

Commentary

## TA'ANGZOOM AMONG THE COWS

Manjushree Thapa

### ASSUMPTIONS MADE

poor  
destitute  
impoverished  
indigent  
penurious  
deprived  
insolvent  
wanting  
needy  
lacking  
limited  
paltry  
insufficient  
deficient  
defective  
inferior  
wretched  
pitiful  
pathetic  
poor

### THE WOMAN

*Ta'Angzoom is the one who knows how to balance a calf upon her shoulders. Not just any calf; her calf. Because it is hers, despite what anyone may think or whisper as she brushes past them in the narrow village lanes. Her calf: for it, she has set apart the entire first floor of her house—a dark, windowless stall that smells of dung and rotten feed. She and her mother share the only other room in the house, the room above the stall, beside the verandah. The small, closed-in verandah. It is to this*

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verandah Ta'Angzoum carries her calf every day in order to lay it down in the sharp high-altitude sun.

*Ta'Angzoum is the one who knows how to stoop under her calf and heave it onto her shoulders.* She remains bent under the weight of the animal, for she is herself a small-boned woman who stopped growing long before she should have. Her hand, reaching out to grasp the sides of the ladder, is cracked from too much work. Too much work: every day Ta'Angzoum either weeds the buckwheat fields or cleans blocked irrigation canals or cuts grass, gathers brush, scoops dung, coats the walls with mud, chops wood, threshes grain, weaves rugs or washes clothes. Always for someone else. Ta'Angzoum's hands are rough because she works too hard. They are rough because she has no butter to smear into them at the end of the day. Has no butter. She has never had. And will not—until her calf grows up and gives fresh milk.

*Ta'Angzoum is the one who moves fast to keep her balance, stepping deftly on the second, fourth and fifth rungs of the ladder, knowing which rungs will support her weight, and which will not.* With a deft kick at each step, she avoids tripping over the spotted blue chuba that wraps clumsily around her. Is Ta'Angzoum attractive? Sometimes she can be, but not right now, not with soot on her face and black beads of sweat quivering on the broad of her nose. Her disarrayed hair—braided days ago—is as dull as the coat of the calf upon her shoulders. Her eyes flit quickly over the ladder and she bites her lips. Her movements are necessarily mannish. Jumping off the last rung onto the verandah, she stoops again and gently shoves off the calf.

*Ta'Angzoum is the one who glances over the white walls and dark windows of the village huts as she catches her breath. She is the one whose eyes pause at any hint of movement within the dark windows.* Sometimes she thinks she sees him, the one she last saw four days ago flirting with the girls at the gate: her husband. Sometimes she knows it is just her imagination. "He's off," Lobsang Norbu's wife had said this morning in the fields, "Chasing the girls by the river." Ta'Angzoum raises a sleeve to her face and wipes off the soot and sweat. Then she turns and watches the calf settle down in the sunshine, and she feels its comfort in her bones.

There is a heap of grass on the verandah to last the calf all day. With a last sweeping glance across the village huts, Ta'Angzoum enters the pitch blackness of the room—her room, her mother's room, the room with the stove, the store room, the prayer room. It is smaller than ten feet by eight. In the darkness she catches the silhouette of the kettle against

the stove. Her mother wheezes in a corner, and her clothes rustle as she sways. Ta'Angzoum scoops up the kettle and pours butter tea into the dim white curves of her mother's tea cup. Crouching onto the burlap rug she blows into the fire, then adds to it a handful of goat pellets and dung. She blows again. The glow of the stove lights up her shiny eyes, and sweat springs up on her nose. Soot and ash fly into the air and fall on her hair, her face, her hands; she tastes thick smoke in her mouth as she places the buckwheat gruel on the stove.

*Ta'Angzoum is the one who hopes her mother is well enough to take Pasang Thondup's cows to the pastures today, because there are other matters she herself must attend to.* Last night her brother Jabyang said he would help re-negotiate her wages with Karma, whose fields she weeds each morning. A few handfuls of buckwheat seeds aren't enough for all that work, that's what Jabyang had said. Ta'Angzoum hopes he wasn't too drunk when he said this, she hopes he'll remember his offer of help today. *She hopes; Ta'Angzoum is the one who hopes.*

*Ta'Angzoum is many people all at once. She is the one who serves her mother hot buckwheat gruel, the one who lifts up her own bowl, blowing on the gruel as she sips at it. She is the one who searches her mother's dark outlines, assesses her, and murmurs hopefully, "You're breathing easier today."*

Her mother moans, but such moans Ta'Angzoum is used to. It is the wheezing she worries about, the debilitating asthma that keeps her from the pastures.

"I might speak to Karma today," Ta'Angzoum says, reaching for the kettle. The trickle of water catches the light from the door as it falls onto her leftover gruel. Her mother doesn't say anything about Pasang Thondup's cows, and so Ta'Angzoum knows that her mother will spend the day in the sun with the calf, swaying back and forth, chanting prayers, muttering her endless supplications.

Ta'Angzoum leaves the dark sooty room and emerges onto the brilliant sun-soaked verandah, carrying her and her mother's bowls. She pours the thin gruel-water into the plastic jerry can beside the calf, and mixes into it a handful of barley that she has stashed in the folds of her chuba. *Ta'Angzoum is the one who measures away every last grain she earns. She is the one who will take Pasang Thondup's cows to the pastures today in exchange for milk. She is the one who will go to her brother tonight to see if he repeats his offer of help. She is the one who hopes that no one misses her at the site of the government trail repair work for which everyone's attendance is mandatory. She is the one whose*

*eyes dart about, the one who looks for her husband in the dark windows of village huts despite the fact that she hates him, hates the claim he's made on the calf in his bid to separate. Ta'Angzoum is the one waiting for village elders to settle their divorce and to declare the calf rightfully hers. She is the one who pleads before important men about her private hurts and anguishes. "He climbs over village rooftops in search of younger girls." She is the one who cried for help when the Chairman of the District Development Committee came to the village riding on a horse.*

Just now, though, she is lost in thought. A light wind shifts past the verandah, stirs against her cheeks, and she cannot but give herself over to its cool, its soft, its subtle tickling flow. She wonders in passing who is Ta'Angzoum now: the owner of a calf, a farm hand, cow herder, daughter, wife, lover, thinker, the one who feels the wind, or the wind?

### THE ONE WHO REPRESENTS THE WOMAN

Infrastructure: roads, trails and bridges. To be surveyed, cost-estimated, constructed, repaired and rehabilitated. Electricity: micro-hydros, mini-hydels, whatever. GI pipes, sacks of cement, etc. carried up by mules. Irrigation canals. River training along unstable embankments, rows of stacked gabion boxes. A second airport to increase trade and tourism. If not, a ropeway: how useful for exporting local vegetables and fruit—apples. How useful for setting up a transportation industry managed by a local contractor—which one?

The Chairman of the District Development Committee sits at his desk trying to compose his speech for the annual meeting of the District Development Council coming up next week.

Infrastructure. His bifocals sit heavy on his nose. The page in front of him is blank. He must write. His mind hums with fresh ideas: roads, electricity, an airport or maybe two helipads.

He hunches over his desk and writes in a neat, sloping hand: *We are the poor people of a poor, developing country.*

He is not alone in the room. Across his desk, in the shadows of his windowless office are three lumpy sofas, all occupied, the first by an old Magar whose son was just jailed in a forest fire case. The old Magar is carrying a bundle of fresh cabbage, and his eyes, paled by cataracts, waver and blink. Next to him is the Chairman's young, twitching nephew here to see about his botched examinations. Will Uncle talk to the District Education Officer? That's what he's here to say; it shows all over his sickly face, in the way he shifts in his chair, the way he tries to catch the

Chairman's eyes but looks away when he does. To his side there's the petty contractor Lal Bahadur, who is wearing a leather jacket and sitting with his hands folded and his chubby legs spread.

Looking down at his desk, the Chairman says, "Bringing vegetables doesn't make a difference." His flat, blasé tone produces the desired effect: the old Magar rustles to attention. The Chairman peers over the thick black rims of his bifocals, and sure enough, the old man is clutching at his vegetables. His face is pulled back, and the thin fibre of his labledas are stretched taut. The Chairman says, in the same bland tone, "Cabbages won't get your son out of jail."

The nephew and the petty contractor smirk. The old Magar stands awkwardly and joins his palms in plea. "He was asleep." His voice comes out husky and hollow. "He didn't mean to do it."

But the Chairman isn't interested. "And so the cabbages prove this?" He delicately tucks off the sheet on which he has just composed his first sentence. Then, adopting a wry undertone he adds, "Or are they meant to give me the strength to walk over to the Judge's office and ask him to release your son?"

The old Magar blinks several times. "A man as strong as you," he mumbles, "What would one dry cabbage do...." Softly, he adds, "A Chairman wouldn't have to go to a judge."

At this, Lal Bahadur guffaws and the nephew starts to shake his legs. Realizing he's being played with, perhaps, the old Magar smiles cautiously. "For the District Chairman...." He holds up the cabbage.

The Chairman makes a dismissing gesture with his hands. "Give it to your son, old man." He speaks more curtly than he planned to because he feels a sudden urge to compose another sentence to follow the first: *We are the poor people of a poor, developing country....* He pushes up his glasses.

"Give it to his son?" the petty contractor Lal Bahadur says in the richly intoned voice of contractors, a mystifying, wavering voice that suggests more than it says. He unfolds his arms, puts his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, and spreads his plump legs wider. To the old Magar, he says, "Old man, don't worry about your son. The police love him because he washes their clothes, polishes their shoes, cooks their food. He doesn't have to work all day chopping wood like he used to."

Darting a glance at the Chairman, the nephew shrilly adds, "Yeah."

The old Magar smiles a little bit. "His wife, his children." He fixes his pale, cataracted eyes on the Chairman. "My grandchildren, growing up without a father. My son's mother can't stop crying."

Brusque now, the Chairman says, "Go now, old man." He knows the old Magar will go straight towards the high school, where the Chairman's dimpled younger wife lives, to drop off the cabbage; that's what he did yesterday. "Give those vegetables to your son. Come back in a week. I'll see what can be done. But you understand," he says sternly, "There's almost nothing that can be done."

"If only they came with reasonable requests," he says in a genial, confiding tone to the petty contractor as the old Magar shuffles out. Then he deftly adds, "Nephew, your mother told me about your little matter. Don't worry, I'll do what I can."

The nephew does not seem to understand this as a dismissal, and he reaches up to feel the pimples on his face. Unwilling, probably, to talk in front of the contractor, he says haltingly, "It's been done, then?" He glances briefly at his uncle.

"Not yet." The Chairman squints at the nearly empty page on his desk. "These things take time, you know."

"Yes of course...." The nephew breaks off.

The Chairman sighs. "There's nothing else, then? Just that little matter?"

The nephew takes his leave.

Which leaves only the petty contractor. The Chairman takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "Tea?" He rings the bell under his desk and orders the peon who shows up to bring in two cups. "This speech," he says with a weary catch in his voice, "Not a minute to write it...." He looks down at the near-blank sheet of paper. Where was he, now?

Lal Bahadur drawls, "There many construction projects this year?"

Which reminds the Chairman about infrastructure. Roads, trails, bridges, electricity, airports, ropeways: how useful for awarding contracts. He says, "One or two."

"The Baglung road?" Lal Bahadur's chubby legs come together and cross. His leather jacket shifts and gleams.

"Not this year," the Chairman says. The contract for the Baglung road—if that funds for that project get approved—will go to Govinda, who will funnel back a percentage to the Chairman's dimpled younger wife. The Chairman says, "There are a few other big projects, like that road to the high school. And the bridge to Syaule Bazaar."

"The bridge to Syaule?"

Infrastructure: the Chairman has a sudden flash of inspiration. "Just a moment, Lal Bahadurji." He rushes to put on his glasses and rereads the first line of his speech: *We are the poor people of a poor, developing*

*country. We are the poor people of a poor, developing country? He crosses out country and replaces it with nation.*

#### **NOTES FOR THE WORDS THAT WILL BE SPOKEN**

Honorable Member of Parliament, Chief District Officer Sah'b, Acting Local Development Officer Sah'b, District Judge, District Superintendent of Police Sah'b, Office Chiefs and Acting Office Chiefs from the Offices of Education, Housing and Physical Planning, Public Health, Forestry, Drinking Water, and Non-Government Organization Chiefs, Village Development Committee Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen, Prominent Politicians, Social Servants, and Well-Wishing Brothers and Sisters,

We are the poor people of a poor, developing nation. (Say something about how poor we are, deprivation etc., especially being a remote district. LIVE IN THE SHADOWS OF DEATH RATHER THAN THE SHADOWS OF THE HIMALS). Therefore we must use our meagre resources carefully, making sure that they reach the POOREST segments of the POOREST villages of our nation.

OUR PARTY: With the new decentralization laws that allow the District semi-autonomous decision-making powers about its own development, this will finally become possible. For this I would like to thank OUR PARTY, whose government passed these laws, keeping in mind the interest of our poor villagers. When I met with the HONORABLE PARTY CHIEF last month at the PARTY MEETING in Kathmandu, I had the opportunity to thank him in person on the podium. (Emphasize: I was one of the few District Development Committee Chairmen who were seated at the podium).

It is with special pride, therefore, that I preside over this meeting in order to plan our district's development activities for the upcoming fiscal year. In the past two days we have heard presentations from the various office chiefs about the anticipated budgets of their respective offices. We have also heard what the various Non-Government Organizations active in our district will be doing to supplement the government's development activities, and how much they will spend, particularly in the field of infrastructure development.

INFRASTRUCTURE POINT: As you know, life in our remote district is very, very hard, without even the most basic infrastructure. Where are the roads that will facilitate our transportation, the airports that will bring in more tourists, the river training that will stabilize our embankments, the irrigation canals that will water our fields? Where is

the electricity with which we can read at night? Particularly in remote districts such as ours, many villages lack even the most basic infrastructure, like trails leading to pastures. How many hectares of arable land have we lost due to erosion of river embankments? And how many of our brothers and sisters have we lost to road accidents stemming from dangerous paths? Many of our villages don't even have a proper house to keep our government offices in.

(Talk about the infrastructure built since I've been in office. FRUITS OF DEVELOPMENT. GOD-GIVEN RIGHTS IN THIS BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY OF OURS). For what can we do without ROADS and BRIDGES, without ELECTRICITY? In this regard, I am very happy with the construction work undertaken by the various government and non-government offices active in our district. The projects to be undertaken by the District in the upcoming fiscal year are aimed at supporting the efforts of these offices.

Among others, these works include:

1. Construction of a two-kilometre motorable road from the district airport to the river, ending at the high school;
2. Detailed feasibility survey and cost-estimation for an airport in Korang village;
3. Detailed feasibility survey and cost estimation for a ropeway to Baglung;
4. Massive rehabilitation of the bridge to Syaule Bazaar;
5. Detailed feasibility survey and cost-estimation for a hydro-power plant in the district headquarters;
6. River training along the south end of the airport.

(Make the Vice Chairman read out the whole list). EMPHASIZE THE POINT ABOUT OPEN COMPETITION BETWEEN CONTRACTORS. REPEAT THE POINT ABOUT HOW IMPORTANT INFRASTRUCTURE IS. MENTION NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRENDS, GLOBAL TRENDS, etc..

ALL-PARTY CONFERENCE: In addition, I would like to inform everyone that I will do my utmost in Kathmandu when I attend the upcoming All-Party Conference to stress the importance of the Baglung road for our district's economy. The budget I have allocated to the survey and estimation of the ROPEWAY to Baglung is a clear commitment to my development of that aspect of our district.

(MENTION OPPOSITION'S EFFORTS TO UNDERMINE GOVERNMENT, BUT END IN CONCILIATORY TONE). In conclusion I would like to say that I count on your continued goodwill

and cooperation, for without a united effort to build infrastructure, we will forever remain the poor people of a poor, developing nation.

### **THE ONE WHO DOESN'T SPEAK**

*Ta'Angzoum, wandering among the cows, is the one who gave the DDC Chairman that line.* Now she stands amid the field of anemones in bloom all over the pastures, staring at their quivering white petals and spiky green leaves. She plucks one flower and chews absently on its stalk. *Yes, she is the one who pleaded, when the DDC Chairman came, for him to declare the calf legally hers.* She had meant to make her appeal more moving when she cried, "We are the poor people of a poor, developing country." He just rode away on his horse, leaving her to the crowds of villagers clucking, "Not now, this isn't the time, girl."

Needy, pathetic, poor: he, in power, makes his fortune representing her as such. Needy, pathetic, poor: she, without power, helps him to represent her as such. *She is, among other things, a generous woman.* She gives him what he wants. She knows she has to. Because so much—fresh milk, small comforts, her mother's health, her life, her whole identity—depends on letting those in power have their due.