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The Circle of Karma: A Realistic Approach to Bhutanese Gender, Culture and Religion

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Abstract

The Circle of Karma, a novel published in India in 2005 by Zubaan Books in collaboration with Penguin Books, was written by Kunzang Choden, a Bhutanese woman writer. It is explicitly a Buddhist novel but one that concentrates on the everyday struggle of the protagonist- Tsomo's life. The writing is rich with Buddhist imagery but the story is firmly grounded in mundane realities of gender and cultural issues, in short an excellent novel about a woman's hard life, set against vivid gender, cultural and religious background. The novel applies the theory of nemesis in practice. It deals with the importance of karma/action. There is a message that each human being will experience the consequences of karma whether good or bad, in one or other way, in this or other birth. There is no escape. The novel is a story of Tsomo the central character, a fat girl compelled by her own restless spirit and later by circumstances to leave her family and go on series of endless travels.

Hope and tragedy mark her path in equal measure as her story gives a look of microcosm of Bhutanese society. It is informative regarding the cultural, religious and gender issues of Bhutan which is a Buddhist country.

Keywords

Buddhism; Nemesis; Circumstances; Culture; Gender; Religion.

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... a Bhutanese woman is forced to deal both with the traditional, restrictive gender roles of pre modern Bhutan and the new kind of sexism is developing as men gain economic freedom. The novel tells the story of Tsomo, a young Bhutanese woman who embarks

on the difficult and lonely journey of life. Tsomo's travels, which begin after her mother's death, take her away from her family, and lead her across Bhutan and into India. All the while, Tsomo seeks to find herself and a life partner, and grows as a person and a woman. The novel enriched by detailed descriptions of ritual life in Bhutan. The novel weaves a complex tapestry of life. (*Search for the Self in The Circle of Karma*)

Gender discrepancy is one of the problems of Bhutan, which is a male dominated society. Everything is gauged by male point of view. Even the education is biased and females are not considered to be educated. The protagonist Tsomo is circumscribed by the restrictions imposed on her by gender system. As a girl she cannot read scripture just as she is not allowed to travel. As an elder daughter her duty is to help her mother in household and learn the skills of housekeeping. Tsomo learns the art of weaving which is the traditional skill that is passed on from mother to daughter in the villages of Bhutan. To give birth to a girl is the result of karma or action and there is remark in the novel on the death of Tsomo's siblings, "It was their karma or the result of their actions in their previous lives" (TCK). Tsomo's father has great reputation in the community. He is highly educated but he is gender biased. When Tsomo asks him to teach her, he replies sternly, "You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a good wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not need to know how to read and write" (TCK). Bhutan is a patriarchal country. The sense of gender is inherent in everyday life of Bhutanese society. It is well expressed in statement during *Chod* rituals:

-I am only a woman'.

Yes we are women, Tsomo, we are different.

We must be less ambitious and more subdued. We are not like men. (TCK)

Butanese culture is primitive in nature. Despite the restrictive nature of culture the tradition of courtship and marriage system are obviously far more liberal than in mainstream European and Asian countries. Instances from Tsomo's life can be taken for reference. The birthmark on Tsomo's knee "*Kye Tag Khorlo*" and her birth in monkey year are the indications of her restless spirit and travelling fate as marked by an soothsayer. Her mother thinks, where can a girl ever be restless to travel? and when Tsomo asks her mother, "where is the farthest I can travel to mother?" She wonders at her question and replies, "where can a girl travel to...perhaps as far as Tibet and as far as India" (TCK). Tsomo's journey begins soon after her mother's death. The death is the result of a still born baby. She decides to go to *Trongsa* – a holy pilgrimage, to light "butter-lamp" on her mother's first death anniversary. In her journey she meets Wangchen, a young married man and falls in love with him. She returns to her village with a baby in her womb. Further he returns to her and claimed his fatherhood in "purification ceremony". Tsomo delivered a baby without breath after that she got a permanent swollen belly. Wangchen deceived her for her beautiful and young sister Kesang. Here, Tsomo realized that she is suffering the consequences of her karma, she too snatched Wangchen of his wife and now her own sister did the same to her. So she neither protests nor complains and decides to get rid-off her mental suffering and leaves her home and village. This departure makes the beginning of series of journeys and sojourns from Thimphu to Kalimpong, Tibet, India, Nepal then back to Thimphu again. She has self-respect, though she suffers a lot in her journey without any support and money, but still she thinks, "She would go home only she could say look what I made of my life all on my own" (TCK).

The novel *The Circle of Karma* gives a realistic outlook of Bhutan. Tsomo's journey and her realization of spiritual life, unfolds difficulties and accomplishments of true happiness. During her journey she met a number of persons; Dechen Choki is one of them. Both have suffered a lot in the bygone

days, specially gendered and sexual harassment is few of many. Gradually they develop a sense of sisterhood/sorority. They shared their life's incidents with each other. But soon Dechen Choki gets married to Tenzing, son of Pema Buti. Choki's departure made Tsomo lonely. So she leaves for pilgrimage and in her way she gets a marriage proposal from Lhatu. But he too deceives her. Anyway she is touched by *Lama Riponche* and due to disillusionment from life she turns to spiritual life. The benevolent Riponche makes a turning point in her life. She realises it and says, "my Lama, my Lama, I take refuge in you" (TCK). But the irony of the life is that only by wearing the clothes of nun and shaving the head do not make one a nun. She questions, "How does one suddenly stop being the person you are and become a new person" (TCK)? She has many problems yet she has to live by her own. Her desires are not mute, they were evoking her old thoughts and habits:

Her old thoughts and habits clung to her. She had to deliberately stop herself from going to the cinema. It was difficult for her to pass by and not glance at film posters advertising films. Even a quick sideways glance was enough for her to immediately recognize the Kayta and Keyti, and the goonda, in the movies and she sat in prayer in front of her alter, their images competed with the image of her teacher. (TCK)

In short one can see that Tsomo's personality has evolved through three stages set forth by Elaine Showalter as imitation, protest and self-discovery. Prof. V.P. Singh has rightly remarked:

What is true in literary terms according to Showalter is equally true to the Tsomo's life. She conforms to the mores of society obligatory upon women by trying to adjust to an unjust marriage. She walks out of the marriage in silent protest and grows gradually to discover herself through her subsequent experiences of which the most significant is her pursuit of spiritual life.

At the last stage Tsomo becomes a pure devotee in a chorten and moves towards spiritual life that brings salvation. She says for herself, “she is everywhere; she is there as if she is meant to be there” (TCK). Thus we notice that in the novel, *The Circle of Karma*, Kunzang Choden sketches a realistic portrait of gender, culture and religion covering Tsomo’s journey and sojourns through Thimphu, Kalimpong, Dorjiten (Bodhyagaya), Kathmandu, Dehradun, Delhi, and finally back to Thimphu again that literally completes a circle where she imitates, protests and discovers her true goal that is spiritual achievement.

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