

BOOK REVIEWS/INDIA

**Harmandeep Kaur Gill. *Waiting at the Mountain Pass: Coming to Terms with Solitude, Decline, and Death in Tibetan Exile*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025. 312 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00; paperback, \$44.95; eBook, \$44.95.**

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Harmandeep Kaur Gill's *Waiting at the Mountain Pass: Coming to Terms with Solitude, Decline, and Death in Tibetan Exile* is an intimate and theoretically rich chronicling of late-life realities among seven Tibetans living in exile. Ranging in age from 80 to 95, Gill's "friends" (she prefers not to use the term "interlocutors") include five women and two men, two of whom are Buddhist nuns and one a Buddhist monk. Set in McLeod Ganj in northwestern India, where Gill spent stretches of time from 2018 to 2023, the work is located in a town that is home to the Dalai Lama and is widely known as the capital of Tibetans in exile. The older adults featured in the book represent the town's aging demographic, as many younger Tibetans born in McLeod Ganj are leaving in search of work and other opportunities.

Written in vivid, poetic detail, Gill reflects on older Tibetans' hopes and fears with honesty and tenderness. The intimacy evoked by the work is enhanced by Gill's frequent references to lower leg and foot massages that she administers to increase warmth and circulation, something she learned in 2016 while volunteering with a Tibetan NGO. When Gill started her ethnographic project two years later, some of the women she interviewed, whom Gill felt were growing tired of her endless questions, encouraged her to find a way to benefit them as well. Eager to infuse reciprocity into her work, she chose to offer massages during her visits. The sense of mutual care that emerged over time, partially a result of these massage sessions, is palpable throughout the book.

The title of the book, *Waiting at the Mountain Pass*, contains a metaphor often used in reference to late life in Tibet, when one stands on the precipice of the unknown, suspended between worlds and between life and death. Suspension is intrinsic to Tibetan exile as well, where older generations live and die away from their original homes and, as is the case in McLeod Ganj, support from younger family members is scarce, if not nonexistent. Unsettled life at the mountain pass in exile is a precarity that Gill's friends share. Yet beyond this commonality, she avidly avoids forcing frameworks onto the

group that could mistakenly lead to generalizations. Determined to treat each individual with singularity and care, Gill also does so with a sense of humility. She insists on several occasions that, despite the bonds they have created over time, knowledge of her friends' rich inner lifeworlds is fragmentary at best. Bringing home this point are photographs scattered throughout the book in which bodies and faces are half concealed by shadow.

Chapter 1, "Exile," sets the stage for the rest. The chapter explores McLeod Ganj as a reimagining of Tibetan life, where sociopolitical and mountainous terrain shape people's experiences of aging. It shows that, while the town poses emotional and physical challenges for its older inhabitants, most have no desire to relocate, as living in close proximity to the Dalai Lama is deeply reassuring. The four chapters that follow focus on individuals' feelings and moods, backgrounded by historical and theoretical reflections. "Melancholia" (chapter 2) considers how interconnections between body, self, and the world are disturbed by bodily deterioration in late life. Readers are introduced to Lisa Guenther's (2013) notion of "hinges," in which aging bodies are understood as unhinged from the self, a theme that reemerges in different ways throughout the book. "Desperation" (chapter 3) explores preoccupations with creating and sustaining relationships of care in older age in contexts where, unhinged by exile, family members have dispersed. "Nostalgia" (chapter 4) treats unsettled conceptions of home across time and space, cobbled by forces of memory and longing among older Tibetans in exile. "Acceptance" (chapter 5) features the fears and hopes that surface at the mountain pass as residents come to terms with impending death and uncertain rebirth beyond death.

Each chapter is followed by a brief Interlude in which Gill invites the reader into one of her massage sessions. Here, she focuses on physical touch itself: skin that is smooth and scarred, the ease and difficulty of her kneading, and the recipient's sense of comfort and pain. These moments of physical intimacy are a slowing of the book's pace. Pushing conversations and silences to the sidelines, they help fulfill Gill's aim to bring her Tibetan friends "to life as people—people whose emotional lifeworlds remain beyond my grasp but which can nonetheless be felt and connected with" (22).

As a scholar of religion, I especially appreciate the nuanced, earthbound ways Gill presents religious themes, steered by formal prescriptions and human inclinations that are regularly at odds. I found "Acceptance" to be particularly rich in its descriptions of ritual practices that older Tibetans typically perform, bundled in hope, to ensure a good death and rebirth. These include mantra recitations, readings from Buddhist texts, shrine circumambulations and offerings, and prostrations. Gill's friends conduct these practices with a sense of urgency, as the time left to them is a precious resource for clearing attachments and creating good karma. Adding to this fervency is the understanding that attaining a human birth in one's next life is extremely

difficult. Cognizant that what lies beyond death is ultimately beyond our control, ritually keeping apace sustains hope amid the unknown. Religious practices thus serve as a hinge for the deeply unsettled, offering comfort, connections to others, and, sometimes, the benefits of physical exercise. End-of-life practices and the intentions behind them, Gill observes, can teach us what it means to let go while giving every day our best effort.

*Waiting at the Mountain Pass* is a satisfying and astute work that has much to teach about the precarious lives of older Tibetans in exile, about their hopes and fears, and their construal of meaning and memory for those preparing to descend. I expect it will become an important resource not only for students and others interested in Tibetan history, culture, and religion but also for those with more general interests in aging studies and good ethnographic writing.

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