rain* (*Sbrang char*) the next year under the auspices of the Qinghai Writers' Association, and numerous others ensued (Shakya 2008). While some of the earliest works were composed in Chinese, a new Tibetan-medium fiction began to flourish from this time onward. Tsering Shakya notes that, in the caution of those early years, the short stories published in journals tended to replicate Communist rhetoric and focus on "the evils of the old society" (67). For this reason, in her survey of representations of religion in Tibetan fiction, Françoise Robin regards the 1980s as a time that fostered a "derogatory stance toward Buddhism and the Tibetan clergy" (2008: 150).

That said, probing works by prominent writers who emerged in this time, like Döndrup Gyal and Tsering Döndrup, are not merely traces of a short-lived anti-clerical trend. Lama Jabb calls attention to the "overlooked Tibetan tradition of social criticism" in both classical and oral Tibetan literature, highlighting Tibetans' skeptical attitudes toward rapacious and hypocritical religious figures, whether lamas, ritualists, or spirit mediums. Proverbs such as "Medium, diviner and astrologer / Are the three great liars of the world" and "It's the Lama who advises not to eat meat / Yet, the fattiest meat is eaten by the Lama" illustrate a degree of skepticism among ordinary Tibetans (2015: 64). Citing such instances, Lama Jabb forges a vital link between the oral tradition of social critique and modern literature. In addition, beyond the formative stages of contemporary Tibetan literature, there has been a sustained discourse among secular Tibetan intellectuals questioning the role of religion in modern society (Hartley 2002, Wu 2013).

Needless to say, short stories by Döndrup Gyal and Tsering Döndrup, such as "Tulku" and "The Disparaging Laughter of the Tsechu River" respectively, reveal skepticism about the power and

privilege accorded to Buddhist lamas in Tibetan society that remains salient today. The enduring popularity of these authors and works attest to their literary merits and the penetrating nature of their social critique. Yet publishing on such topics has its risks, namely the danger of being perceived by Tibetans as undermining cultural revitalization efforts that began in earnest in the 1980s and continue today, including the rebuilding of Buddhist institutions across the plateau. In fact, ground-breaking Tibetan authors like Döndrup Gyal received death threats for some of his short stories, including "Tulku" (published in *Light Rain* in 1981), which critiques blind faith (*rmongs dad*) in reincarnate lamas, and "The Narrow Footpath" (*Rkang lam phra mo*) that questions Tibetan's conservative adherence to the pathways of the past, published in the same journal three years later (Shakya 2008: 80). Matthew Kapstein notes that Döndrup Gyal was further "accused of harboring perverse views (*log lta*) and of being a destroyer of the teaching (*bstan bshig*)," apparently even becoming the object of sorcery by tantric communities (2002: 99).

"Tulku" was the first Tibetan short story to deal with fake lamas and sexual transgression. The tulku of its title remains nameless throughout, and no one knows anything about him in the mountain village where he arrives one day, travelling with the son of a respected household. The father, the devout old man Aku Nyima, is thrilled to have a tulku stay with them, despite the stranger's apparent uneven knowledge of the dharma. The elders in the village likewise seem enthusiastic to make offerings, and the longer he stays, the more their faith grows. However, early on, Döndrup Gyal leaves clues in the reader's path that the tulku is not the real deal, such as when he sizes up, from head to toe, the daughter-in-law of the household, Jakmo Cham, and searches through drawers in their home. The plot thickens when Jakmo Cham recommends the tulku to her friend Drukmo and suggests that he perform prayers for her ill mother. After mumbling prayers incomprehensibly all day, slipping in a few recognizable words like "lama" and "Buddha," the supposed tulku takes the opportunity to proposition Drukmo, first by suggesting that sex together will help heal her mother and finally by promising to marry her. Depicted as a beauty past her prime, Drukmo succumbs to the seduction, imagining that she will secure a tulku for a husband.

The situation begins to unravel after the tulku tries to pull Jakmo Cham into his room. She already had started to become suspicious of him, but now she is enraged. Fighting her way free, Jakmo Cham wakes up the next day, ready to warn her friend, only to find the tulku gone and herself the object of gossip, accused of stealing Drukmo's coral necklace which the stranger took with him. Döndrup Gyal stages a *deus ex machina* moment to set the record straight. The identity of the

imposter is revealed when a police officer comes to the village and reports, "The tulku you've placed your hopes in is currently under arrest at the Public Security Bureau in the county's capital. There's no question that he's not a real tulku. He's a criminal who has been going all over the place swindling and wreaking havoc. He's accustomed to committing these crimes that break the law and contradict tradition. It's a real shame that you all fell for his scam."[10] The blind faith of the villagers is thereby exposed in what is the most explicit and direct revelation of a fake lama in stories involving sexual transgression.

Other short stories leave it to the reader to figure out the lama's deception on their own, while still offering plenty of clues. During the 1980s, Tsering Döndrup crafted the iconic character Alak Drong or "Wild Yak Rinpoche" (A lags 'brong), which translator Christopher Peacock hails as "the foremost symbol" of his "wide-ranging and unflinching critique of corruption and hypocrisy in the modern-day practice of Tibetan Buddhism" (2019: 8). The name was regarded as an abomination by some, for it signaled imposture, if not for the institution of tulkus (Alak is the honorific used in Amdo) then at least for any character so named (Robin 2008: 150). Tsering Döndrup could thereby critique certain excesses and human failings among lamas by invoking his fictional character. For example, in "The Disturbance in D— Camp,"[11] Alak Drong is behind a fundraising campaign to rebuild the local monastery that ends up impoverishing the surrounding nomad communities. Each time the chief of the encampment raises funds for one building, Alak Drong sends him back for more—until finally the nomads move elsewhere and the chief goes mad.

In this and other stories, Tsering Döndrup is masterful at showing the ironic dilemmas of monks and lamas who are held to a high standard despite "the flaws, desires and contradictions of all human beings" (Peacock 2019: 8–9). In "The Handsome Monk,"[12] for example, the protagonist Gendun Gyatso finds himself caught in paralyzing self-doubt about remaining a monk, and this drives him to despair and serious breaches of his monastic vows. Unable to confess his dilemma to his elder brother, and afraid of being conscripted into a clan battle over access to grasslands if he disrobes, instead Gendun turns to liquor for solace and eventually an affair with a Chinese prostitute. Ironically, by the end of the story, he is recognized as a tulku despite his protests about violating his monastic precepts. Much to his chagrin, the search party excuses his behavior and replies that the previous holders of their monastery's tulku line "had always had consorts… [and]

[10] Our thanks to Lowell Cook for sharing his translation of "Tulku" (Don sgrub rgyal 1997) prior to its publication. The translation of this passage is his.

[11] This story can be found in Döndrup 2019, translated by Christopher Peacock.

[12] This story can also be found in Döndrup 2019, translated by Christopher Peacock.

partaken of the elixirs" (Döndrup 2019: 146–147). Here tantric tropes are marshalled to entrap the ambivalent monk.

The Antics and Abuse of Wild Yak Rinpoche

The use of parody by male authors to critique fake lamas, specifically in relation to sexual violation, is most clear in another work by Tsering Döndrup. In "The Disparaging Laughter of the Tsechu River" (*Rtse chus khrel dgod byed bzhin*),[13] the charlatan Alak Drong Tsang foists himself on a seventeen-year-old girl, employing tantric language to explain away his assault. The story, first published in 1988, is set in a fictional town in Amdo along the Tsechu River in the post-Mao era as local communities were beginning to rebuild monasteries out of the rubble and debris of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The head of the monastery is Alak Drong Tsang, depicted as a bald lama with hair growing around his neck, and no distinguishing qualities other than his large, thick ears. Yet as the head of the monastery, he is accorded much respect and devotion by the local community. Each day, when villagers visit the monastery, the monks emerge to see if they might be the recipient of alms, yet get passed over by those eager to receive the lama's blessing.

An old devout woman Ama Gonkyi and her daughter Lutso make a humble offering of yogurt when they can. Once when Lutso had a toothache, her mother sent her to the monastery with yogurt and encouraged her to get a blessing from Alak Drong Tsang as a cure. In the case of illness, blessings are often given by the lama by blowing on the affected area. And this provided the opportunity for much more than a cure, though the outcome is left to the reader's imagination:

> Alak Drong Tsang had just woken up upon Lutso's arrival. She prostrated to him three times and then mentioned how she couldn't sleep last night because of a sudden toothache. At seventeen years old, appealing but not especially beautiful, Lutso had a full-grown body with rounded breasts, large eyes, and a small mouth. Staring at her breasts protruding from under the chuba, Alak Drong Tsang thought, "I haven't performed my secret practice for a long time." Swallowing his saliva, he said, "Come here, let me see!" He held her cheeks with his hands and pulled her toward his lap, saying "open your mouth… let me bless you."[14]

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[13] Tshe ring don sgrub 2012.

[14] Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from short stories analyzed in this article were translated by Somtso Bhum and edited by Holly Gayley. Tshe ring don sgrub 2012: 47. *klu 'tsho thon dus a lags 'brong tsang mal las langs ma thag yin/ mos kho*

The rest of the scene is left to the reader's imagination. In this passage, the reference to "secret practice or conduct" (*gsang ba'i mdzad pa*) signals something tantric, although it is neither a technical term nor the appropriate context for such a practice. Clearly, Alak Drong Tsang is using the teenage girl's toothache and invoking a tantric reference as a pretext to take advantage of her. This first section of the story ends with the refrain, "The Tsechu River laughs disparagingly."

Throughout the story, the Tsechu River serves as the satirical witness to unfolding events, and each section ends with the same refrain as the antics and abuse of Alak Drong Tsang remain a secret. When Gonkyi tries to send her daughter to take yogurt to him again, she stubbornly refuses, and the Tsechu River again laughs, understanding all too well the reason for her refusal. When Lutso is forced to go the following year, Alak Drong Tsang can see that she is pregnant. Fortunately for him, the girl has not told anyone who the father is. In order to provide support for the child, without having to acknowledge paternity, he hatches a plan to recognize the child as the reincarnation of a wealthy old lady who recently passed away. Again the Tsechu River laughs disparagingly. After that, a few years pass, and the little boy comes to the monastery to meet the wealthy lady's family. Alak Drong Tsang whispers to him, "Be a good boy and reach for the rosary on uncle Tseden Gyal's neck. Say it's yours and ask him to return it back. If you do that, you're a good boy and, if you don't, you're a bad boy."[15] If it wasn't clear that Alak Drong Tsang was a fraud previously, this moment leaves no doubt. The boy does as he's told and the uncle is moved by the gesture, imagining that the boy has recognized the old lady's rosary around his neck, because he is her reincarnation. Even Lutso is won over by the gesture, suddenly regaining faith in the lama and thinking that his "secret conduct" was meritorious. The story closes as the Tsechu River laughs one last time. Alak Drong Tsang has managed to fool everyone else.

Tsering Döndrup's use of parody artfully undercuts the legitimacy

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la phyag gsum 'tshal rjes mdang dgong glo bur du rang gi 'gram so na nas gnyid kyang ma khugs pa de ji ma ji bzhin du bshad/ kho mo da lo mo lo bcu bdun yin la shin tu mdzes sdug ldan pa zhig min yang lus po dar zhing nu zung rgyas pa/ mig gnyis che zhing mchu sgros chung la blo la 'bab pa zhig 'dug/ a lang 'brong tshang gis klu 'tsho'i ras lwa thar rkyang gi 'og na tshur la 'bur ba'i brang khar lta bzhin sems la "rang gis gsang ba'i mdzad pa ma gnang bar yun ring 'gor song" bsams nas yang yang mchil ma mid zhor "'o na khyod tshur shog dang/ ngas gcig blta" zer zhor lag pa gnyis kyis klu 'tsho'i 'gram pa bskyor nas mgo rang gi pang la blang te "kha gdongs shig" zer… "ngas shal phu zhig gnang"/

[15] Tshe ring don sgrub 2012: 54. *khyod kyis a khu tshe brtan rgyal gyi ske yi 'phreng ba de bzung nas 'di ni nga'i yin pas nga la byin shes bshad thub na a ma'i bu bzang po yin pa dang ma thub na bu ngan pa yin nges red/*

of the lama who takes advantage of Lutso, thinly disguising his assault as an esoteric or "secret" practice. This is not to deny the existence of genuine instances of tantric couples engaged in this practice in the post-Mao era.[16] Rather it calls attention to the slippage between esoteric practices and the license accorded to lamas out of respect and devotion. Since lamas are presumed to be benevolent, their actions are regarded as "skillful means" (*thabs*) even when executed in unconventional ways. Hence Lutso reflects at the end of "The Disparaging Laughter of the Tsechu River," that if Alak Drong Tsang could recognize the old lady's reincarnation, he must have been correct in saying, "each lama has secret conduct but an ordinary person never understands even a fraction of it."[17] In this story, the lama protagonist is rendered as devious and debauched, while the mechanisms for mystification are illuminated. In this vein, with respect to Wild Yak Rinpoche as a stock character, Francoise Robin remarks, "Tsering Döndrup's hallmark sense of irony and delight in human ridicule must be interpreted in his case, it seems, not so much as an indictment of the institution of *tulku* or as a condemnation of the belief in rebirth per se, but as a reminder to readers that all human power systems are prone to mishaps and mishandling" (2016: 118). There is a palpable skepticism and ambivalence, one that invites reflexivity and distances the reader, if only for the moment, from a devotional impulse.

An ambivalent stance toward reincarnate lamas is not restricted to authors who began their literary careers in the 1980s, nor to issues of abuse. It can also be found in more recent Tibetan fiction, such as the Sinophone work "Enticement" (Ch: *Youhuo*, Tib: *Bslu brid*,) by Pema Tseden (published in 1995)[18] and the Tibetan-medium story "Entrusted by the Wind" (*Rlung la bcol ba*) by Lhakshamgyal (published in 2009),[19] which offer indeterminate explorations of reincarnation and leave it up to the reader to decide on the validity of

[16] For example, see Gayley 2016 about a tantric couple who played a significant role in revitalizing Buddhism in the region of Golok during the post-Mao era.

[17] Tshe ring don sgrub 2012: 54. *bla ma re la gsang ba'i mdzad pa re yod pas gang zang rang ga ba zhig gis de'i zur tsam yang mi rtogs*.

[18] This story was initially published in *Literature from Tibet* (*Xizang wenxue*) in 1995 and recently included in a 2018 compilation of Pema Tseden's fiction, titled *Enticement: Stories of Tibet*, translated by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart.

[19] This story was initially published in *Light Rain* (*Sbrang char*) in 2009 and was translated in 2016 in *Himalaya Journal* 36.1 by Françoise Robin. Robin analyzes the story in her essay, "Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World" for the same special journal issue on *The Secular in Tibetan Cultural Worlds*, edited by Holly Gayley and Nicole Willock.

their protagonists' conscription as tulkus. In this way, contemporary Tibetan fiction is able to address the human fallibility of lamas and reservations about religious institutions in ways that the devotional tenor of much Buddhist literature does not permit. As such, it makes a contribution to contemporary discourses wrestling with the tension between preserving Buddhism as a central feature of Tibetan culture and imagining a Tibetan modernity in secular terms (Hartley 2002, Shakya 2008). Urban intellectuals like Shokdung and the so-called "new thinkers" regard religion as a regressive force hampering the development of Tibetan modernity (Wu 2013), while progressive Buddhist leaders articulate a vision of Tibetan modernity aligned with Buddhist values (see Gayley 2013, 2021). Tibetan-medium fiction has a special contribution to make by calling attention to possible corruption and abuse within otherwise revered Buddhist institutions. In this regard, short stories by Tibetan women who are less well known, such as Tashi Drönma and Tsedrön Kyi, offer another significant vantage point on this issue.

From Scorn to Sympathy: "Sister Dechen Tsomo"

What changes when a female writer depicts the sexual transgressions of a fake lama? In our sample of stories, the most significant shift has to do with the protagonist—from male perpetrator to female victim. As a result of centering women's experiences and perspectives, the emotional tenor of the narrative correspondingly shifts from parody to pathos. Rather than focusing on the so-called lama's hypocrisy and deception, with all its attendant ironies, female-authored stories call attention to the plight of women whose faith is taken advantage of and whose lives are ruined in the process. Instead of the distancing effect of parody as a form of social critique, these stories depict the suffering of women in intimate terms in order to elicit sympathy and compassion. In this sense, just as the legitimacy of the lama is subverted through parody, the tendency to blame and spurn victims is challenged by offering a personal portrait of young women's experience before, during, and after being lured or forced into sexual relations with a lama. The reader is thereby confronted with the impact of sexual violation on women: the sense of shock and powerlessness, the breach of trust and faith, the enduring wound that is both psychological and spiritual, the discourses that prevent her from calling the lama to accountability, and the uncertain future of a life derailed.

A short story by Tashi Drönma, "Sister Dechen Tsomo" (*A shel bde*

chen mtsho mo),[20] opens with elaborate, poetic language depicting the sunset along the Kyichu River in Lhasa. The bucolic scene is interrupted by the cries of a baby and shouts of a mother, who in a fit of frustration, says to her one-year-old son: "You are my karmic retribution! Why do you keep making trouble? I don't know how to live anymore."[21] The other women along the river are aghast, exchanging glances of shock and disgust. They chastise Dechen Tsomo for scolding her baby so harshly and for being headless in getting pregnant in the first place. One says, "How can you say that to a child? You should have given it some thought first. Don't scold your baby, have mercy!"[22] Others on the shore call attention to her heedlessness (*bsam med*) as the cause of her own predicament. This is a classic scene of public shaming and blaming the victim by others who do not know the woman's story and presume her own reckless passion as the source of her troubles. Only one, a young woman named Lhakyi, recognizes her, and it is this moment of recognition that shifts the tenor of the story and paves the way for a sympathetic response.

The scene has resonances with contemporary fiction by Tibetan and Himalayan women writing in Chinese and English as well. For example, scenes of rape, domestic violence, monastic seduction, and adultery in the Sinophone short story "An Old Nun Tells Her Story" by Geyang[23] and the Anglophone novel *The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden[24] showcase the real-life dilemmas of Tibetan and Himalayan women in bearing the burden for male violence and sexual violation. Whether in Tibetan, Chinese, or English, women's writings are part of a new trend in Tibetan and Himalayan literature to use narrative fiction as a potent way to call attention to the challenges and injustices faced by women.

In "Sister Dechen Tsomo," author Tashi Drönma challenges the typical reaction of gossip and scorn by providing the backstory to the protagonist's frustrated attempt to raise a child on her own. The scene at the Kyichu River gives way to an extended flashback recounting

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[20] Bkras sgron 1988. This short story was published in the Lhasa-based journal *Tibetan Literature and Art* (*Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*) in 1988.

[21] Bkras sgron 1988: 2. *lan chags kyi bu lon khyod/ nga 'gro stangs sdod stangs mi shes par gyur tshar song/ khyod da dung rnyog dra shod rgyu ci yod/*

[22] Bkras sgron 1988: 2. *phru gur lan pa gang yod/ khyod kyis dang thog nas bsam blo yag po gtong dgos red/ da gzod phru gur gshe gshe ma gtong snying rje/*

[23] This short story originally appeared in *Listening to Tibet* (*Lingting Xizang*) in 1999. It was translated by Herbert Batt and published in a special issue of *Manoa 12.2* (2000), *Song of the Snow Lion,* featuring translations of Tibetan short stories from Tibetan and Chinese.

[24] *The Circle of Karma* (2005) is a contemporary classic of Bhutanese literature by the prominent woman writer Kunzang Choden. For a discussion of gendered representation and social critique in this novel, see Gayley 2020.

Dechen Tsomo's journey to Lhasa and what happened in the ensuing years. The narrative thereby centers her experience and perspective as a young woman from eastern Tibet who ventures to Lhasa on pilgrimage with dreams of a good life. The story is set in 1982 and was published in 1988 in the journal *Tibetan Arts and Literature* (*Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*). This is early into the post-Mao era, and few of that generation from eastern Tibet had likely ever been to Lhasa. To Dechen Tsomo and her friends who accompanied her, in this new era of promise, Lhasa was a "dharmic pure land" (*chos ldan gyi zhing khams*) replete with pilgrimage sites, plentiful shops and goods, as well as cars and cinemas. It promises them "a lifetime of happiness and merit accumulation" as the preeminently sacred and modern city in Tibet,[25] where the young women sought spiritual nourishment and economical benefit. The author makes a point to depict Dechen Tsomo and her friends as innocent, pious young women on pilgrimage. Of course, life in Lhasa was not as easy as expected, and the group must disperse to find work.

Tashi Drönma spares no ink in crafting Dechen Tsomo as a virtuous character throughout her ups and downs in Lhasa in order to render her a suitable object of compassion. The mother of Lhakyi, who the reader encounters in the opening scene, takes pity on the beautiful Dechen Tsomo, who wears the dress and jewelry of an undisclosed region of eastern Tibet, and gives her shelter. The turquoise and amber woven into her black braids and her large silver earrings signal that she is from a good family, and it is made clear on several other occasions that she left home out of piety rather than poverty. Once she found a factory job, she made for an excellent worker, another sign of her good character, so much so that the factory boss took notice and tried to help her. Depicted as an amicable and good-hearted boss, Yangchen refers her to a job tending the home of an old pious lady and a lama visiting from Kham in eastern Tibet. Touting him as an "eminent" (*rtsa chen po*) lama, Yangchen assures the young woman of two things: the work will be easier and by serving the lama she will "purify her karmic obscurations in this life" and "gain benefit in the next life" through merit-making. Being "someone with genuine faith in the dharma," as the narrator affirms, Dechen Tsomo was enthusiastic about the opportunity.[26]

Two months into her new domestic job, Gyaltsen, the purported lama, began to take an interest in her. The ordeal begins innocuously enough. One day, as she is cleaning, Gyaltsen comments on the

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[25] Bkras sgron 1988: 4. *mi tshe gcig gi bde skyid dang tshogs bsags*.

[26] Bkras sgron 1988: 7. *rang gi tshe 'di'i las sgrib dag pa, tshe phyi mar yang phen,* and *chos la dad pa rnam par dag pa byed mkhan*.

turquoise Dechen Tsomo wears around her neck. She relays that it was her late grandmother's turquoise "soul stone" (*bla g.yu*) which she had received as a child. The lama takes the opportunity to touch her, first reaching to examine the turquoise and then clasping her checks to pull her toward him and touch foreheads in a gesture of respectful intimacy. Dechen Tsomo felt confused by the gesture, but offers him the turquoise anyway, saying: "Rinpoche, please take this turquoise and guide my deceased grandmother upwards [to a favorable rebirth]. Please confer your blessing to purify my karmic obstructions in this life and the next and to enable me to repay the kindness of my parents."[27] Gyaltsen took her hands in his and accepted the gift, but the narrator adds a hint of suspicion, stating that he did this primarily in order to gain her trust. Thereafter, when the old lady would leave to do her daily circumambulation, Gyaltsen would seek out Dechen Tsomo for conversation and began to teach her the dharma, ingratiating himself to her and creating opportunities to hold hands.

Several weeks later, when Dechen Tsomo undoes the top of her dress in the kitchen to wash her hair, the lama hastily rises from his meditation to take a closer look. Here's how Tashi Drönma depicts the scene:

> While she was about to wash her hair, Gyaltsen got up from his seat and came out to meet her. As soon as he saw Dechen Tsomo's upper body, in the full spender of youth with soft skin and large breasts, he paused in his tracks. With two bulging eyes, he stared at her. Clutching his robes with both hands, he stuttered, "Now it's time to lead the dead upwards." Gyaltsen embraced Dechen Tsomo against her will and kissed her all over like a madman.[28]

Despite Gyaltsen's reference to "lead[ing] the dead upwards" (*gshin po'i yar 'dren*), there is no tantric sexual practice that has to do with guiding or liberating the dead. Within the context of the story, this appears to be a reference to Dechen Tsomo's request that he guide her grandmother to a favorable rebirth, and he offers it as an excuse for his assault. But it may also function to show how little he knows about

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[27] Bkras sgron 1988: 10. *rin po che/ g.yu 'di khyed gyis bzhes nas nga'i rmo bo dam pa yar 'dren dang/ rang nyid kyi 'di phyi gnyis ka'i las grib* (elsewhere: *las sgrib*) *dag pa dang tshe 'dir pha ma'i drin lan gso thub pa bcas yong ba'i skyabs 'jug gnang rogs/*

[28] Bkras sgron 1988: 11. *skra 'khru grabs byed skabs rgyal mtshan gdan las langs te phyir thon yong ba dang 'phrad pas rgyal mtshan kyis dkar la 'jam sha dod pa dang rab tu rgyas pa'i nu 'bur la sogs lang tshos yongs su phyag pa'i bde chen mtsho mo'i stod khog mthong ma nyid gom pa spo mtshams bzhag ste 'bur du don pa'i mig chen po gnyis pos kho mor sdig cing/ lag gnyis pos rang gi gos nas shugs gang yod kyis 'then pa dang sbrags kha nas "gshin po'i yar 'dren byed ran song" zhes shod bzhin par rang dbang med par bde chen mtsho mor 'khyud de smyo ba ltar mchu sgros gang sar bsnun/*

Buddhist tantra.[29]

Regardless, it is clear to any reader that this is not a religious act. Instead, Gyaltsen is transfixed by her beauty, with eyes bulging at the sight of her youthful breasts and hands clutching at his robes in an attempt to control himself. Moreover, the author makes it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Dechen Tsomo did not consent or reciprocate. When the lama embraces her, mad with desire, she is depicted as powerless (*rang dbang med pa*) to resist. Kissing all over is used here as a euphemism for sex. The rest is not depicted, but soon we learn that Dechen Tsomo is pregnant.

After that, she is tormented by the thought that she has "accumulated grave misdeeds and faults in this life by staining the lama."[30] While Dechen Tsomo blames herself for what happened, feeling remorse and engaging in purification rituals, Gyaltsen remains in predatory mode, speaking sweetly to her while "looking for opportunities to enjoy the fullness of her youth."[31] When she confronts him, the exchange is telling:

> With intense remorse, Dechen Tsomo made an anguished plea: "I am a woman with impure karma, isn't that so? Since I have stained you, a holy man, of all the thousands of men in the world, I will plummet down to the depths of vajra hell and won't have the opportunity even to speak of benefiting beings in future lives."
>
> Gyaltsen replied, "This is not at all impure behavior. I am overwhelmed by your meritorious gift. You will certainly obtain a male body in the next life. In the past, many qualified lamas have taken consorts (*rig ma*), and when I saw your signs and marks, I took you as my consort.[32]

Here we can see a pernicious rhetoric around gender and sexuality.

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[29] In addition, the phrase may have a sexual valence as suggested by male Tibetan colleagues when workshopping this passage at the Kayden Translation Symposium on "Buddhist Women & the Literary in Tibet" held at the University of Colorado Boulder on October 22, 2021.

[30] Bkras sgron 1988: 11. *tshe 'dir sdig nyes chen po bsags te bla ma brdzad song*.

[31] Bkras sgron 1988: 11. *kho mo'i lang tsho yongs rdzogs longs su spyod gang thub byas*.

[32] Bkras sgron 1988: 11. *bde chen mtsho mos "skyes dman nga ni las ma dag pa ji lta bu zhig ma red dam/ 'jig rten 'di'i thog tu skyes pa khri stong du ma bzhag ste khyed skyes bu dam pa bdzad pas* (elsewhere: *brdzad*) *dmyal ba rdo rje gting du lhung rgyu las phyi ma'i 'gro don zhes pa gleng yul bsdad ma song" shes 'gyod sems drag pos gdungs pa'i gtam rgyal mtshan la shog skabs rgyal mtshan gyis "'di ni las dag min gyi bya ba zhig gtan nas ma red/ khyod kyi bsod nams kyi bzi sbyin gyis nga gnon pa zhig yin pa dang tshe phyi mar khyod la skye bo pho lus thob nges yin/ sngon byod tshad ldan bla ma mang pos rig ma bzhes myong yod pas khyod kyang mtshan ma dang dpe byad bzang bar mthong nas nga'i rig mar blangs pa zhig yin/*

Dechen Tsomo understands herself to be the one to bear the karmic retribution as a woman—here the Tibetan term for woman used is literally "lowly birth" (*skyes dman*). Even though Gyaltsen is the one who assaulted her, Dechen Tsomo still believes that she is the one who "stained" (*brdzad*) him, since he is purportedly a "holy man" (*skyes bu dam pa*).

Of course, this is not how karma is supposed to work. Doctrinally, individuals are responsible for their own actions and bear the results in kind. However, anthropologists of South Asia have shown that karma is often marshalled as an explanation of last recourse to make sense of one's own misfortune (Keyes and Valentine 1983). In Himalayan contexts, this can translate into women imagining a husband's infidelity, domestic violence, or worse to be the result of their own bad karma (Gayley 2020). In addition, this story echoes a discourse on the inferiority of the female body that is longstanding in auto/biographical literature in Tibetan and Himalayan regions. The voices of eminent female tantric masters, from Yeshe Tsogyal to Sera Khandro, stand out for their recurring laments about the female body, doubting their own capacities for spiritual attainment despite authoritative affirmations to the contrary (e.g. Jacoby 2010).

In "Sister Dechen Tsomo," Gyaltsen counters that there is no cause for worry, since he engaged in tantric practice with her, taking her as his spiritual consort. Moreover, he placates her by quoting a poem by the Sixth Dalai Lama, known for his romantic dalliances, followed by the stock phrase, "Since the actions of a bodhisattva are an inconceivable secret, how can they be understood by ordinary people?"[33] When he attempts to legitimize his abuse by stating that many qualified lamas have taken consorts in the past, his deceit is obvious to the reader, who has been clued into his lust and manipulation. What's more, once Gyaltsen finds out that she is pregnant, he suddenly decides to leave for his homeland, claiming that he needs to supervise repairs on his monastery, never to return. She waits in vain, hoping at the very least to have a father around to help support the child.

This is a devastating account of deception and abuse. Not only is Dechen Tsomo subjected to sexual assault by a trusted religious figure, she is left to raise a child alone, imagining her grim circumstances as the fault of her own negative karma. In a more than twenty-page review, titled "The Call from the Heart of a Female Author,"[34] literary critic Lhakpa Phuntsok links the fate of Dechen Tsomo to the real-life

[33] Bkras sgron 1988: 11. *byang chub sems pa'i mdzad pa ni gsang ba bsam gyis mi khyab pa zhig yin pas phal pas ci la rtogs.*

[34] Lhag pa phun tshogs 1994.

experiences and concerns of Tibetan women, past and present. He takes a special interest in her anguish around the karmic outcome of her contact with Gyaltsen in relation to the searing question with which the story ends: "Alas! In this human life, am I experiencing such difficulties as the result of my lack of merit accumulated in past lives? Even if this is the case, my karmic obstructions should be purified. Or do I have such a miserable fate?"[35] This haunting question illustrates how abuse by clergy damages its victims both psychologically and spiritually. Perhaps in order to redeem the narrative from unrelenting pathos, Lhakpa Phuntsok takes it upon himself to respond to her question, stating emphatically that Dechen Tsomo, in the end, does indeed purify her karma.

However, this seems to miss the point and legitimize Gyaltsen as a genuine lama. In the narration itself, Tashi Drönma leaves subtle cues that Gyaltsen is not what he pretends, referring to him as an ordinary man (*skyes pa*) throughout, rather than lama, and eschewing honorifics except when characters in the story speak about him. Lhakpa Phuntsok understands what happened in conventionalized terms—that Dechen Tsomo "offered" (*phul*) her body to the lama as something meritorious and purifying, despite what appears in the story as assault: he embraced her; she was helpless to resist. This reading seems contrary to the thrust of the story itself. Apart from the reverential attitude of Yangchen and the old lady, no other information or evidence for the lama's exalted status is given, such as lineage, teachers, or home monastery. Beyond that, it misconstrues the nature of their encounter, which was forced rather than consensual, if there can be consent in situations with such a differential in power.

Nonetheless, we agree with the reviewer that Dechen Tsomo deserves compassion. Beyond that, we suggest that the story enacts a powerful transformation of Dechen Tsomo from an object of scorn by the women at the banks of the Kyichu to someone pitiable as the victim of sexual abuse. As we have shown, Dechen Tsomo's virtue and religious faith is emphasized by the author throughout the story, while Gyaltsen's deception is revealed in manifold ways: when he decides to accept the gift of turquoise, when his eyes bulge at the sight of her breasts, when he thrusts himself on her, when he claims that their sexual encounter was tantric in nature, and when he abandoned her with a promise to swiftly return. This juxtaposition of their characters is part of what creates pathos in the story and vindicates Dechen Tsomo as an innocent victim, worthy of compassion. Lhakpa Phuntsok

[35] Bkras sgron 1988: 14. *kye hud/ na'i mi tshe 'di ni tshe sngon tshogs dang bsod nams ma bsags pa'i rnam smin gyis sdug po 'di dag myang du bcug pa yin nam/ gal te de ltar na'ang nga'i las sgrib dag po yod pas yang na las dbang dman pa yin nam/*

reads the ending as an affirmation that Lhakyi, the bystander in the opening scene, responds with "affection and sympathy" (*sha tsha snying rje*) to Dechen Tsomo's plight. Yet despite the drawing that accompanies the story in publication—of two women side by side looking at a baby in one of their arms, an image that would suggest such care and concern—the story concludes without a sense of resolution. In the end, the two barely interact. Lhakyi looks toward Dechen Tsomo and sighs, shaking her head back and forth, and Dechen Tsomo lowers her gaze and returns to an uncertain future.

Shattered Dreams in "My Sunset"

Unlike the black-and-white portrait of sexual transgression in the story above, a female writer from the next generation, Tsedrön Kyi, offers a more complex and cosmopolitan portrait of sexual transgression set in urban Xining, capital of Qinghai Province, set in the early 1990s. The female protagonist and narrator of "My Sunset" (*Nga yi nyi ma nub song*),[36] Özer Tso, is a prospective student at Qinghai Nationalities University who is seduced into an affair with a purported lama named Nyima after the initial surprise and shock of his sexual advances. In the end, she falls in love with him despite the string of scantily-clad Chinese women who come and go from his life. Despite what appears as a consensual relationship, the story suggests that Nyima exploited her naiveté as he romanced her, engaged in a two-year relationship with her, and ultimately left her pregnant and alone. While Özer Tso is portrayed as a starry-eyed youth with dreams of success as a university student, Nyima's character is dubious from the start even though he is depicted as being kind and handsome. In addition to his liaisons with other women, Nyima routinely shifts in and out of religious attire, sometimes putting on a black wig and suit to travel. These various guises become a metaphor for the hypocrisy he embodies.

"My Sunset" was published in 2011 in a collection of short stories within the *Contemporary Tibetan Women's Book Series* (*Deng rabs bod rigs bud med kyi dpe tshogs*), edited by the writer and activist Palmo. This series and others edited by Palmo includes anthologies of poetry, essays, and research as well as novels by women writers, representing a new trend in Tibetan literature to elevate women's voices in concerted publication efforts. Parallel publication efforts have been spearheaded in recent years by Tibetan nuns at Larung Buddhist Academy, including the women's journal *Gangkar Lhamo* or *Goddess of the Snowy Range* (founded in 2011) and 53-volume collection *The*

[36] Tshe sgron skyid 2011.

Ḍākinī's Great Treasury (published in 2017) containing writings by, about, and for Buddhist women from India, Tibet, and China (see Padma 'tsho and Jacoby 2020 and 2021).

Similar trends of burgeoning publications by women writers can be found in other Himalayan contexts. In 2003, Zubaan was founded in Delhi as an outgrowth of the feminist publishing house Kali for Women, making women's fiction and non-fiction from across South Asia more widely available. In Himalayan regions, Nepali authors like Manjushree Thapa and Sita Pandey and Bhutanese authors like Kunzang Choden and Chador Wangmo explicitly address violence against women in short stories and novels—from rape and domestic violence to prostitution and sex trafficking. The realm of fiction gives voice to social dynamics on the ground which may otherwise be taboo, due to silencing within communities and personal attacks on women who dare to speak up. With respect to the ongoing challenges that Tibetan women on the plateau face, Tsedrön Kyi reports, "Even though the overall situation and fate of Tibetan women has changed, there are still a lot of unimaginable and depressing things that happen. For that reason, through creating characters in my stories, I have grappled with, both consciously and unconsciously, profound sentiments of sympathy, respect, and concern for women's lives."[37]

In this vein, "My Sunset" returns to the issue of sexual transgression by fake lamas in Tibetan literature from the 1980s and reimagines it within the world that most young literate Tibetan women have passed through: the urban minority university (Ch. *minzu daxue*). The story opens by evoking a sense of pathos: Özer Tso views herself as the bearer of "miserable karma" due to the "secrets and deception" of a supposed lama that leaves her feeling "disgusted and depressed."[38] She asks the reader to have affection and compassion (*sha tsha snying rje*) for her as a consolation for all that she has been through. From that opening, Tsedrön Kyi takes the reader back in time to witness her dreams and aspirations as a girl from nomadic regions of the Tibetan plateau. Like others, Özer Tso dreamed of getting a university degree and good job in the city. When she failed to pass the entrance exams, she became dejected and briefly entertained the idea of becoming a nun instead. Arriving in Xining by bus, on her way to Achung Namdzong nunnery, she went to a restaurant in the nearby Tibetan

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[37] Interview of Tsedrön Kyi by Döndrup Tsering (2019). *spyir bod rigs skyes ma'i gnas babs sam las dbang la 'gyur ba byung yod kyang/ da dung nyam thag pa'i gnas tshul blo las 'gongs pa mang du mchis/ de bas/ brtsams sgrung gi mi sna 'bri bzhengs las skyes ma'i 'tsho bar bsam bzhin dang bsam bzhin ma yin par gdung sems skyes pa dang/ brtsi mthong dang/ gces skyong byed 'dod kyi brtse dungs zab mo yang bcangs yod nges/*

[38] Tshe sgron kyid 2011: 225–226. *las ngan*, *sba gsang dang g.yo zol*, and *skyug bro ba dang ya nga ba*.

neighborhood for lunch. There she meets an apparently "genuine monk" (*grwa pa rnam dag*) wearing the Buddhist robes who strikes up a conversation with her. He is charismatic with a round face, prominent nose, thick dark eyebrows and long eyelashes curled upward, wearing an ivory mala or rosary. At first, Nyima is a positive influence, encouraging her to try again on the university exams, giving her some basic Buddhist teachings, and engendering her trust. Özer Tso returns home with her spirits uplifted.

When Özer Tso passes the entrance exams the following year, she attributes it to "Lama Nyima who blessed her fate and world of darkness,"[39] and her faith in him grows stronger. After returning to live full-time in Xining to attend Qinghai Nationalities University, she visits him, arriving unannounced. Özer Tso is greeted at the door by a Chinese lady in a low-cut shirt and tight red pants. Nyima makes excuses: the Chinese lady is a disciple and patron, helping him raise funds for his monastery in Kham, and he refers to Özer Tso as his sister, giving her money to help with school supplies. The next time, when she returns and another Chinese lady opens the door, she begins to feel uncomfortable. The apartment smells of alcohol, incense and perfume. After the lady leaves, Nyima tries to soothe her, taking Özer Tso in his arms and telling her that she is his precious jewel. For a moment, she struggles to get free, protesting that he is a lama. With a smile, he counters, "Lamas are also human beings and, among lamas, some have wives (*bdag mo*). Their wives are *ḍākinīs*.[40] If they can have love, why can't you?"[41] Here the premise of consorts in tantric practice is marshalled as an excuse to cover for the lust—and in this case the playboy lifestyle—of a supposed lama. Though initially confused and scared, as Nyima lovingly (*brtse dung ldan*) kissed her head, face, and lips, she reports feeling love and desire welling up involuntarily as an intoxication. Unlike the stories from the 1980s previously discussed, in "My Sunset," Özer Tso gives in and falls in love.

Tsedrön Kyi does not dwell on their two-year affair. The story fast forwards to the moment Özer Tso discovers she's pregnant and decides to drop out of university. She goes to tell Nyima, but finds the apartment empty. When he returns, accompanied by a glamorous Chinese woman whom he refers to as his patron, Nyima promptly

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[39] Tshe sgron kyid 2011: 231. *bla ma nyi mas nga'i mun nag gi 'jig rten dang nga'i las dbang la byin rlabs*.

[40] The ḍākinī is a class of female tantric deity originally from India. The Tibetan epithet Khandro (*mkha' 'gro*) is a translation of the Sanskrit term and can refer to a realized female master or the female consort of a high lama.

[41] Tshe sgron kyid 2011: 236. *bla ma yang mi yin/ bla ma'i nang na bdag mo bzhes mkhan yang yod/ bdag mo de dag mkha' 'gro ma red… mkha' 'gro ma la yang brtse dung yod na/ khyod la ci'i phyir yod mi chog/*

announces he must accompany her to Hong Kong the next day and stay for an indeterminate amount of time. In a flurry of activity, he changes out of his monastic robes into a blue suit and puts on a black wig, dark sunglasses, and a red scarf, telling Özer Tso not to wait for him and to study well in school. After rushing around to gather a few more things, he and the other woman leave without so much as a backward glance. This is the moment where the double entendre of the story's title, "My Sunset" becomes clear. Since the lama is named after the "sun" (*nyi ma*), the title could also be rendered "the disappearance of my Nyima" (*nga yi nyi ma nub song*). Nyima abandons her without knowing that she is pregnant.

In the end, Özer Tso gives her baby up for adoption, delivering the boy at the house of a friend of the family in another village, and returns to Xining to look for work. When she tries to visit Nyima, a blond foreign man answers the door instead, and she realizes that Nyima has left her for good. Yet she still maintains her faith in and love for him, thinking to herself, "How is an inept woman like me able to judge whether a lama's conduct is good or bad? Absolutely not. Yet Lama Nyima left with my love, my hope, my laughter, my happiness, my youth, and my future. He went far away. Is he engaged in benefitting beings in that distant land?"[42] Here it is clear that her hopes and dreams for the future have been dashed, yet she still does not question Nyima's identity nor does she feel adequate to judge his actions. Even so, she waits for him for ten years, unwilling to date other men despite their interest and invitations. When she is working in a fancy restaurant with a bar and performance space, she finally sees Nyima again. Dressed in western attire with a beautiful Chinese lady on his arm, he does not recognize her. The story closes with Özer Tso words, "My sun has set, and my small world is covered by darkness."[43]

In this story, as with "Sister Dechen Tsomo," the anonymity of an urban context allows a supposed lama to materialize from nowhere with claims to a monastery somewhere else. There is no real proof of his identity apart from the outer appearance of monastic robes and/or the testimony of others. To apply the words of Tenzin Repa from the seventeenth century, these characters are "dharma imposters [who] just turn the wheel of deceit" (Schaeffer et al 2013: 578). Nyima's status as a charlatan is highlighted in a final encounter, no longer wearing

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[42] Tshe sgron kyid 2011: 241–242. *bla ma'i mdzad pa la nga lta bu'i rang mgo mi thon pa'i bud med cig gis bzang ngan gyi kha tshon gcod ga la nus te gtan nas mi nus so/ yin na yang/ bla ma nyi mas nga'i brtse dung dang/ nga'i re ba/ nga'i dgod sgra/ nga'i bde skyid/ nga'i lang tsho/ nga'i mdun lam bcas khyer nas phebs song/ ha cang rgyang ring du phebs song/ ha cang rgyang ring ba'i gnas de ru khong nyid kyis 'gro don mdzad bzhin yod dam/*

[43] Tshe sgron kyid 2011: 244. *nga yi nyi ma nub song/ nga'i 'jig rten chung chung mun nag gis g.yogs song*.

monastic robes and no longer even recognizing his young lover of years past. Pathos is evoked, both for the protagonist and her shattered dreams and for the state of contemporary Buddhism in which such deception is so readily possible.

Pregnant in the Buddhist Robes

Let us conclude by considering the special case of nuns. In Buddhist canonical sources, the rape of a nun is depicted as a serious offense and cause for rebirth in hell. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the realized nun Uppalavaṇṇā whose story reports her rape by a lust-filled cousin while residing in a forest hermitage.[44] Not only is she exonerated in the story with respect to her vow of celibacy, but the earth cracks open and her assailant falls instantly down to Avīci hell. By contrast, in the gendered politics of Tibetan areas during the post-Mao era, Charlene Makley reports that nuns are the subject of gossip and disdain that (re)sexualizes them as opposed to their male monastic counterparts. As Makley puts it, with respect to northern Amdo, "nuns had to be extremely careful in their public comportment because one mishap among nuns would be the talk of the town for a long time to come" whereas "young monks in Labrang… were publicly visible indulging in once forbidden (or at least hidden) leisure activities" (2005: 279). This double-standard leaves nuns more vulnerable to scrutiny and blame in cases of sexual misconduct.

Another short story by Tsedrön Kyi illustrates the ways that nuns bodies can be (re)sexualized despite their vows of celibacy and determined attempts at modesty. A scene in "Offering of Youth" (*Lang tsho'i mchod pa*)[45] depicts a group of mischievous monks (*grwa pa pra chal*) teasing young nuns at a large empowerment in northern Amdo, while the nuns attempted to shelter their breasts and cover their heads. The beautiful young nun Tendrel Drolma was fortunate to be protected by a monk Tenpa Rabgye sitting next to her, and they kept in touch by cell phone afterwards. There is a strong hint of romance in their friendship, but she leaves the area where she had been a nun at Achung Namdzong to study Tibetan medicine. Without access to a rigorous education at the nunnery, Tendrel Drolma felt that studying medicine would give her a way to benefit others, while maintaining her status as a nun.

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[44] This story can be found in *Buddhist Legends* V.10, translated by Eugene Burlinghame 1921. It is also discussed in Alice Collett 2016: 80. In *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism,* José Cabezón provides other examples of how canonical sources treat male sexual impropriety and the torments of hell that result of serious offenses, such as the rape of a nun (2017, 45–73).

[45] Tshe sgron skyid 2016a.

Tragically, the doctor she chose to study with—who she calls Aku Phakpa in deference to his age and role as a teacher—ends up taking advantage of her one day over tea. At first he attempts to seduce her, telling her how much he admires her beauty, compassion, and diligence as a student. Oddly enough, in his seduction, he draws on the discourse of fake lamas and monks, stating: "These days, how many of those wearing the red garments remain celibate and keep their vows authentically? How many monks and nuns? What's the difference between being religious and lay?"[46] With this, he insinuates that if the monastic robes are just a pretense, then why should she resist his advances? However, Tendrel Drolma does actively resist and attempts to dissuade him, appealing to her status as a nun. Even as she concurs that the state of nuns leaves her without much training, she casts him as an "uncle" to her, the literal meaning of Aku, a role that should elicit his protection. Despite her appeals, he forces himself on her. As she tries to shake herself free, Phakpa's body is depicted as a heavy boulder pinning her down and immobilizing her like a corpse. This is a devastating image to depict rape.

Not long thereafter, Tendrel Drolma realizes she is pregnant. Although Phakpa had initially promised to take care of her, he is already married with children and so, after expressing regret, he puts some money under her pillow and leaves. Tendrel Drolma finds herself in a predicament that Tsedrön Kyi calls "pregnant while wearing the Buddhist robes" (*ston pa'i na bza' mnabs bzhin du mngal sbrum pa*). In an interview, the author discusses the poor conditions of nuns, who mostly stay at home or find abandoned hermitages where they can practice, rather than live at a nunnery—which are few and far in between. Without proper facilities or training, nuns are vulnerable to having their labor or bodies exploited. Tsedrön Kyi states:

> I have heard many stories involving the sad fate of contemporary Tibetan nuns. There are numerous nuns in the Yushu area; some are able to practice in monasteries and the rest of them herd livestock for their families. Among those who neither stay at a monastery nor travel beyond their homeland, there are plenty of nuns who get pregnant while wearing the Buddhist robes. I have actually witnessed three daughters within a single household who were ordained as nuns but ended up becoming mothers.[47]

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[46] Tshe sgron skyid 2016a: 5. *da lta'i dus 'dir/ pho mo'i lus 'brel med pa dang na bza' dmar lheb lheb cig gon yod pa las pho mo'i lus 'brel med pa dang sdom khrims ngo ma yod pa'i grwa pa du yod/ jo mo du yod/ ser skya gnyis la khyad par ci 'dug/*

[47] Interview of Tsedrön Kyi by Döndrup Tsering (2019). *da lta'i bod kyi jo mo dag gi las dbang skyo bo'i gtam rgyud mang po zhig ngas go myong/ gzhan yang yul shul du jo mo ha cang mang po 'dug/ gnas de ru dgon par song nas sgrub pa nyams len byas te 'dug pa'i*

Another story by Tsedrön Kyi with a nun protagonist, "A Lonely Soul" (*Kher rkyang gi rnam shes*),[48] likewise depicts the hardships of nuns, who have to wander from place to place, eking out a subsistence. They attempt to engage in practice alongside traveling to receive teachings, cooking at monasteries, finding and repairing hermitages in which to stay, and relating to patrons and family. Though "A Lonely Soul" does not contain explicit references to sexual misconduct, it depicts a number of questionable behaviors by monastics that highlight human fallibility and throw into question their religious motives.

The discourse on fake lamas and monks hovers in the background of "A Lonely Soul" but takes explicit, if surprising, shape in "Offering of Youth." Retracing our steps, the story opens with Tenpa Rabgye, the steadfast monk friend, as he sits in the rain waiting for Tendrel Drolma. She is getting an abortion at the hospital, and he risks scandal to bring her there and then deposits her safely in a nearby hotel to recover. From there, the rest is a flashback that provides the backstory. While the reader at first may anticipate that the two monastics had an illicit affair, soon it is clear that Tendrel Drolma had been raped. As she recalls attempting to dissuade her assailant Phakpa, curiously she refers to herself as a "fake nun" (*jo mo rdzun ma*).[49] However, it is clear that she deems herself inauthentic not because her virtue or purity was compromised at that point, but because she did not have access to an adequate religious education. As such, the statement points more to a social critique regarding the lack of institutional support for nuns than to a failure of her own character. After getting an abortion, she refers to herself as a "demonness" (*bdud mo*) and fears retribution in hell.[50] Like Dechen Tsomo, she is left alone to feel the guilt and shame of what has happened to her. Although her friend Tenpa Rabgye promises to return, the story ends on an ambiguous note with Tendrel Drolma in the hotel on her own, flooded by memories and dreams.

Conclusion

"Desire in saṃsāra is very strong—like a flaming fire," muses the nun Detung Wangmo, founder of the nunnery Dechen Sherab Tharchin

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jo mo cung mang la/ rang gi pha ma'i gam du zog rdzi byas te bsdad yod pa'ang gang mang 'dug/ dgon par ma bsdad la yul phyogs gzhan du 'grim ma myong ba'i jo mo dag las ston pa'i na bza' mnabs bzhin du mngal sbrum pa mi nyung ba zhig yod 'dug/ khyim tshang gcig nas bu mo gsum jo mo byas pa dang mthar jo mo gsum po bu skyes kyi a mar gyur yod pa'ang ngas dngos su mthong/

48 Tshe sgron skyid 2016b.

49 Tshe sgron skyid 2016a: 5.

50 Tshe sgron skyid 2016a: 2.

Ling in Guinan County, Hainan Prefecture. For that reason, to her, it is hardly surprising that "many ordained monks and nuns are breaking their vows to enjoy worldly pleasures."[51] Emphasizing the difficulty of maintaining celibacy in contemporary life, she marvels at the merit of those who can uphold their vows. Nonetheless, she acknowledges the devastating impacts of sexual harassment on nuns and especially sexual assault, which can deprive them of the chance to remain in robes and lead a religious life. The most appalling incident that Detung Wangmo shared in an interview had to do with a nun and student of hers who was an incest survivor. Even after she became a nun, her stepfather continued to abuse her on visits home, and eventually she had to leave the nunnery after getting pregnant. Compounding the tragedy, such events rarely are publicly acknowledged and redressed.

As illustrated in this article, fiction is becoming a potent vehicle for exposing sexual violence endured by Tibetan and Himalayan women including Buddhist nuns. While stories by male authors like Tsering Döndrup use parody to lampoon fake lamas and monks, creating the stock character Alak Drong who engages in various types of abuse of power under the guise of religion, the female writer Tsedrön Kyi is more interested in capturing the pathos and predicaments of actual women. During an interview, she reflected on the "unbearable sadness of women's fate" (*bud med kyi las dbang skyo ba sems kyis bzod bka' ba*) which she was exposed to while working as a secondary school teacher in Yushu.[52] Her examples from the Tibetan plateau are "countless including a number of young women sent into prostitution by their parents, nuns who become pregnant while wearing the saffron robes, female students away at school confronting the deception of fake lamas, young and dedicated wives suffering from domestic violence by their husbands, and the social practice of polygamy."[53]

In her artistic process, Tsedrön Kyi constructs stories based on the general fate of Tibetan women (*bod kyi bud med spyi'i las dbang*) and actual oral testimony (*gtam rgyud dngos byung*) with which she is familiar. Two of her short stories discussed in this article, "My Sunset"

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[51] The material in this paragraph comes from an interview with Detung Wangmo by Somtso Bhum in August 2020.

[52] Yushu is known as Jyekundo in Tibetan and lies on the border of Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces.

[53] Interview with Tsedrön Kyi by Somtso Bhum in August 2020. *na chung bu mo mang po rang gi pha mas 'phyon ma'i khang du skyel ba dang/ ngur smrig na bza' mnabs pa'i jo mo'i mngal la phru gu sbrum pa/ bu mo slob ma slob grwar 'grims pa'i skabs su bla ma rdzun ma'i mgo skor thebs pa/ lus kyi lang tsho dang sems kyi brtse ba yongs su phul ba'i chung ma bzang mor khyo gas mnar gcod gtong ba/ shug gcig khyo gnyis kyi gnyen srol la sogs bgrang gis mi lang/*

and "A Lonely Soul,"[54] were based on women she knew personally, a former student of hers taking the college entrance exams and a nun friend, respectively. Even so, Tsedrön Kyi describes feeling pained by not being able to fully capture the depth of their suffering and thereby move the reader. This shows a specific concern with affect. Tsedrön Kyi is writing in order to convey the despair (*skyo ba*) experienced by victims of sexual abuse and thereby "touch the hearts of readers" (*klog pa po'i sems pa sgul*). Thus, while parody can subvert an unquestioning reverence and authority accorded to Buddhist lamas, depicting women's plight is intended to elicit sympathy and, by extension, undermine the tendency to blame the victim. In this way, female writers shift the focus from the dubious character of fake lamas to how his behavior can ruin the lives of pious young women. Eventually, this shift in perspective may help create a receptive field into which Tibetan women's first-person accounts of sexual transgression, whether harassment or assault, can eventually be shared in public forums such as social media.

Among Tibetan communities in the diaspora, it is already becoming more acceptable to speak publicly about sexual assault. In her Anglophone memoir, *A Hundred Thousand White Stones*, Kunsang Dolma candidly articulates the impact of sexual violence on the direction of her own life, first in Tibet and later in exile (2013). Himalayan nuns are also starting to speak out. In her 2017 dissertation, Tenzin Dadon, a Bhutanese nun living in Malaysia, articulates her own experiences of sexual harassment and analyzes the structural factors prohibiting nuns from coming forward with allegations, such as lack of education and institutional power (Langenberg 2018). Tibetans living within China face much different constraints. While the #MeToo movement initially gained traction in China, feminist voices have been driven underground by censorship and arrests.[55] In such a climate, it would be too risky for Tibetan women to speak out, not only out of fear of reprisals, but also because any criticism of their own culture—and revered religious figures within it—could be weaponized against them.

Female writers are crucial to making visible the conditions and experiences of Tibetan and Himalayan women. As more Tibetan

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[54] Tsedrön Kyi describes the latter as a work of "documentary prose" (*don brjod lhug rtsom*).

[55] On the #MeToo movement in China, see Simina Mistreanu, "China's #MeToo Activists Have Transformed a Generation: A small group of feminists has shifted attitudes—and prompted harsh pushback," *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2019 (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/10/chinas-metoo-activists-have-transformed-a-generation/) and Yaqui Wang, "#MeToo in the land of censorship," *Human Rights Watch*, May 8, 2020 (https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/08/metoo-land-censorship).

women are able to access higher education within and beyond China, and nuns have more opportunities for accessing rigorous dharma training, their advanced education can help other women to make sense of socio-cultural issues within a wider framework and also position them to voice their concerns and experiences in a legible way. Tibetan women's active engagement in public affairs has made it possible for them to open spaces through advocacy groups and publication efforts in order to raise awareness and discuss long-silenced social issues, such as domestic violence and sexual assault. Moreover, having greater access to both monastic and modern education will allow women to question wayward lamas or religious practitioners from an informed viewpoint and help address abuse.

In conclusion, the trope of fake lamas and monks in Tibetan short stories has allowed for the issue of sexual abuse to come into public discourse without threatening to destabilize Buddhist institutions. Yet it has limitations. What happens when a Tibetan woman comes forward to accuse a respected Buddhist lama or monk of sexual abuse? Tenzin Dadon chronicles a chilling case of a Bhutanese nun who got expelled from her monastic institution because the senior monk to whom she reported an incident of abuse was himself engaged in illicit behavior and feared exposure (Langenberg 2018). Needless to say, the institutional obstacles are daunting, and social reprisals against victims often accompany revelations of abuse. One ironic effect of the discourse on fake lamas in contemporary Tibet is that it may unwittingly foreclose the possibility in public discourse that actual lamas, ones who hold a genuine lineage and teaching credentials, could go astray.

The topic of sexual transgression by lamas and monks is now being discussed on Tibetan social media by secular intellectuals, albeit without calling out specific figures. Thubten Phuntsok, a professor at Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, angrily responded to a poem "A Plea to Beautiful Women" (*Bud med mdzes ma rnams la re zhu*) on WeChat.[56] The poem was written by Khenpo Rigdar of Larung Buddhist Academy and asked young Tibetan women to stop seducing ordained monks. Thubten Phuntsok publicly queried the traditional monastic position of blaming Tibetan women for the failings of lamas and monks (*bla grwa*): "Do women seduce lamas or do lamas chase after women and thereby go astray?"[57] While he concedes that some Chinese women might seduce Tibetan lamas and monks in big cities,

[56] Thubten Phuntsok's response (2020), in the form of an eight-minute audio critique, circulated in WeChat groups such as "Today's Women" (*Deng gi skyes ma*). The poem by Khenpo Rigdar is included in the post.

[57] Thub bstan phun tshogs 2020. *ngas skad cha shig 'dri ya la bla ma tshos bu mo tsho phar bdas nas bla ma log gi yod red dam bu mos bla ma tshur bda' gi yod red/*

he denies this possibility among Tibetan women. In response to his own rhetorical question, he states:

> Placing your faults on women's shoulders is such a shameless deed. Forget about shame, you basically disregard karmic cause and effect… Don't put the blame on women for breaking your vows. It's your own fault, isn't it? In deceiving women, if there's rebirth in hell, you need to go to hell, not women. Since women have been serving you with a pure heart, how could they end up reborn there?[58]

In this way, he expresses disgust at the behavior of monks and lamas, who deceive women with threats of hell if they don't comply and then blame them for the seduction when they do. He concludes by suggesting that the more Tibetan women are educated, the less likely they are to fall for the subterfuge of illicit lamas or monks. Thubten Phuntsok's words serve as a poignant response to the realistic predicaments portrayed in "Sister Dechen Tsomo" and "My Sunset." As this response illustrates, in social media venues like WeChat, sexual abuse by lamas and monks may now be emerging in public discourse as a serious social issue for Tibetans within China.

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[58] Thub bstan phun tshogs 2020. *khyed rang gi nag nyes de bud med mgo la bkal bar ngo ma tsha ba ha las dgos pa de 'dra red/ ngo tsha phar zhog/ las rgyu 'bras rtsa ba nas yod ni ma red… sdom pa log pa'i nyes pa bud med steng la phar bkal/ nyes pa khyed rang la yod pa ma red dam/ bud med de tsho la mgo skor btang nas dmyal ba mnar med kyi gnas la skyes dgos na khyed rang tsho skyes kyi red ma gtogs bud med tsho skyes kyi ma red da/ ga la skyes srid/ kho tshos lhag bsam rnam dag gis khyed rang tshor zhabs 'degs zhu gi yod pa red pa/*

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