

‘I Just lit Up. I Did Not Burn.’: Theatre as a Site of Tibetan Resistance in *Pah-La*

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Abstract

Pah-La throws the spotlight on the relevance of non-violence in the Tibetan struggle in the face of Chinese occupation. In an increasingly violent world how does one resist -- but with dignity? Drawing on a shared memory, *Pah-La* rallies Tibetans in exile, and conscientizes the world to the violation of human rights in Tibet. It establishes theatre as a powerful medium to campaign for freedom. Its focus on the struggle of a woman (Deshar) to personify the liberation movement accentuates her political helplessness. It also explores the personal dynamic of defying her father. The supplanting of Tibetan by Mandarin by the occupying forces is a cause to fight for the Tibetan language. The non-violent spiritual moorings to Buddhism are also articulated in the play. The textual transformation from the first production in London in English in 2019 to the second in 2022 with Tibetan actors in Dharamshala showcases some of the imperatives which besiege theatre – and Tibet – today. It is also a testament of how theatre survives even in the most challenging conditions. This paper will attempt to address some of these issues.

Keywords: Pah-La, Tibet, Deshar, self-immolation, Abhishek Majumdar, Buddhism

Epigraph

We have to do drama.

-The Dalai Lama

It's important that the Tibetans tell their story to the world, because they are getting more and more forgotten.

-Harry Fuhrmann

Co-director of *Pah La*

I wanted to get a sense of the risk in Tibet.

-Abhishek Banerjee, Writer of *Pah-La*

Occupation

Theatre has a long history of being synonymous with resistance. When German forces occupied France during World War II, French dramatist Jean Anouilh wrote *Antigone* (1944) - a modern allegory of the state of affairs. Einat Wizeman's *Prisoners of the Occupation* (2025) is about the conditions faced by Palestinians in Israeli prisons. It is also a play on Israel's occupation of Gaza. To consolidate their position in the besieged city of Ukraine, Russia bombed the Mariupol Drama Theater on 16 March 2022. 'China occupied Tibet in 1949. That is not history. It is an ongoing reality,' reads a slogan for the Free Tibet movement. (TRC) Theatre thus is on the frontlines of any recuperative activity to usher in peace.

Performance

Pah-La [Father] is a drama that was written in English by Abhishek Majumdar in Tibet during 2013-2019. It premiered in London and was performed at the Royal Court Jarwood Theatre Upstairs on 3rd April 2019. It was directed by Debbie Hannan with an ensemble cast. Deshar was played by Millicent Wong, while in her final year at drama school, in which she made her UK theatre debut.

The play was translated into Tibetan by Lhakpa Tsering, Head of Tibet Theatre and directed by him along with German Theatre Director Harry Fuhrmann in 2022-2023. It featured Tibetan actors with Kalsang Dolma as Deshar, in collaboration with the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA).

The play is based on the Lhasa riots in 2008. It takes its genesis from the conditions which caused the Dalai Lama to flee Tibet to India in 1959 and set up the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamshala. The Dalai Lama instituted TIPA the same year because he believed that Tibetans need to tell their stories to the world. (Gowalla)

Genesis

Harry Fuhrmann, co-director of *Pah-La*, makes the point that not enough attention is being paid to the situation in Tibet. Despite the human rights violations in Tibet other countries are still continuing trade with China. 'This implies that the world is more in favour of capitalism than they support human rights and democratic ideas.' (Gowalla)

Language

The very language in which the play is being performed becomes a symbol of protest. Exiting from English, which was the language in which the play was first performed in London, Tsering translated the play into Tibetan. 'It becomes a very powerful thing for this language to exist on stage for two hours and for people to be able to hear that language,' feels Abhishek Majumdar. (Singh) Keeping the Tibetan language alive is one of the goals of the play. Interestingly, the people who showed up for the Tibetan performance in Delhi were not bothered that they did not know the language. (Dhamdul)

Self-Immolation

Since February 2009 it is estimated that around 160 people have immolated themselves in Tibet. (TRC) They include monks, nuns and Tibetans. It is the only way they know to get out of the existing situation. The self-immolation of Tibetan Pawo Logba Rangzen in front of the UN Headquarters in New York on 2 July 2026, has once again turned the spotlight on this visceral form of protest. (Marino)

Pah-La

ACT I

The play opens in a nunnery in Eastern Tibet, perhaps Kham. It is a brutal opening with Dorjee wiping the blood of Deshar's face. She has sustained the injury because she has been hit by a Chinese officer. In turn Deshar breaks his jaw and extracts a molar. Stunned by the turn of events Dorjee reminds her, 'Deshar, he is a Chinese soldier, you are a buddhist nun.' (I.i.2) The fact that Deshar is wearing a soldiers uniform suggests that she is prepared to use force if needed.

The consequences of Deshar's action are debated in Tsering's house in Scene 2. The Rinpoche is worried that the act would invite retribution from the Chinese authorities – more nuns would be expelled. Teacher Tsering pleads for Deshar. 'We do not have violence in our culture Tsering,' (9) reminds the Rinpoche. Tsering is also a Commander. He represents the armed struggle of the Tibetans before they were advised to eschew violence and follow the path of nonviolence. 'We were warriors Rinpoche.' (I.ii.9) he states. He also castigates the

move of the Dalai Lama to flee to India in March 1959 saying, 'But you see my God of compassion has JUST escaped to India. I am stuck here. (I.ii.11) He is also distraught that the monks have stooped to worship the Beijing-Lhasa express. (I.ii.11) He rues the fact that 'Deep, deep inside all of you have become Chinese. Your mind is in Mandarin and you are just using Tibetan-sounding words.' (I.ii.9) In this scene Majumdar deftly lays the scaffolding for the play and foreshadows what is to come.

The telescope becomes an important symbol of the play. It signifies a world which every Tibetan dreams of but is still unattainable. (The telescope is also a potent reminder of distant dreams in another fable like *The Little Prince*.) Deshar procures the telescope from Tashi who brings it from Beijing. When Deshar interacts with Pema who is a 12-year-old boy the conversation borders on fantasy: 'Deshar: What's a spaceship? / Pema: A spaceship is the yak on which the astronauts go far.' (I.iii.12)

Later Pema asks Deshar: 'What do you want to be?' to which Deshar replies, 'I don't want to be an imposter.' (I. iii.15) This is a powerful line which will define her character later. Pema presses on, 'Yes, but what do you like? What do you want to be?' 'I don't know. I really don't know what I want to be,' admits Deshar. This existential crisis is resolved later when Deshar finds her calling. The Buddha is alluded to. 'Did the Buddha become a star?' inquires Pema. With a new insight Deshar says, 'He became everything and nothing, at once.' (I. iii.15)

Tsering feels affronted that Pema has the confidence of his daughter: 'You do whatever you like and I am the poor father, am I?' (I. iii.16) Deshar replies, 'Pahla, I am sorry.' (I. iii.16) This is the first time Deshar addresses her father as 'Pahla' in the play.

This scene sets the stage for the opening up of a deep wound between father and daughter. Deshar accuses her father Tsering of killing her mother. Tsering justifies himself: 'She was going to leave me and go away to meet his holiness with my baby in her arms, across these mountains. She was fleeing her home to seek the blessings of a man who called off our only chance of independence.' (I. iii.16) Deshar castigates her father for having saved her instead of her mother: 'You should have saved her. I was only an infant.' (I. iii.17) Embittered, Tsering can only conclude: 'You know what the real problem with Tibet is Deshar? (Pause) It's not the Chinese. It's our children. They grow up to be delusional.' (I. iii.17) The generation gap is split wide open. This wound will not heal.

Some of the most searing lines appear in this scene: 'Deshar: I ran away from you. (Pause) You killed my mother. / Tsering: If you don't know who you are, living in Tibet, you will never know who you are Deshar. It's much easier to be a Buddha than to be an ordinary Tibetan in this world.' (I. iii.18)

Whereas the butter lamps in the Buddhist ritual are reverentially put on to dispel darkness and usher in light, in *Pah-la* the Rinpoche and the nuns light and blow out the butter lamps. (I. iv.19) The scene – devoted entirely to this ritual emphasizes the precarity of light and awareness. The moment is extinguished when the train, which can be seen as a metaphor, and an intruder, arrives at high speed causing the lights to go out.

The play is set in a time post the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China since Commander Deng observes, 'How is it that the Cultural revolution spared these relics? Charman Mao must have really liked them.' (I. v. 20) Deng pushes the Communist agenda which flies in the face of the Tibetan Buddhism practised by the Rinpoche in the nunnery in Eastern Tibet. He says matter-of-factly, 'Your knowledge is of no use to the common man. People cannot be starving while hundreds of monks and nuns sit in monasteries and debate whether they are really here or not.' (I. v. 23-24) Deng accuses the Rinpoche of harbouring separatists in the nunnery. He produces Deshar Tsering and points to her lineage with her father being part of the militant Tibetan group, the Chushi Gangdruk formed in 1958. (I. v. 23-26) To remedy the situation Deng starts the 're-education' of the nuns. (I. vi. 29)

Deng decides to demolish the monastery and build a hospital instead, because it is more utilitarian and in line with Communist ideology. The Rinpoche prefers to stay beside the statue of the Buddha. He delivers his last 'Sermon of fire.' This foregrounds the course of action Deshar will take. 'Everything burns. Everything always burns, and the world is never the same.' (I. vii. 34)

When the young Pema sees Deshar at night with a can of petrol, his reaction is not of alarm but to pull out his telescope to view the debris of the nunnery. (I. viii. 34) It took a month to demolish the nunnery. This is also violence when people are displaced and without shelter. The demolition of the nunnery has a deep impact on Deshar and her father. Deshar camps at the demolition site for a month as the work was going on. Her father becomes a recluse doing the Kora.

Homeless and without family, annihilation almost complete, Deshar chooses this moment to self-immolate. She tricks Pema to agree to a race to the top of the hill. The progress of the race is to be measured by the horns of the approaching train. 'You have to cross the top of the hill by five horns.' Deshar says. (I. viii. 38) She warns Pema not to look back. With Pema out of the way Deshar pours petrol on herself. She begins to chant. She lights herself and walks on the track the train is coming in an act of defiance. The train blows its horn repeatedly. She burns. (I. viii. 39) The stage directions are explicit.

Deshar's act is reminiscent of the self-immolation of Tibetan Pawo Logpa Rangzen in New York on 2 July 2026. He was protesting against a move to unify the diverse ethnic communities of China under a homogenous national identity. He was an ordinary Tibetan like Deshar, but in the cause for Tibet he found his purpose. Like Deshar says about the Buddha, 'He became everything and nothing, at once.' (I.iii.15)

ACT II

Deshar's self-immolation recoils on Inspector Deng when his daughter goes missing. His wife Jia minces no words. She says, 'You inspector Deng pushed someone's daughter to burn herself. This is your price. And as always, I have to pay for it as well.' She shows her defiance of the marital bond by lighting a cigarette. (II.i.43) The elaborate drama of framing

Deshar for her deed plays out in Deng's home. 'The party is going to take action against me Jia, if she does not confess.' (II.i.43)

Jia aligns with Deshar as a defenseless woman and finds her husband's act of beating Deshar pathetic. In a damning diatribe on Deng, Jia explodes, 'You won't be able to find my daughter Deng. You are not a person. You are a system. Systems don't have children.' (II.i.44) Disgusted at the repressive policies of the State, Jia puts her lipstick on a photo of Mao Tse Tung and declares cynically, 'It's red.' (II.i.44) Jia has no qualms of burning her husband if his soldiers had demolished her home. She empathizes with Deshar. She considers her a hero though she is from the 'opposite' camp. 'Tell that girl, she has changed Tibet forever. It doesn't take long for people to get to others, when they begin to burn themselves.' (II.i.46)

Despite her setting herself on fire Deshar is subjected to a polygraph test in the interrogation room. The extent of what she has been through becomes apparent when Ling tries to separate her hands and part of her finger falls away. Unable to extract a confession from her, Deng asks the incredulous Ling to burn her again. (II.ii.53) He feels it is Deshar's self-immolation bid that is inciting Tibetans in the streets to attack the Chinese. It also causes others to follow her example, 'In just this week, there have been 18 arrests just in the women's cell for self-immolation, and 8 we couldn't even save. You . . . you are responsible for all this.' (II.iii.56)

Meditating on her act Deshar says, 'I just lit up, I did not burn. And everyone is becoming this light, in these times of darkness.' (II.iii.58) Examining her motives, she says, 'I burnt long ago. In my mind. In the mind, is where it matters. *(Pause)* And the re-education. What is that? What kind of education derobes one's teachers, insults one's companions, destroys places of education . . . I had no other choice.' (II.iii.57) Deshar keeps emphasizing that she had no option but to do as she did. 'I burnt my body, to present my mind. There was no other way.' she says. (II.iii.59) Her sense of nihilism extends to the next generation as well. She observes, 'Our children have no choices. My father fought against all the odds to raise me by himself.' (II.iii.60)

Tsering and Gaphel bring back vivid memories about their life in the resistance movement. (White Crane) Bitter at being condemned to be a pacifist Tsering asks sarcastically, 'You want a revolution, but you want chants to beat atomic bombs and automatic machine guns.' (II.iv.68) The ways of Tsering and Deshar, father and daughter are diametrically opposite. One chooses violence, the other non-violence. The play *Pah-La* presents both these viewpoints with equal felicity.

When Jia is forced to use her body to find her 8-year-old daughter Liu she recognizes it as a kind of violence. (II.iv.75) The scene is an examination of the motives – this time of Tibetans - to being violent towards the Chinese in general. 'You have made violence normal You are only surprised that it is against you.' says the man in the scene. (II.iv.77) Violence does not discriminate. Both Chinese and Tibetans suffer. Jia is made to demean herself in her desperation to find Liu. The man bargains with her for sexual favours in return for revealing

where Jia (or her body) may be found. He gets turned on by Jia's lipstick which not so long ago she smeared the portrait of Mao with. (II.iv.78)

Tsering and Deng are bound by the fact that both are fathers and both have lost their daughters. The play exploits this angle. Having lost Liu to Tibetan protesters Deng promises to kill Deshar in front of her father to assuage his guilt. 'I am a father. He is a father. He should watch his child die. She wanted to burn. Mine didn't.' (II.vi.81) Ling lifts the conversation to a symbolic plane. She says fathers are a problem. Citing his holiness the Dalai Lama, Mao Tse Tung, and Nixon, - the principal actors of Tibet in the 1950s - she says, '[F]athers are not just fathers of a child, but fathers of a nation, of an idea, of the people. That is the problem. Fathers.' (II.vi.81) The title of the play *Pah-La* ('Father' in Tibetan) assumes renewed significance in this light. Ling disdains this mindless adulation of fathers. She says with biting sarcasm, 'My father on his deathbed, asking for forgiveness from his dead father's portrait, while my mother worked in a brick factory to bring home our dinner that night.' (II.vi.81)

The final scene opens with Deshar holding a butter lamp. There is a sense that something momentous is going to happen. Deshar gives her father the butter lamp and recreates the scene of her mother dying. 'Hold this. This is Amala. Tell her you love her.' (II.vii.87). After attempting to heal this wound, Deshar tries to explain her act to her father, 'I had to burn to make our voice heard. What the voice found, is the revolution.' (II.vii.88) She elaborates to Deng, '[I had] to find a way of making our voice heard without hurting another sentient being.' (II.vii.89) She universalises the nature of violence, 'We are all responsible for every injustice that happens in this world. In this "Samsara."' (II.vii.92)

Epilogue

Pah-La sears the conscience of thinking people. As Deshar tells her father, 'Your generation was fighting for Tibet, Pah-la. Mine is fighting for the conscience of the world.' (II.vii.88) We see this struggle continuing even today with the self-immolation of Pawo Logba Rangzen in front of the UN headquarters in New York on 2 July 2026. Deshar's is the voice of the people who have not voice. Her sentiments, imbued with Buddhist philosophy, offer hope and awareness. Abhishek Majumdar's *Pah-Lak* is a testament for our times. The ability to present the saga of the occupation of Tibet and the struggle to regain it through the medium of theatre is commendable. Historical elements are finely embedded in the action to provide a backdrop for the characters. It is a compelling play which - despite the silence of the Dalai Lama about those immolating themselves - offers a unique way of giving theatre the agency for resistance.

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