As the title indicates, the story of this documentary film is that of Angu, a Tibetan woman whose life comes to illustrate the general theme of women and mobility in a diasporic context, which is, from what we learn in the introductory remarks, the broader topic that the film director has been working on. This documentary is in fact part of a larger and ambitious project, and although it should be viewed as such, and Angu’s story should be seen as part of a larger mosaic of women itineraries in exile, the present reviewer has neither knowledge of nor access to the other parts of the mosaic, and will therefore base the present review on Angu’s story alone.

The film was shot in two different locations, Majnu-ka-Tilla, which is Delhi’s informal Tibetan colony, and Dharamsala, the headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile, situated in the Himalayas. Angu is presented as a mother from Tibet, and Osmond, her husband, as a father from Kenya, while Peggy is the couple’s only child. The family was living in a small damaged house of Majnu-ka-Tilla when Angu became the target of domestic violence. Reporting her situation to the Tibetan Women Association (TWA) helped her file a complaint to the local police, which led to Osmond’s imprisonment. Angu was therefore left alone to raise Peggy. We are made to understand that this was a task she was not able to fulfil, all the less so as the young Peggy was very sick at the time. Angu therefore received additional help: her child was sent to Dharamsala’s Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) ‘baby home’, a place not unlike an orphanage, where foster mothers take care of children.

The film director first met Angu in 2011. The film itself was shot at two different times: in 2012, when Angu and Peggy were alone, and in 2013, when, after Osmond’s release from jail, the couple was living together again in Majnu-ka-Tilla without Peggy, who had been staying in Dharamsala for four months. One of the director’s goals is to bring the couple to Dharamsala. She finds it difficult to do so, due to the parents’ apprehension about meeting Peggy after a long separation. Yet they eventually decide to undertake the journey. The part of the documentary set in Dharamsala is filled with pathos, as the child has obviously become attached to Ama (mother) Dorjee – the foster mother. We see her as Angu and Osmond take her to a restaurant in Dharamsala, but the scene itself is presented as too upsetting to have been included in the film. It is however described and commented upon: we learn that Osmond voiced his anger at the...
Tibetan authorities in exile, whom he accused of stealing his child, while Angu and Peggy would not stop crying. Distress, helplessness and anger: these are some of the feelings that may be experienced more acutely in exile. They are shown here in connection with what is presented as the loss, albeit temporary, of a child. In fact, we do not see them directly expressed on screen, but we understand them nonetheless, through comments made by the director/narrator and impressions left by the rest of the documentary.

The film’s conclusion is that Angu’s life as a refugee is a tough one. Tougher than most, as she carries an additional burden – inter-marriage. In India, after almost sixty years, it is rare enough between Tibetans and Indians, but it is almost unheard of between Tibetans and Black Africans. If intermarriage is a big obstacle to the couple’s integration in the Tibetan community, two other factors may explain, according to the director, why Osmond may be ostracized by other Tibetans – his history of violence and the fact that he is black. The former is only mentioned in passing, while the latter is discussed at the end of the documentary, where racism is presented as the main explanatory factor of the couple’s rejection by the Tibetan community.

This seems to me a distorted message to convey. First, we are led to forget that Angu’s family, much like other Tibetan families in a system where a network of associations ensures that individuals belong to a tightly knit community, is clearly taken care of by the Tibetan community. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we do not understand what makes the Tibetan situation specific, that is, quite different from other exile situations. Tibetan refugees have come to see Tibet as a country, a nation and a people about to disappear and the Tibetan government-in-exile has worked to turn the idea that Tibet can only be truly preserved in exile into a widely shared assumption. This explains notably why inter-marriage is frowned upon and why it is thought that preservation requires in-breeding. And the Indian context clearly does not help alleviate this view of inter-marriage as something counter-natural: it would therefore have been useful to mention that India is a country where, for the majority Hindu community, marriage should happen within the same caste.

Thus, if foreigners are sometimes seen as a danger to the identity of the Tibetan community, India’s view of difference, from which Tibetans themselves have suffered, does not help come to terms with ideas of intermarriage, or, more generally, of diversity. This is not to say that racism has nothing to do with what is happening to Angu and Osmond or that the Tibetan exile society is totally devoid of racist sentiment. But it is my belief that the story would have been more powerfully told, and to the full extent of its complexity, if Angu’s relatively exceptional situation had been more clearly put in perspective. With those reservations in mind, the documentary remains an important testimony of the Tibetan refugees’ lives, as well as a story of a particular woman refugee, that is worth telling.

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