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Cultural Consciousness and Narrative Representation in *The Circle of Karma*

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Abstract:

Kunzang Choden's novel The Circle of Karma presents a substantial portrayal of Bhutanese culture by addressing memory, tradition, and gendered circumstances. This research paper examines the novel through the lens of cultural consciousness and narrative representation, exploring how The Circle of Karma functions as a literary account and a cultural repository of Bhutanese existence. The protagonist Tsomo's expedition demonstrates the collective experiences, beliefs, customs, and social order of Bhutanese culture. Choden's narrative serve as a vehicle to safeguard oral traditions and expressing the collective experiences of women marginalized by prevailing historical and cultural discourses. Choden argues that memory and the act of retelling are strategies of securing a legacy. She can record the history of Bhutan and its cultural practices in a unique and intensely personal way by blending her beliefs with those of the community. The protagonist's journey here is analogous to the experiences of women who negotiate between individual desires and cultural obligations. Going beyond the narrative representation, the novel interrogates the patriarchal values embedded in Bhutanese society. Through depictions of cultural practices, the novel spotlights the discrimination faced by lower-class woman across Bhutanese society as a whole. The customs, Tsomo's defiance of them, and the gender discrimination are portrayed as conventional element. In the process, it becomes a form of reclamation and redefinition of Tsomo's cultural identity. The Circle of Karma challenges the patrilineal structures ingrained in traditional culture and reconstructs Bhutanese cultural identity by fusing memories with shared experiences. Ultimately, this study contends that Choden's narrative not only documents social facts and cultural practices but also establishes a forum for self-representation, resistance, and cultural preservation in the contemporary Bhutanese literature.

Keywords: Cultural Consciousness, Narrative Representation, Identity, Gender and Tradition, Collective Memory.

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INTRODUCTION:

In her debut novel, *The Circle of Karma*, Kunzang Choden, recognized as Bhutan's first female English novelist, explore the rigid and intense religious practices of the Himalayan nation. Choden, born into a traditional feudal household in Bhutan, witnessed firsthand the difficult and neglected lives of the country's lower-class women. The protagonist of the novel, Tsomo, represents every woman in Bhutanese culture. The book explores the inner spiritual life of Bhutan. From custom to modernity, personal identity within society, a submissive, uneducated woman transformed into an educated nun, Tsomo illuminates the ignorant individuals of the Himalaya.

The novel limns the ordinary life of the people of Bhutan in the wake of industrialization in the mid-20th century through Tsomo, the first daughter of a family of twelve in Wangleng, a tiny hamlet in Bhutan. The novel interprets the hardship of Tsomo from the moment she was born as an emaciated, wrinkled child till her seventies, when she reaches sublimity. Her father is a gomchen, a lay monk whose perspectives are significantly shaped by the Buddhist philosophy of predestination of karma, who marries a girl of Tsomo's age within a year

after the death of his wife during childbirth. The narrative illustrates the devoutness of people, their conviction, myths, practices, and the man-woman relationship. Through clothing, cuisine, religion, and marriage connections, it also highlights various migrations, spaces, locales, and cultures.

Gender inequality is one of the issues in the region of Butan. The society is dominated by males. Everything is measured from the male perspective. Although education is biased, women are not regarded as educated. The protagonist Tsomo is constrained by the limitations set by the gender system. As a girl, she is prohibited from reading scripture, just as she is not permitted to travel. Her responsibility as an eldest daughter is to assist her mother in the home and acquire housekeeping skills. Tsomo masters the craft of weaving, a traditional skill handed down from mother to daughter in the Bhutanese village.

Bhutanese culture has a primitive essence. Although culture can be restrictive, the courtship and marriage traditions are clearly much more liberal than those found in mainstream European and Asian countries. Examples from Tsomo's life can be used as a reference. Tsomo's knee birthmark, "Kye

Tag Khorlo,” (Choden 02) along with her birth in the “monkey year,” (Choden 02) signifies her wandering soul and destined journey as foretold by a seer. Her mother wonders, where can an unsettled girl journey? When Tsomo inquires of her mother, “What is the farthest I can go, Mother?” She ponders her inquiry and answers, “Where might a girl journey to...maybe all the way to Tibet and even to India?” (Choden 02) Tsomo's adventure starts shortly after her mother's passing. The death is due to a stillborn infant. She chooses to visit *Trongsa*—a sacred pilgrimage—to light a butter lamp on the first anniversary of her mother's passing. During her travels, she encounters Wangchen, a young married man, and develops feelings for him.

She came back to her village carrying a baby in her belly. Additionally, he returns to her and asserts his role as a father in “ceremony of purification.” (Choden 82) Tsomo gave birth to a baby that wasn't breathing; afterward, she developed a permanently distended abdomen. Wangchen misled her regarding her attractive and youthful sister, Kesang. In this moment, Tsomo understood that she was facing the results of her karma; she had taken Wangchen from his spouse and was aware that her own sister had done likewise with her. Thus, she neither objects

nor voices her grievances and chooses to eliminate this mental anguish, departing from her home and village. This exit signifies the start of a succession of travels and stays from Thimphu to Kalimpong, Tibet, India, Nepal, and back to Thimphu. She possesses self-respect, despite enduring many hardships on her journey without any aid or finances, yet she believes, “She will return home only if she can proclaim, ‘see what I built of my life by myself.’” (Choden 164)

The Circle of Karma explores the notion of karma in Bhutanese culture. Life events such as birth, death, and all occurrences in the lives of the Bhutanese characters in the novel are linked to karma. It serves as a tool to oppress women, as there is a belief that giving birth to females is less valuable than giving birth to males. The Bhutanese think that being born as a woman is due to the female not having gathered enough good deeds in her past life. “If only she had been born male, but she lacked the virtue to be born as one.” (Choden 22)

In contrast to this view, Tsomo's father shares the tale of Machig Lhapdrön, a miraculous figure and revered Tibetan saint known for making the practice of *chod* widely recognized. The ritual involves presenting one's body to nourish all

imaginable forms of existence and fulfill every type of longing. A woman initiates this religious ritual, but it is carried out by men. In religious narratives, women offer all imaginable sacrifices. However, they are distanced from religion and its rituals. Tsomo expresses, “Currently, the men carry out this ritual as though they are the sole practitioners of it, claiming that women ought to learn how to be good women.” (Choden 22)

Kunzang documents the customs of matrimony in Bhutan. Marriage as a festivity is meant for the affluent and aristocratic individuals. The common people never formally celebrate marriage. In particular, in rural western Bhutan, relationships between men and women revolve around courting. This romance starts privately and evolves openly. It also validates having physical relation before marriage. In addition, the male claims to be the child's father when a girl gets pregnant, and they are eventually acknowledged as husband and wife through the "Tshangm" ceremony. The author gradually explains how a girl who is expecting a child is humiliated when her partner doesn't acknowledge the child. The Bhutanese blame the girl's unclean pregnancy. Any natural disaster that strikes the village is attributed to these pregnant girls. These pregnant girls are held

responsible by the Bhutanese for the disturbance of the natural world. According to Tsomo, a woman had to announce her pregnancy and go through a purification process called "tshangma," since pregnancy was regarded as impure until it was purified. Despite her child's father's encouragement and love, she nevertheless experienced a very trying time. A woman would be held accountable for any natural calamities that occurred in the village that year if she neglected to perform tshangma.

The local gods and birth deities are offended by impure conceptions. Until the woman finished the ceremony, she was in charge of all severe weather, diseases, and human and even animal deaths. Every time there was an unusual hailstorm, people immediately suspected a pregnant female. Tsomo frequently listened to the denunciation, ‘A girl who is expecting must have ventured to the mountains and desecrated the holy site.’ (Choden 36-37)

In *The Circle of Karma*, women's experiences reflect the constraints created by their biological conditions and the rigid boundaries established by society. In Bhutan, traditions allow the man to go unpunished, while the woman faces blame for engaging in sexual activities. Kunzang highlights the

humiliation faced by unpurified pregnant women in society when the father of the child fails to acknowledge it. In other terms, a successful marriage arises from the sexual relationship between a man and a woman when the man acknowledges the unborn baby within the woman. However, if he fails to take responsibility, the woman must endure the consequences, and the whole community ridicules the girl, while the man who caused her pregnancy faces no blame or repercussions. The writer illustrates how Chimme experiences humiliation disguised as cultural expression. She wears the traditional white scarf, the khoda, around her neck. Beside her, on a different mat, lies a figure of a man sculpted from dough. Chimme is four months along in her pregnancy, and the father of her baby is hesitant to marry her. Chimme's mother and friends pleaded with her to employ someone to accompany her during the purification ceremony, but she declined. "Consider this: if the biological father is so unreliable that he would reject his own child, why should I further debase myself by going through the effort of finding someone to stand in for him?"

"However, having a real person is preferable to a dough figure, and you can definitely find one of the village boys to do it for a modest

payment." It is our tradition. "Why not pursue it?" her mother inquired, wishing that Chimme would reconsider her decision. A dough figure is sufficient. This is likewise our tradition. 'Isn't that what you did while you were expecting me, mother?' (Choden 38-39)

The narrative serves as repository of shared memory. Memory plays a crucial role in Tsomo's journey. The passing of her mother starts a journey of recollection that influences the whole story. The narrator reflects, "After her mother died, Tsomo stepped into a realm defined by memory and quiet" (Choden 5).

The narrative archive encompasses food preparation, weaving techniques, agricultural activities, and religious rituals. Choden's employment of language also aids in narrative depiction. In the article "Coming Full Circle," Avijit Ghosh notes that Choden's work maintains the indigenous culture of Bhutan via language and memory (Ghosh). She blends Bhutanese language, phrases, and cultural allusions into the English storytelling. This combination of languages enables the novel to maintain its cultural integrity while appealing to a global audience. Employing local language helps preserve indigenous identity.

In several aspects, the novel resembles an oral account. Tsomo's voice reflects the essence of shared female experiences. Her story mirrors the experiences of numerous Bhutanese women whose lives are influenced by work, sacrifice, and societal norms. Choden notes that "women bore the weights of both survival and tradition" (Choden 66).

The Circle of Karma offers a practical perspective on Bhutan. Tsomo's path and her realization of spiritual reality uncover the obstacles and triumphs of genuine joy. During her journey, she met various individuals, including Dechen Choki. Both have faced considerable challenges in their history, especially gender-based and sexual harassment, along with various other problems. Gradually, they foster a sense of camaraderie. They shared tales about their life journeys. Dechen Choki expresses, "Our narratives are alike and yet distinctly different." All that transpired was due to our identity as women. You cared for a man and endured pain. "I despised the man and endured." (Choden 109) Nevertheless, Dechen Choki swiftly weds Tenzing, Pema Buti's son. Choki's departure left Tsomo feeling lonely. Consequently, she embarks on a pilgrimage and, during her journey, gets a marriage offer from Lhatu. Nevertheless, he also deceived her. Nonetheless, she comes

across Lama Rinpoche, and disheartened by existence, she adopts a spiritual journey. The compassionate Riponche arrives at a crucial point in her life. She recognized this and expressed, "My Lama, my Lama, I seek refuge in you." (Choden 225) Yet, the irony is that merely donning a nun's clothing and shaving one's head does not genuinely make one a nun. She asks, "How can someone abruptly cease to be themselves and transform into a different person? "Is this even feasible?" (Choden 290). She encounters many challenges, yet has to look after herself. Her desires are not quiet; they are awakening her former thoughts and habits.

The narrative depicts her overcoming obstacles, including her father's conservative thinking, a troubled marriage, and social stereotypes. These obstacles are not just obstacles but also the engines of her growth and change. Tsomo's metamorphosis into a peaceful nun at the end is her triumph over these obstacles. That she has secured a position as a teacher in the religious field is evidence of her contentment and of a wider affirmation of her independence and intellectual ability. Choden's story presents Tsomo as a lively personality who chooses her own path, contrasting her with a passive character who accepts theirs. Tsomo's

development is characterized by her Buddhist practice, which offers her spiritual and intellectual resources to change her place in society.

The novel's feminist theme is emphasized by her devotion to Buddhism and eventual acceptance as a revered nun, which shows that spiritual and intellectual growth can result in women's empowerment and self-discovery. The narrative discusses Tsomo's transformation and its consequences for society. By depicting Tsomo as a woman who breaks free from societal constraints, Choden emphasizes the possibility for women to defy and rise above traditional roles. Tsomo's experience is part of a larger trend to see and value women's contributions outside of traditional standards. Her last performance, as represented by the "sound of mantras from the faithful, the clicking prayers, and the spinning of the handheld prayer wheels" (Choden 299), exemplifies her convergence of self-development and spiritual contentment.

Conclusion:

Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* is an engaging work that delves into the idea of karma and stimulates thoughts about cultural awareness, narrative devices, and their effects on identities. *The Circle of Karma*

draws on Tsomo's experiences, and Choden employs this narrative to build a background where Bhutanese culture is recalled, explored, and reimagined. It is a narrative and a commentary on the treatment of women, and a collection of cultural memories.

Choden manifests the importance of storytelling in preserving traditions and the collective experiences of a community. She examines rituals and stories, religious practices and everyday routine, making *The Circle of Karma* a rich source of memories. Tsomos' struggles are reminiscent of countless women who are trying to balance their desires with cultural standards. Her story is a testament to her strength, determination, and resistance to the limits that attempt to confine her.

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