



Search for the self in *The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden

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Abstract

*The paper focuses on growth of a woman protagonist from a traditional conservative to a modern woman through her voyage in search of identity in the novel *The Circle of Karma* written by Kunzang Choden, a Bhutanese woman writer of Disapora. The protagonist, living in a small town in Bhutan, spends her childhood under the restrictions of patriarchy. In the youth she is passionate. She travels from Thimpu to Siliguri, Kalimpong and Delhi to search for the self. During her travel to Kilimpong she meets Wangchen and becomes pregnant with his child. But the upheavals in her life disturb her. She wants to be a good wife and a caring sister of her siblings. But she has a miscarriage and baby dies. Later on she starts her pilgrimage in quest of spiritual truth of Karma to know the ultimate truth of life and paths of salvation. She escalates her from an illiterate woman suppressed by male dominated society to a woman who attempts to understand her circle of Karma and struggles to sustain life through the ideals of Buddhism.*

Key Words: *South Asian Diaspora, immigration, karma, spiritual quest, salvation*

Introduction:

Creative writers from post-colonial societies use various genres and forms of English to explore alternative worlds of experience that were formerly repressed or unimagined. Language is also ‘ both source and womb of creativity, a means of giving birth to new stories, new myths, of telling the stories of women that have been previously

silenced' (Nasta xiii). As Rama Nair points out, "Women from post-colonial countries are now transforming English to enable their intellectual, emotional and psychic dilemmas." (Nair 74) International literatures in English are now enriched by the writers of Diaspora, exile and immigration. As Nandini Sahu remarks, "Globalization has radically expanded the background of the study of Diaspora literature as well as offering opportunities to the immigrants to emerge, survive and thrive, making their literature loud and clear." (Sahu xxii) The term Diaspora refers to the movement of any population sharing common ethnic identity that were either forced to leave from the nomadic culture or may be voluntary migration for better prospects and ultimately settling in a new geographic location. Etymologically, the term Diaspora is derived from the Greek word Diaspeirein--"to scatter about, disperse", Dia means "about, across" and Speirein means "to scatter" ("Diaspora." Wiktionary). The term "South Asian" encompasses distinctly different categories of people who trace their origins either directly to the Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh), or else indirectly through their ancestors who migrated to East and South Africa, Fiji, East and South East Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere. South Asian literature in English, particularly, writings of South Asia Diaspora, has become one of the important tools to know about the society of these developing countries vis-à-vis that of the developed countries and to study the problems of immigrants. The study of different societies, their custom, religion, and rituals etc. within South Asia and of the countries where the characters migrate in the texts reveals various issues of Diaspora. "Roots" are very important in the context of ethnic identity. The Diaspora theory links to the ethnic theory. People seek a shared identity in an era of large-scale urbanization and weakening of localized, particularistic relations, ethnic theory addresses itself to understanding of the processes involved in deriving such identities from commonalities of history, language-in some cases religion and past achievements.

The Circle of Karma

Kunzang Choden is a Bhutanese writer. She is the first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English. Choden was born in Bumthang District. She has a BA Honours in Psychology from Delhi and a BA in Sociology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She

has worked for the United Nations Development Program in Bhutan. She is a Bhutanese Diaspora writer.

The Circle of Karma, published 2005, is her first novel. It takes place in the 1950s, the initial period of imperially regulated modernization in Bhutan. The main character, a Bhutanese woman is forced to deal both with the traditional, restrictive gender roles of pre-modern Bhutan and the new kinds of sexism 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 from a relatively unknown part of the world.

Tsomo's childhood

The opening locale of the novel is set in Thimpu in Bhutan. Tsomo is the third child and the first daughter among twelve siblings. The orthodox background of her parents is revealed in the beginning and we find drastic change in personality as the event progresses. She was born in the Year of Monkey as per Bhutanese calendar and that forecasts that she will remain restless, always wanting to travel throughout her life.

After scrutinizing her horoscope, the astrologer predicts that material prosperity would elude her but if she practices religion she will be born as a man in her next life. Since her childhood, Tsomo finds herself as a restless and full of anxiety. By the time she was fifteen, they were only seven siblings. Five of her brothers and sisters had died in infancy and the last died with mother before it was born. Thus, Tsomo has grown up in a typical patriarchal family system where she, being a girl child has to care her younger siblings. Her house is big and her ancestors had been known as the Wangleng *chupko* or the wealthy of Wangleng. The economic condition of her ancestors was very sound and they were proud of being tax payers. The municipality is charged with the unpleasant task of evicting the migrants who construct unauthorized huts in and around Thimpu town. Tsomo's father is a *gomchen* or a lay monk. He spends most of his time performing rituals in and around the village. The orthodox beliefs surrounded Tsomo's childhood. Her aunt Dechen feeds the spirits to make them contented and keeps any evil away from the villagers. Throughout her

childhood she listens importance of Karma which makes our next life happy. Her father informs her about Karmic illness. The beginning of the novel depicts Tsomo as a girl child, conscious of her duties in a house without mother and having younger siblings with father, who is a Buddhist monk, preaching the importance of Karma every time.

Condition of Women in Bhutan

The novel opens with a prologue where subordinate position of women is described through conversation between Lham Yeshi and Tsomo. Tsomo says: "I never want to think of men or sex. Men and sex have caused me enough suffering to last many lifetimes." (Choden ix)

The women in Bhutan have lower status and it is reflected here when Tsomo asks her mother where is the furthest I can travel? Her mother replies: "Where can a girl travel to? ...Perhaps as far north as Tibet and as far south as India." (2)

Tsomo's father was a meticulous writer. But Tsomo longs to be able to read and write and learn religion. When she asks her father to teach her, he quietly but sternly says:

"You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a god wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not need to know how to read and write." (21)

Here, the ideas of her father resemble what the Victorian English Poet Tennyson says about the condition of women in his era. Her longing for study and the circumstances that she faces in later part of the novel clearly indicates the importance of study for a woman. Tsomo's search for the self and spiritual truth may be the result of her subjugated condition during her childhood. Tsomo's mental suffering reaches to climax when her pregnant mother dies before delivering the child and the astrologer guides them to get the unborn child out from the womb for salvation. Tsomo's father performs the task of extracting the baby girl from Tsomo's mother's womb. The post death rituals continue for 49 days and later on Tsomo's father remarries with Tashi Lhamo. She hears old women saying: "Yes, we are women, Tsomo. We are different. We must be less ambitious and more subdued. We are not like the men." (23) But in the later part of the novel, we find metamorphosis in her personality under the influence of different people whom she meets during her journey to India.

Socio-cultural life in Bhutan

The novelist, as a writer of Diaspora, mentions about the socio-cultural condition of Bhutan. As a teenage girl, Tsomo plays funny games with her friends of both sexes which include playing with genital parts of opposite sex. When a young woman becomes pregnant she has to announce it and has to undergo purification ceremony called *tshangma*, for a pregnancy was seen 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. Until the woman performs the ceremony, she is considered accountable for all severe weather conditions, illness and deaths. There is a mention of legendary couple King Gesar of Ling and his queen Sheycham Drolma. Tsomo's friends Chimme and Wangmo undergo this ritual when they became pregnant. Tsomo wishes her to be never the part of this ritual. Tsomo regrets at one stage for not getting started her menstruation till the age of fifteen and feels that it is because of her Karma that she may be deprived of having a baby in future. It was ritual in Bhutan to take hot water bath as often as possible for a woman, after delivery.

Tsomo's growth through journey

The protagonist depicts the philosophy of life at the beginning in prologue while talking with Lham Yeshe. Tsomo longs for spiritual knowledge but she says: "...Most of us hope that we can spend our days in prayer and meditation, but it is not easy to detach ourselves from materialism."(xi) Kunzeng, as a writer of Diaspora from Bhutan put forward the harsh realities to the reader that the impact of modern temptation for materialistic pleasures has not spared even in a small developing country like Bhutan. Tsomo's life is centered around the *chorten* i.e. a Tibetan Buddhist Shrine. Although Tsomo puts on the clothes of nun, she cannot get away from all the weaknesses of the human mind and body.

As per Buddhist tradition, Tsomo wishes to go to Trongsa to offer butter lamps on her mother's death anniversary and to search her brother who has become Buddhist priest. During her travel to Kilimpong she meets Wangchen and becomes pregnant with his child. He agrees to be her kid's father and the purification ceremony has been conducted. But the upheavals in her life disturb her. She wants to be a good wife and a caring sister of her siblings. But she has a miscarriage and baby dies. Later on Wangchen marries Kesang, the sister of Tsomo. The struggle in the life of Tsomo starts from here. After miscarriage, she has

a problem in her belly which becomes swollen and she suffers physical pain from it. She reaches Thimpu. She decides to go to Phuentsoling, a border near India from where she could reach Kalimpong, via Siliguri, in India, the country where Lord Buddha was born. She wants to forget her dreadful past and dreams that Kalimpong will give her a new life- A life of religion and prayer, a life of peace and forgetfulness. She wants to forget all that she had left behind. From Siliguri, with Dechen Choki, she reaches Kalimpong. She reaches the village Chomo Basti where many Bhutanese and Nepali people live with Indians. She meets her brother Nidip Tshering who has become a *gomchen*. Her conversation with him describes the realities of life for a person who migrates to a foreign place. Nidup says:

“When I left home I thought I could break away from all attachments, from my parents, my brothers, sisters, my village, my country, and everything. I wanted to become a celibate monk and be completely free. But you know something? Even if we be free ourselves from all mental attachments, I think we can never be free of our attachments through our bodies. Within the very being in me there is a yearning that calls for family. Families are connected through blood and bones and I think there is a need to connect. If this connection is denied then there is a restless anxiety that haunts you all the time. It is like unfinished task....The more I tried not to think of the family, the more lucid your images became. But my master said I will be able to overcome this attachment too. I am planning to go home and meet everybody once.” (144)

The transformation in the protagonist comes through her search for salvation. Her brother Nidup says: “It is all our karma. Our lives are like the lamp on altar. We are born and we live for a while like lamp. Life is transient.”(145)

Dechen Choki marries Tenzing and goes off to live with him in town and later on top at Gangtok in Sikkim. Tsomo gets support from Pema Buti and plans to go Dorjiten (It is Bodhgaya to which Tibetians and Bhtanese say Dorjiten.) on a pilgrimage. By train from Siliguri, she reaches with her companions at Bodhgaya, the place where Buddha had attained *nirvana*. She visits Mahabodhi Temple and finds monks and nuns sat in meditation under the Bodhi tree. She feels lucky and it is only because of her good Karma that she could visit this holy place. She lits butter lamps and prayed there with other pilgrims. She tries to earn by weaving Bhutanese cloths. She gets marriage offer from Lhatu. With the help from the Rinpole she arrives at Ladakhi monk in Delhi. She gets acquainted with American and other

foreigners in Delhi and starts weaving for her livelihood. In the later part she realized that suffering knows no boundaries and she forgot her own pain. She joins as a nun and goes to Thimpu. She realizes that it is not easy to live like enlightened Buddhas if we have the bodies and minds of human beings. A whole lifetime's endeavor is not enough to do that. Tsomo thinks and asks herself: "Who was she to expound on human weakness or the virtues and religion?"(311)

Conclusion

As Avtar Brah writes, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the Diasporic imagination(Brah 192).The Diaspora novelist narrates the incident of life of a woman who develops from an ordinary traditional, illiterate woman to a woman who experiences life through journey for the spiritual quest and realizes that life is no easy anywhere. She attains wisdom at the end that it is circle of karma that we all have to endure. Tsomo has different phases in her life, viz. anxious child grown up under patriarchy, passionate young woman and voyager for the answer of spiritual quest; lead her to the knowledge of self-the ultimate truth of life in every human being that life is to suffer and it is not easy just by leaving a place or just to whim to live like Buddha.

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