

BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
10th International Conference: Synergies in Communication (SiC)
Bucharest, Romania, 27-28 October 2022

HOME AND RE-HOMING IN NORTH EAST INDIA: WHEN HOME IS DIASPORA

Iulia Nicoleta RĂȘCANU¹

Abstract

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium are marked by artistic writings, theory and theoretical criticism on post-coloniality, migration, diaspora and transnationalism. William Safran's (1991) characterisation of diaspora from 1991, imposing the existence of a migratory group for diaspora to even be accepted, has been long debated, re-assessed, and re-interpreted with some theorists taking diasporas to the global level, some others emphasising the inevitable hybrid nature of diasporans' identities and the 'in-between', 'Third Space' that they inhabit (Bhabha, 1994). Some others have questioned the very validity of recent diasporas, as opposed to 'classic' diasporas, due to their widespread conceptual extension generative of lack of density and of substance for diaspora.

*In this paper, the researcher, aware of the processes of 'diasporic homing' and of how diasporans may or may not negotiate their cultural affiliations in the diasporic space, sets to explore modalities through which diasporans re-consider 'home' by gradually becoming part of a de-diasporisation process (Laguerre, 2006). This article is an analysis of director Sange Dorjee Thongdok's *Crossing Bridges* (2013), a film that challenges theories according to which diasporans negotiate their home and space in the diaspora. Instead, it follows the experience of a multi-lingual multi-cultural man who re-discovers the homeland, involuntarily getting involved in a whole system of de-diasporisation within the home. The type of diaspora alluded to in the film is internal diaspora while the protagonist's diasporic thinking and consciousness are equally investigated in the context of post migration homeland. The paper also insists on the particularity of internal diaspora with the protagonist shifting between ethnic and national identities, languages and cultures.*

Keywords: home; Sherdukpen; community; dediasporization; *Crossing Bridges* (2013); Thongdok; Northeast India.

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2022/04.07

1. Introduction

This paper is an analysis of director Sange Dorjee Thongdok's film *Crossing Bridges* (2013), the first feature film in Sherdukpen, the language of the Sherdukpen tribal community. Thongdok, a member of this community, wanted to make this film in the very language of the tribe living in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the seven states that make up the North Eastern part of India. The Sherdukpen culture being an oral one, language becomes one of the means that preserves and perpetuates their culture.

Premiered on the 27th September at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2013, the film received

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, Bucharest, Romania, iulia.rascanu@rei.ase.ro.

the National Film Award for Best Film in Sherdukpen (2013). The director approaches the problematic of how people who leave their native places and communities/groups conceptualise ‘home’. He does this by creating a multi-lingual multi-cultural protagonist from Arunachal Pradesh who had left his village to take up a job in IT in Mumbai. The protagonist, Tashi, soon faces the dark side of globalisation by losing his job (and his girlfriend) and is forced to return to his roots. In spite of his initial desire to be re-connected with and re-located in modern Mumbai, his temporary ‘home’, Tashi learns how ‘cross bridges’, the metaphor in the film title revealing the protagonist’s readjustment to his natal community life and culture.

Mumbai (former Bombay) is a great world metropolis and a city that attracts many people who emigrate from remote rural areas from all over India. Part of a migration trend that starts from rural poor areas and reaching dense urban ones, these people seek economic betterment and job opportunities that are not available in their places of origin. Similarly, increasing numbers of North East Indians form such communities that, despite belonging to different ethnic groups and subgroups, appear as a more or less homogeneous community in Mumbai.

1.1. Short geographic and historical framework

The setting of the film is entirely in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, with references to Mumbai made by the protagonist, by a voice (of his friend) heard on the phone giving bad or good news to Tashi (in search of a job), as well as by objects that remind one of a world-completely different from that of Tashi’s village (his branded clothes, shoes, and laptop).

Due to the fact that the protagonist’s ‘home’ belongs to one of the most contested parts of current India and due to the complexity of the history, geography and of the composition of the population of India, one must be aware of the context that these elements form.

Geographically, North East India is a region of 82,000 square kilometres crossed by the Brahmaputra River, which makes the land bountiful in crops and fruit. Yet, the region is located rather at long distances from metropolises such as Mumbai and New Delhi. The type of terrain also adds to the difficulty of being connected by faster means of land communication with the cities where the great resources that the province possesses could be sent for enhancing the growth of its population. As Hazarika (2000) points out, the environment and the borderlines mark a crucial role in the extreme inequity of the people: ninety-eight percent of the borders of the North East touch various nations of the South and South-East Asia, while only two percent is connected to India.

Not only is the province’s geographical position special and bearing direct effect upon its population’s well-being, but the North East is also known to have been a land that faced several primitive migration waves consisting of different tribes and clans (Prakash, 2007). Going back to the history of North East India, Prakash asserts:

Here [in the North East] the people trace their origin to the Aryan and Dravidian stocks as also to the Austro-Asiatic and Mongoloid stocks. Because of its geography, migration of various races to the area over the centuries, and subsequent intermingling of these races, the North-East has been called “the melting place of two great civilisations of the world - India and China” (2007, 11-12),

Thus, before the area was annexed by the British, it was already ‘the land where waves of immigrants from the East and West had met and woven with the aboriginals some patterns of common traditions, creating a miniature India, speaking in myriad voices, belonging to diverse faiths, and living under varied conditions’ (Prakash, 2007, 12).

In the nineteenth century, North East India started being annexed by the British in stages, coming

completely under British rule in 1838. Known as the Assam or the “Land of the Seven Sisters”², the province joined the rest of the country, India, in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 launched by Mahatma Gandhi, and in 1935 it obtained self-governance. Post-Independence (1947), apart from Manipur and Tripura which were princely states, the Assam Province was gradually divided into several territories. Arunachal Pradesh, the state where the Sherdukpen community lives, has become a full-fledged state only in 1987:

Recorded history of Arunachal Pradesh can be traced only when Ahom kings began to rule Assam in the 16th century. The British took possession of [it] in 1838. British government had brought Arunachal Pradesh also under their administrative control. After independence, it was a part of North East Frontier Agency, and later, made a union territory. On 20 February, 1987 Arunachal Pradesh was made a full-fledged state (Bareh 2007, 1).

It is also the state having the lowest population density in India, of which most of the people live in low-lying valleys and in scattered upland communities on the hills.

All the above are factors that contribute to a particular setting in which the Sherdukpens live, pointing at the economic limitation of the people, a consequence that triggers new most of the young population to leave their communities behind in search of a better future for themselves and a financial support for the families left behind.

2. Tashi in between the Margin and the Centre

Comprising a variety of ethnic groups that are ‘in some ways related to the peoples of Tibet and the hill region of western Myanmar’, the area that the film director comes from is mostly made up of officially designated indigenous people, or the Scheduled Tribes, that is people ‘falling outside of the prevailing Indian social structure’ (Britannica Eyclopaedia). Being ‘outside’ is synonym to being on the outskirts, marginalized, or even being completely cut from the Centre, from what is recognized as official.

It is thus understood that the protagonist’s ethnic origins condemn him to an identity that is socially seen as marginal or ‘below’ (understood as minor or ‘less’). Besides, Sherdukpen is just one of the fifty languages and dialects spoken in the province, ‘often mutually unintelligible’, thus ‘making Assamese and Hindi (and English) lingua francas in the regions’ (Britannica Eyclopaedia). The Sherdukpens do not have a written script either, the tribe’s stories and songs being passed over totally orally. As the language of a minority, further marginalised by its lack of written script, and spoken only by a very small number of individuals, the Sherdukpen language has been made by Thongdok a valuable tool by means of which his own community and culture have been brought to light.

The protagonist, Tashi, the director’s *alter ego*, as well as the other characters are mostly interpreted by members of the community itself. Thongdok (2014) admits that, when he proceeded to make the film, he was constantly aware of the responsibility he took upon himself. That is, to preserve a way of life and to keep alive an authentic community that otherwise had but poor chances, if at all, to leave a mark, ever so small, in the public space (represented here by art and the media). His became a responsibility, whether conscientious or not, to re-establish the power relations between that which is the Centre and that which is the Margin: “After completing college in Delhi, I came home and did nothing for some time. I would try to record our old folk songs and make small documentaries to preserve our way of life and culture. But I wanted to make a film on my people because it is a subject that is close to my heart”³ (Thongdok, 2014).

² a term coined by journalist Jyoti Prasad Saikia (1972) (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Sister_States) because it is made up of seven states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, plus the Himalayan state of Sikkim.

³ <http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-pvr-director-s-rare-to-release-crossing-bridges-first-film-in-sherdukpen-language-of-arunachal-pradesh-2014488>, accessed 20 October 2022.

An independent filmmaker, Thongdok had to improvise in order to find the actors. The most handy and obvious answer to his dilemma was to ask members of his own community, friends and family to play in the film. However, this necessity translates into the gaining of agency for this community: it therefore made no sense for Sherdukpens to be played by anybody else than themselves, nor could the film have been played in any other language than the Sherdukpen. The filmmaker's explanation lacks the regaining of power that the act holds though: 'making the film in Hindi and English was out of question because I did not have actors and I could not afford it' (2014).

2.1. *The protagonist and internal diaspora*

Inspired from his own life, the filmmaker speaks about the pain he felt when he became displaced and detached from his homeland⁴: "I have lived outside all my life. At that time, I was a visitor in my own home. Everything would be strange when I would go to my village and it took me time to know people there" (2014).

The type of diaspora alluded to in the analysis is internal diaspora, while the protagonist's diasporic thinking and consciousness are equally investigated in the context of his returning home. The protagonist, Thongdok's *alter ego*, is a North East Indian who has been living away from his 'home'/homeland for many years, working as a Web designer in Mumbai. Shifting between tribal and national languages and cultures, he has been laid off by the company whom he was working for, having no other choice than to return to his home village and live with his parents for an indefinite period of time, while hoping to be called back to the City. When he became unemployed and had to return to the village, Tashi had to give up a busy way of life (in Mumbai) and re-adapt to the life in the village, where not even the mobile phone signal was reachable. Besides, as noted in the Britannica Encyclopaedia⁵, telecommunications in the area have long been underdeveloped: mobile phone and Internet services were poor and even landline telephone service was limited.

His dis-connection has two meanings: on the one hand, Tashi is disconnected from the modern world of the metropolis that he wants to come back to, while on the other, the protagonist had been long disrupted from the rural world of his homeland, a world he is rather unwilling to be a part of again. For this reason, the young man constantly avoids giving a hand to his old parents. Instead, he is watching around at the calm still village life, as if fearful it might suck him in. Being continuously reminded by relatives and friends that he should stop living "outside" their world, "in a foreign land", Tashi would rather return among those "foreigners" in the City. Ironically or not, these two theoretical concepts analysed here (the Centre and the Margin) are being used reversely by the Sherdukpen community. For them, the homeland (their village) has always been 'the inside' (*their* Centre), while the Centre (the City) has remained 'the outside'. Without plainly voicing it, the actors/community-members have clearly re-set the power relations from *their* perspective: the homeland is the Centre and the *Powerful* for each community member (and therefore for Tashi), and the 'non-homeland' (the City) is the *Powerless*. It is this lesson that the boy has un-learned by migrating to another state and that he needs to learn again.

The director thus makes us ask ourselves a very trenchant question about the issue of internal diaspora as we know it. If the internal diaspora is known to refer to the (groups of) people who leave their homelands in order to find a better livelihood in the big City (like Tashi did), then can the ethnic group (such as the Sherdukpen) - devastated by their youngsters' abandonment of language, values, culture and dispersed into a multitude of little and distant pieces (the individuals who leave) into the wide world – be also called a diaspora itself, another kind of internal diaspora?

⁴ We'll refer to Sherdukpen as the homeland (the natal home), while the 'home' can mean either the natal home or India (the home country).

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Arunachal-Pradesh/People>, accessed 20 October 2022.

3. A New De-diasporisation

What is curious about the protagonist of the film is that the director does not present him as a diasporic. The emphasis put on Tashi's disappointment and frustration at the prospect of not finding a new job in Mumbai demonstrates that, although an Other due to his marginal origins while living in the City, his consciousness is not of a diasporic kind (Knott, McLoughlin, 2010). The audience cannot see Tashi mourning over a home left behind as there is no episode in the film that would have been filmed there; however, one can see him longing for the other 'home' he was forced to part with - the world of technology and modernity.

However, the protagonist slowly finds his way back to the village life of his childhood. As Johnson Thomas (2014) of *The Free Press Journal* remarks, the film "is allowing for a gradual cultural immurement in the land and its spiritual enchantment"⁶. By the time Tashi is eventually called by his friend from Mumbai to fill up a position in a start-up company, the protagonist has already commenced a process similar to dediasporisation, through interaction with the people, the culture, the surrounding nature and the dynamics that holds the community together. Thus, instead of rushing back to Mumbai, he re-settles in his homeland where farming, an activity that involves direct connection with one's land (a reminder of one's roots), is the main occupation.

Not only conflicts among tribes of the region took place over time, but they sometimes extended over to the rest of India⁷. Thus, despite the fact that North East Indians do face discrimination and problems as a minority in metro cities such as Mumbai, the protagonist appears not to have encountered any circumstances that would have made him feel displaced, alienated, discriminated or abused. There is a lot of empirical data that attest to their discrimination and mistreatment. In Mumbai, representatives of the community of North East Indians have even organised a helpline and a website in order to assist those in need. They say that most of the time, they are confronted with stereotyping and racial and gender misconceptions. A member of the community, So So (in Rebello, 2014), asserts:

Yes, we are a minority but that doesn't give anybody a reason to call us 'hakka' or 'Nepali' or 'chow mein'. We have Indian blood just like the others. It's good to say we treat foreigners well in India, why can't we treat our own brothers and sisters a little more like we would like to be treated?⁸

Considering these facts, the filmmaker's overoptimistic attitude towards the presence of the North East Indian community in Mumbai may be a drawback in the film, Thongdok's focus being on the significance of 'home' as homeland and that of home-coming (return). Thus, the director – as it may be seen in the cinematography of the film – relies mainly on the fascination with nature, cultural customs, tradition, and on the calmness of village life as opposed to the cruel globalised society, as incentives for Tashi's staying back home. Nostalgia, a concept so many times connected to 'home' (homeland) in Diaspora Studies, is here re-interpreted as a vibrant (although temporary) desire to possess and be possessed by the new 'home' (Mumbai), left behind only by force of circumstance, rather than as nostalgia for the 'home' as homeland.

Nicholas Van Hear describes dediasporisation "as the regrouping or in-gathering of dispersed people ... when a community returned to its place of origin" (1998: 48-49). Noticing the emphasis that Van Hear puts on physical relocation, Michel Laguerre (2006) challenges Van Hear's understanding of dediasporisation, explaining that, for him, "dediasporization is defined as the process by which a

⁶ <http://www.freepressjournal.in/a-haunting-engagement/>

⁷ The most well-known conflicts are the Azad Maidan Riots of August 2012, in Mumbai, when Raza Academy, a Sunni organisation of Indian Muslims, organised a protest over the ethnic conflicts in Assam and Rakhine against the illegal Muslims coming from Bangladesh. The indigenous tribes, concerned about the increasing Muslim population and worrying over the competition created over lands, livelihood and power, wanted to limit if to stop immigration from Bangladesh. Nonetheless, this details are not relevant for the film itself (as the protagonist is not Muslim), but only for the general background of the area.

⁸ <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/building-bridges-with-a-helpline-for-north-east-indian-community/15198064>

diasporic subject either reacquires homeland citizenship by returning to the sending country, effects generational assimilation in the host state, or re-inscribes himself or herself in the transnational circuit of the trans-nation state” (134). He adds: “It is not return *per se* to one’s former place of residence, but rather to an ancestral territory’ and ‘the individual must be willing to initiate the process [of dediasporisation]” (2006, 134). Laguerre also asserts that “the most common type of dediasporization is voluntary return undertaken by individuals for personal reasons (unemployment, marital considerations, the education of children, business ventures, or retirement)” (2006, 155).

The dediasporisation concept has been employed in this paper due to some stages through which the protagonist goes post return. Return is the stage of the migration process that is variable: migrants might or might not return home. Similarly, return is either voluntary or forced by circumstances. Return and dediasporisation are interlaced as, post return, the individual undergoes a process of re-adaptation to an old lifestyle while gradually giving up or altering the one s/he has just left behind in the new world. From this point of view, Tashi can be told to undergo a process similar to dediasporisation that involves migration, voluntary return (unemployment), as well as willingness to initiate the process of dediasporisation.

The analysis employs an individual-centred approach in which, apart from being physically relocated, and indeed isolated from the metropolis, the individual has to recover (rather than re-build) a certain group consciousness that has been only temporarily obscured. In this respect, this paper challenges Laguerre’s own view of the individual-centred approach according to which diasporans “forsake their identity for the benefit of acquiring a new identity, to erase cultural differences, and to acquire a new group consciousness” (Laguerre, 2006, 155), by which he suggests that the diasporans’ identity – prior to migration, post migration and post return – is made up of several separate identities that can be activated and de-activated as per necessity. Instead, I advocate the perspective according to which multiple identities add up in the case of migrants, diasporans and returnees.

3.1. *Reconnecting with roots, finding the ‘home’*

Drawing on the theme of returning-to-roots, the film is more an inquiry into real possibilities of former diasporans as well as of migrants to cast a new look towards the ‘old’ ‘home’ (the homeland) rather than a celebration of the global village. The analysis explores the smooth but forceful and gradual transformation through which the protagonist goes. As Pronoti Datta of *Mumbai Boss* remarks, “Tashi’s transformation is as gradual and undramatic as the change of season in the village” (2014).

The film starts with a deep focus that has in the foreground a bridge and in the background a narrow and empty road that pierces the mountain. An old blue bus emerges from the left corner of the frame and heads towards the forefront. In the next shot, the angle is changed, the bus being shown from profile as it crosses the bridge over a rocky valley and a small river flowing beneath it. The bus continues its way through the beautiful mountainous scenery when the protagonist is introduced. Tashi is inside the bus, watching outside of the window, deep in thought. As he reaches his natal home, the protagonist seems to feel out of place and embarrassed as his parents, friends and relatives tell him that he should not leave again to a foreign land. His mother asks him: “How long will you be *running in a foreign land?*” [my emphasis]. Instead of answering, Tashi is continuously looking for ways to be re-connected with the modern world.

The initial stages of his return home show the protagonist being calm but thoughtful, hiding a certain frustration generated by his desire to leave the old home which he perceives as a prison he needs to escape from. The director portrays Tashi as no longer being adapted to the life in the village. Thus, he forces himself to drink butter tea, the drink he used to enjoy as a boy but that now he dislikes; he is disappointed at finding out that there is no electricity except for one hour every day; he complains that he is bored and has nothing to do while the director shows several scenes in which his parents, now quite old, are performing their usual activities inside and outside the house without Tashi giving a hand; he is on the verge of desperation when he cannot use the phone, either the only landline in the village or his own mobile phone for which, in order to get signal, one has to climb a steep hill.

Being bored is a state that Tashi defines as the one in which, in the absence of activities one can do in the modern world, life becomes meaningless. His friend Norbu acknowledges this in one scene when he says ‘our life doesn’t have much meaning’. Indeed, the meaning of life in the village evolves around the work in the fields, the type of work that Tashi wants to know nothing of whereas his father knows only how to work the land. The father is Tashi’s half opposite: if the first represents traditional tribal life, the latter has moved away from what his father represents, embracing modern urban life. In one episode, the director has shot several scenes without dialogue which show the protagonist’s lack of connection with the village world around him. The first frame is shot from inside the dark room of the family’s house (which serves as kitchen and living room); the frame encompasses an actual doorframe where one can see Tashi standing from behind; the light is coming only from outside while the camera is slowly moving closer to the protagonist; in the next shot, one can see a close-up of Tashi’s face looking straight at the camera, without any trace of a smile. The following two shots reveal the protagonist’s reluctance to be diasporised and re-adapt to the village life: in the first one, the camera shows the two parents working around the house; next, Tashi, in his city clothes, turns his back and leaves. The series of frames ends in a symmetrical way: there is another frame within a frame, in which the protagonist - still filmed from behind - leaves the house by stepping over the threshold of the open door (the second frame).

As Amit, his friend in Mumbai, does not call him there for a new job, Tashi has to stay longer than he had expected in the village, and finds ways to stay connected with the Centre – the world he has left. One way of being connected is by continuing wearing his branded clothes. He complains when his expensive sandals get soaked in the rain. Tashi tells his parents that, because of their material value (“they’re Vibram sandals”, “very expensive”), they must be treated with care, therefore he places them in front of the fire in order to dry. In this scene, his father, a character that speaks very rarely in the film but is a constant presence, warns him that it is the fire that must be treated with care and respect, reminding him of their traditional values and beliefs which include the one according to which the fire has spirit. The fire topos is recurrent throughout the film, being a powerful force that, within the Sherdukpen mythology, can kidnap men and take their souls away.

Another way to stay connected with modernity is technology and transportation. As working the land is not on his agenda, Tashi buys a TV set and a car in order to escape boredom by watching programmes in Hindi and English and by being mobile.

The episode in which Tashi and his friend Norbu buy a self-made TV set that works on batteries in Bodmila town is evocative of the difficulty with which returnees let go of the recent past (the world they have just left). Thus, Thongdok uses a frame that portrays the protagonist sitting back-to-back with Norbu who is driving a motorbike, Tashi holding the TV set and facing the camera. The camera is still while the bike moves away, Tashi being taken away as if being unwillingly pulled out of the town and to the village. In order to emphasise the importance of the TV for Tashi, the director has shot another episode: soon after leaving Bomdila, the motorbike gets broken and Norbu and Tashi have to return to Bomdila on foot to look for a mechanic; as Tashi had to carry the TV set, Norbu encourages his friend to leave it nearby a deserted house reassuring him that it won’t get lost. It is another proof that village life is not only simpler but that people are also more trustworthy.

After that, by purchasing a car, the protagonist gets closer to the life in the village as mobility also enables him to socialise more. Unlike him, his father lets himself being seduced by the attractions of modernity and gets addicted to watching TV, his favourite programs being romantic classical Hindi films. In the meantime, the old man forgets about farming and stops having his daily afternoon tea with his wife, by this Thongdok pointing to the dangers of urbanisation and globalisation, reiterated in other scenes in the film in which his friend Norbu is always coming up with new business ideas to make him rich overnight.

Invited by the school principal to temporarily teach the children of the village, the protagonist initially turns down his offer. Although reluctant at first, as taking a job is one step ahead towards growing roots,

Tashi eventually agrees after he finds out that the girl he likes works in the same school. The bond between him and the girl is not excessively romanticised, the director emphasising only the girl's role in Tashi's dediasporisation process and readjustment to the life he used to have prior to migration. The relationship between the protagonist and Anila is based on help, support and trust. It is Anila who helps Tashi cross over narrow log-bridges, a symbol of Tashi's fragmented identity, having lost past abilities and re-learning them post return. Anila is also the only person to whom the protagonist confesses that he has been laid off. In her turn, Anila shares with him the story of her birth: although she has arrived from Shillong to fill the position of teacher in Tashi's village, she was born right there, in the mountains, where the first snow falls in winter.

Apart from the girl's influence on him, Tashi's experience as a teacher at a primary school class has been one of the crucial reasons for his decision to stay back in Arunachal Pradesh. His first encounter with his young students when Tashi has to teach them the Hindi class reveals a side of the dynamics between cultures and languages that Tashi had not seen before. In this episode, Thongdok skilfully illustrates the unequal relationship between a majority (national) language (Hindi) and culture on the one hand, and a minority one (Sherdukpen) on the other. When he is left alone with his students, the camera moves around showing the children's expectant faces. The protagonist writes in Hindi 'Holi' and asks the children to open their books and repeat after him the sentences that he reads from the book. Sentence by sentence, the students diligently and almost mechanically repeat after Tashi:

Tashi: "Holi..."
 students: "Holi..."
 Tashi: "...Is a festival of colours."
 students: "...Is a festival of colours."
 Tashi: "It is"
 students: "It is"
 Tashi: "celebrated in the ..."
 students: "celebrated in the ..."
 Tashi: "spring season"
 students: "spring season" [transcript].

Then, the protagonist translates them to the students who, for now, only speak Sherdukpen. Repetition is, in Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry (1984), mere imitation of the dominant, without opposition. Whether the filmmaker is aware of postcolonial theory or not, he instantly introduces an element of resistance in the episode under the form of genuine questioning. As the lesson is about Holi, a Hindu festival, a girl in the class wants to know more about it; as Tashi explains, she makes connections with corresponding traditions in her own culture and subsequently wants to know if those traditions are also in the book. The answer is obviously a negative one, as "the book" stands for the instrument of the powerful, as it can contain only the history, culture, and language of the powerful. Having to answer the girl's question "Why?", the protagonist has to admit shortly that 'people do not know about us too much, that's why'.

The director initially portrays Tashi as an invisible cultural translator whose translation is smooth, fluent (Venuti, 1995). In time, as he learns how to cross bridges over flowing rivers, he starts playing the role of a subversive mimic man who handles the tools of the Master for the benefit of his own people.

This episode also makes up for the lack of representation of Tashi's real life in Mumbai, forcing the protagonist to ask himself questions he did not think about before. The protagonist has always used technology in class, not necessarily as a means of entertainment but as a tool for the children to learn by watching instead of by being told what to do. Thus, before being re-connected with the history, culture and traditional art of his tribe, Tashi showed them recorded images of their environment explaining that the river 'keeps flowing see', a topos that is remindful of the idea of fluid identity as well as of that of the cycle of life, the one another friend of his, Pema, was talking about (one gets a wife, settles down). The students could also watch Charlie Chaplin films: by this, Tashi uses comedy, the jester topos who mocks authority, as well as lack of language (Charlie Chaplin films are mute) as a subversive substitute for the national language (Hindi) or international language (English). Later on, he

uses technology in order to capture tradition and pass it over to the next generation by showing his students the traditional dance he had recorded with his cell phone.

4. Conclusions

Tashi's is a case of return migration triggered by the unequal powers of globalisation in which individuals become dispensable tools in the macroeconomic system. With Tashi, Thongdok asserts that the Other can be both that of the minority and the powerless individual in front of globalisation. The village, the land, 'old' traditions can help one re-discover one's identity and resist uniformisation. The journey envisaged here is no longer a one-way but a circular one, thus engendering additional changes and transformations in the identity and conceptualisation of 'home' of those who are on a journey. For the filmmaker, some of those who are in a minority are not aware of their repetition act and enter the game of *imitatio*. Return can be painful due to one's blindness towards what is true (the original, the authentic) and what is the replica. Opening one's eyes for the dediasporised means making the distinction, unlearning what has been learnt, letting go of the burden of the 'past'.

Between the moment of coming back 'home' and the decision of staying back, the protagonist is being dediasporised, going from frustration to mild resignation, to curiosity, to desire to belong and be re-assimilated. All these stages are marked by a series of bridges that he is able to cross – either by help or by himself. The crossing is thus not one of borders, of limits, of boundaries that separate and divide, but one of bridges that re-connect.

Being played in a language that had not been heard on the big screen before, by non-professional actors (some of whom may not even have ever been in a cinema theatre), is the very statement that Thongdok's film makes: a community does not need to be large in order to become big, nor does one need to belong to the Centre in order to occupy it, even if not for long. Looked at from this point of view, this scholar attempts extending the borders of Safran's (1991) diasporic group into the internal diaspora, one that is portrayed in the film as being much more isolated from 'Mother India' (the Centre, the 'home') and rather preserved in a unknown homeland.

An ethnic indigenous group has been called by one of their own to become part of a 103-minute-long piece of artwork that has made up for a whole world of non-acknowledgement and marginalization.

References and bibliography

- Bareh, H. (ed.). (2007). Encyclopaedia of North-East India. Vol. 1. Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi: Mittal Publications. First published in 2001 by Mittal Publications.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1984). Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* (Spring), 125-133.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Arunachal-Pradesh/People>
- Datta, P. (2014). 'Crossing Bridges' is a nuanced tale of homecoming in Arunachal Pradesh. Mumbai Boss. <http://mumbaiboss.com/2014/08/27/crossing-bridges-is-a-nuanced-tale-of-homecoming-in-arunachal-pradesh/>. Web 2015.
- DNA interview. (2014). PVR Director's Rare to release 'Crossing Bridges'; First film in Sherdukpen language of Arunachal Pradesh. DNA. <http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-pvr-director-s-rare-to-release-crossing-bridges-first-film-in-sherdukpen-language-of-arunachal-pradesh-2014488>. Web 2015.
- Hazarika, S. (2000). *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*. Penguin.
- Knott, K. and McLoughlin S. (2010). *Diasporas. Concepts, Intersections, Identities*. New York: Zed Books.
- Kuhn, A. and Westwell G. (2012). *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Laguerre, M. (2006). *Dediasporization: Homeland and Hostland. Diaspora, Politics, and Globalization*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 133-162.

Naficy, H. (2001). *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filming*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Prakash, C. V. (2007). *Encyclopaedia of North-East India*, volume 1. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Ltd.

Rebello, M. (2014). Building bridges with a helpline for North-east Indian community. <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/building-bridges-with-a-helpline-for-north-east-indian-community/15198064>. Web 2015.

Safran, W. (Spring 1991). Diaspora in modern societies: myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A Journal of transnational Studies*, 1.1, University of Toronto Press: 83-99.

'seven sister states'. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Sister_States. Web. 30 Nov. 2015.

Thomas, J. (2014). Crossing Bridges: A haunting engagement! *Freepress journal*. <http://www.freepressjournal.in/a-haunting-engagement/>. Web 2015.

Thongdok, S. D. (director). (2013). *Crossing Bridges*.

Van Hear, N. (1998). *Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 48–49.

Venuti, L. (1995). *Invisibility. The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

The author

Iulia Nicoleta Rascanu is an Associate Professor with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Her publishing includes works in Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora and Migration Studies, Cultural Studies, and Gender Studies. Her teaching focuses on communication in English for Business and new technologies in higher education.