

The Circle of Karma

The Circle of Karma, by Kunzang Choden, Zubaan Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, vii+316. ISBN: 9788186706794

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Set in approximately, 1950s' and 1960s Bhutan, *The Circle of Karma* has the unique distinction of being the first English novel to be published in Bhutan by a woman. The novel's publication positioned Bhutan in a unique situation where, contrary to more British and Western literary and canonical traditions, there does not seem to be a lack of representation of female writers. The publication of *The Circle of Karma* inspired many other female writers to pen down stories. Whereas in the west, the discourse has centered on the dearth of female writers and female characters, Bhutan's English literary scene began with a female novelist writing about a novel that focused on a female, Tsomo, as the main character.

The Circle of Karma traces Tsomo's story from being a child in Tang Valley, Bumthang to her old age in Thimphu. The novel is written and narrated using a simple third person point of view, in a linear and chronological order and highlights the various events and experiences that Tsomo goes through, throughout her life.

Though the form may not be experimental, the central theme that is at the crux of the story and i.e. her journey and her self-development shows the importance of individuality and self-reflection as a way to always improve oneself. The novel moves from giving a general glimpse of Bhutan's cultural and social aspects, told through a child's (Tsomo's) perspective at the beginning to the more specific events of Tsomo's life and journey.

Tsomo grows up in a "tax-paying" household in Tang Valley along with several siblings and her mother and father, who is a *gomchen*. Through her family, she internalizes several gender roles (doing household chores, gardening, and weaving, to

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name a few) and the oft repeated myths associated with female gender, namely that of female suffering and endurance. From her father, she learns the cruel truth that girls, because of their gender, are not supposed to get educated and learn to read and write and despite being a *gomchen*, her father never teaches her that skill, sticking to the belief that a religious education is meant solely for boys.

As Tsomo grows older, being the eldest, she takes in more responsibility around the house and her mother makes sure to teach her the various skills, be it weaving or cleaning, or other household chores. After several tragedies befall on her and her family and after the severe blow of losing both her baby with “no baby breath” as well as her husband, Wangchen, because of his affair with her younger sister, Kesang, Tsomo, decides to run away from her childhood home to free herself from the restrictive ideas of belonging and relationships. This assertive decision, which is the major turning point of the story, makes the foreshadowing at the beginning of the novel associated with her *key tag khorlo* (birth mark), being on the knee and how she would always be restless and wanting to travel, come true. This turning point also places her on a path of several obstacles and ordeals, but in turn those very ordeals also give her the space and independence to grow and stand on her own two feet.

After running away, she travels to Thimphu to meet her brother but after realising that he had moved further away to Kalimpong, she becomes a road construction worker, despite her swollen belly, which had not healed since she had her still born baby. She meets many more women sharing the same dreams and struggles. She finds a new sister in another fellow worker, Dechen Choki. Both even travel to Kalimpong in search for Tsomo’s brother. The reconstruction of the Thimphu *Dzong* and the construction of the roads provide a good idea about the setting, which is around the time when Bhutan had chosen the path to modernization and was opening up to the world, slowly but surely.

After a chance encounter with her brother in Kalimpong, she lives with him and is able to find support and solace in his company. She sustains herself through Dechen Choki’s weaving skills and her gardening, the products of which they consume and even sell. Slowly, she becomes accepted by the community and gets involved in a group going for a pilgrimage to Dorjiten aka Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India. This group then goes on several other related pilgrimages to Nepal and Tso Pema. All these visits further broaden Tsomo’s way of thinking, enrich her experiences, and give her an exposure to several other cultures and peoples. But this also forces her to face a burning conflict that has been consuming her since she ran away: whether to have a normal life (with a husband and children) and be a good wife and a good woman as her parents had taught her or

to pursue a life of religion. Being still young, she craved for male attention. Yet, she was also driven to go on these pilgrimages by her desire to pursue religion.

While at Tso Pema, in Himachal Pradesh, she meets Lhatu (through a suspicious matchmaker, Ap Thinley) and by a strange coincidence, they end up living together and carrying out the roles of husband and wife. Tsomo soon immerses herself in being resourceful and trying to make ends meet through weaving, after her surgery to remove her swollen belly was successful.

This other major turning point in Tsomo's life, which was meeting Lhatu, takes her away from Kalimpong and from her religious desires. But if they were fated to meet because of their *karma*, they were also fated to separate because of their karmic connection. Their marriage eventually falls apart when Lhatu cheats on Tsomo and Tsomo finds out about it. In her anger, when she is about to mutilate Lhatu's mistress, she learns an important truth about the patriarchal society and how it has taught women to always have hate and suspicion towards each other and not to hold the men accountable. She realizes that she needs to relearn everything that society has taught her about gender roles. This portrayal of an epiphany and self-realization on Tsomo's part is the crux of the novel.

Although Lhatu's loss is not something that Tsomo could easily comprehend, she still had her own determination and support from others to rely on to help her get through this trying phase. Furthermore, she was finally free to also pursue her desire to practice religion whole heartedly, now that she was no longer tied down by any filial bonds. Rinpoche also blessed her and in a ceremony marked by simplicity, he ordained her as a nun.

After that blessing, there was no looking back for Tsomo and she took on the role of a nun by shaving her head and donning a simple *gho* that would be suitable for a nun. Finally, now at the far end of her life, Tsomo returned to Bhutan, to Thimphu and practiced religion while circumambulating the Memorial Chorten.

The novel begins and ends with Lham Yeshe, Tsomo's friend, commenting about Tsomo in the present and her friendship with her. The prologue begins in the present with Lham Yeshe meeting Tsomo, who is now seventy years old, after a long time and asking her to share about her life. The novel ends with an epilogue in which Lham Yeshe is reminiscing about Tsomo, about how she had met her five years ago, and about how she had then decided to go to a pilgrimage to Siliguri to meet the Dalai Lama. Now at the end, she looks for Tsomo in and around the Memorial Chorten but she only feels her strong presence. The novel thus ends on an ambiguous note where we do not know about what happened to Tsomo. The story is thus framed by Tsomo narrating about

her life to her friend, Lham Yeshi and perhaps the entire novel is the narration that Lham Yeshi seems to be reminiscing about in the epilogue.

By tracing Tsomo's growth from childhood to adulthood and finally old age, *The Circle of Karma*, qualifies as a female *bildungsroman* as it traces both Tsomo's physical and psychological growth and journey. The story thus highlights the manner in which girls experience the world and how societal and parental ideas shape one's early notions about gender. One example being the *tshangma* ceremony that her friend, Chimme, had to endure and how that taught Tsomo about shame and other disturbing yet revered female qualities of suffering, endurance and resignation to one's gender's fate.

In doing so, the novel throws light on deeply ingrained gender roles that both men and women are expected to follow. It focuses on how one's gender shapes one's identity. Yet in making Tsomo, someone who has chosen to not be defined by relationships that burden a women's identity, the author has also deftly both questioned those gender roles as well as depicted the conflict that Tsomo faces in wanting to fit in to society's expectations of a woman, yet trying to carve her own identity at the same time.

The novel also focuses on female friendships and female solidarity and how women can support each other in times of need and deed, which is the exact opposite of the internalization of the predominant idea about women being enemies to each other. We see how Tsomo connects with her fellow road construction workers and partakes in their dreams and struggles. We see how Pema Buti in Kalimpong helps Tsomo to set up and sustain herself in her house with dignity. Later on, we see how it was Tsomo's circle of friends in Kalimpong that gave her some distraction from Lhatu's deceptive behavior. It was also her friends and neighbours who supported her when she finally left Lhatu. The novel thus showcases the strength hidden in female bonding.

The other important themes are the pursuit of religion and the idea of *karma*; the latter being reflected in the title of the novel. The concept of *karma* permeates the story; we see it in everyone's thoughts and how this religious concept is used to justify one's fortunes or misfortunes. But the idea of *karma* as a journey is what stands out as Tsomo's life comes to full circle at the end of the novel, where she is also able to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a religious person and is able to come back to Bhutan as well as get a chance to meet her family members, towards whom she holds no grudges anymore, even Wangchen and Kesang. Her action of letting go of the past shows both her self-growth, as she is unwilling to remain a slave to the past, and how she successfully takes up a more spiritual mindset and fulfills her role as a religious practitioner.

Thus more than the religious overtones, the novel's use of several nuanced interpretations of travel as a motif should be commended - be it in the *key tag khorlo* or

in Tsomo's actual physical journey, or her spiritual and mental journey, or be it the abstract concept of *karma* itself which travels with you in the present and in the afterlife, walking together as you wander on the path of *karma*'s circle.