



Subaltern Women in Kunzang Choden's Novel The Circle of Karma

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Abstract

Kunzang Choden, the first Bhutanese woman English novelist published her debut novel *The Circle of Karma* in 2005 published in India by Zubaan Books in collaboration with Penguin Books. The novel reflects Buddhism as the religious identity of Bhutanese. The protagonist Tsomo represents every woman in Bhutan. Her transformation from an ordinary subordinate village girl to a peaceful nun at the end of the story proves Buddhism as a medicine of healing to one's mind and body injury scars.

Keywords: Culture, karma, identity crisis, female trauma, subaltern

Introduction

Kunzang Choden, Bhutan's first English female novelist in her debut novel *The Circle of Karma* is about the strict and strengthened religiosity followed by the landlocked kingdom of Bhutan. Being born in a traditional feudal family in Bhutan; Choden had witnessed the harsh and marginalized realistic lives of the female strata in Bhutan society. The protagonist in the novel Tsomo represents every woman in Bhutan culture. How puranas is to Indians, religion is to Bhutanese.

The novel is a journey through the interior religious culture of Bhutan. From tradition to modernity, individuality to society, passive subordinate woman to a literate nun Tsomo enlightens the dark people of the Himalayan region. The novel can be criticized in the perspective of feminism.

Kunzang Choden was born in Bumthang, Bhutan in the year 1952. It was during her childhood that Bhutan had opted to shed its self-imposed isolation for modernization and socio-economic development. It was the author's interest in folklore and her concern that much of her country's cultural heritage would be lost in this transitional period, that motivated her to compile the folktales of this remote Himalayan Kingdom. Ashi Choden was born in a feudal family and educated at Catholic convents in India, and now worked for the



United Nations. Her ancestral house in Ogyen Choling in the Tang valley, Bumthang have occupied a remarkable multi-story temple with rich religious frescos, sacred artifacts and an entire floor dedicated to Tara and Guru Rinpoche.

The novel *The Circle of Karma* published in the year 2005. The protagonist, Tsomo's life portrays the so-called traumas between the traditional restrictive gender roles of pre-modern Bhutan with the new sets of sexism evolving when men in power. Tsomo's life journey starts from her mother's death. Choden pictured Tsomo's mother in the perception of her father, as a household material who solely responsible for taking care of their children.

"Tsomo is in the house alone with her mother. They are seldom on their own; this is a rare moment. They are in the kitchen arranging pots and pans on the shelves. The late afternoon wind hisses, through the bare trees and beats against the bamboo mats, rattling then noisily under the roof. It's a warm wind and Tsomo knows that spring will come soon." (Choden 01)

From the very starting of the novel, Choden exposes the strict gender roles of Bhutanese community. Tsomo's father as a religious preacher (gomchen), is an educated man occupied the evidence of a patriarchal society. Religious teachings are not permitted to females in the community. Tsomo's gomchen father makes her life distanced from teaching religious education. According to him; "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." (Choden 21)

By concluding in a traditional way that, religion in Bhutan paved an opportunity to male community to expose their superiority powers and under developing ego upon the subordinate females.

Chapter One

"When an unmarried woman became pregnant, she was obliged to announce it and have the purification ceremony called tshangma, for a pregnancy was seen as unclean unless purified. That was really a bad time for the girl unless she had a willing father for the child. If a woman did not perform tshangma, she would be held responsible for any natural catastrophes that befell the village that year." (Choden 36)



Tsomo's childhood friend Chimme, had undergone such a customary occasion. On this special day, the couple have to take on the persona of the legendary royal couple, King Gesar of Ling and his queen, Sheycham Drolma. In order to get rid off the pollution of the pregnancy from the house; the astrologer chanted prayer by burning the ritual of juniper and blue pine branches with special ingredients was first conducted outside the house. Thus, they believed that, by conducting such religious customs the gods and deities in the region may get appease. Ara or fermented alcohol is another significant part in their religious customs. Ara is served by the brides's father to both the bride and groom. And eventually they completed the process of tshangma.

In the Bhutanese ritual; if the dead woman is a pregnant cannot be cremated with the child still in her womb. The unborn child must witness the ray of light. The foetus must see the sky, occupy the space and feel the wind otherwise it will cause consequences for its future lives. Thus, its obvious that they are the strict believers of karma and re-birth.

Tsomo believed that whatever had happened in her earthly life, is due to her karma. Starting from her beloved mother's death, her breakup with first husband Wangchen, her swelling belly, her unsuccessful secondary relationship with a young man namely Lhatu etc.

Here, the transformation of Tsomo from an ordinary subordinate village girl, who is marginalized from religious preaching's by her own father is converted to a peaceful nun chose the way of spirituality. Choden scored by proving the reformatory phase of a girl to a peaceful nun.

Conclusion

Tsomo's wanderlust life get settled at the end of the novel. Being followed by the disciple of Buddhism under the sainthood of Guru Rinpoche; Tsomo realizes the purpose of life through the power of spirituality. The belief of God is within the human beings made her detached from the materialistic pleasures offered by the earthly life. Through Buddhism, she acquired a meaning and an identity to herself as a peaceful settled nun. Just like how religion mould an identity to the country Bhutan.



The novel also proves the fact that, spirituality heals every injury scar of one's body and mind. The power of God Almighty is underlined here. As Kunzang Choden quotes, "We are all pilgrims on earth, but the choices are not the same for all." (Choden 150)

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