

The Overlooked Potentialities of Women through the Eyes of Tsomo

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***Abstract:** Ever since the beginning of the Cold War, South Asia has been a conflict prone region with modest movements towards co-operation. Along with the larger states as India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the smaller states as Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan get included. The nature and implication of the word conflict varies. The scars left by the different conflicts are worked upon, constructed and recreated by different writers in different manners. One of the most celebrated books that can be taken into account is Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* (2005). It's the first English novel by a woman from Bhutan and the protagonist of the story is Tsomo, an uneducated woman whose life goes through turmoil and hardship. This paper is an attempt to seek the ways in which a woman struggles for survival and peace under the layers of patriarchy. Tsomo's exploration of the self makes her grow as a person and a woman and the ultimate company she had was religion.*

***Key Words:** Woman, Struggle, Survival, Patriarchy, Religion*

Women and their position has always been in conflict and irrespective of the situation or condition, a woman in one way or the other has always been a sufferer. Conflict in South Asian nations has its impressions on the womenfolk as well. The novel *The Circle of Karma* follows the life of Tsomo, a poor, illiterate Bhutanese woman. Born in a small village, she quickly learns that her life will be hard. The men in her life constantly take advantage or neglect her, such as her father's refusal to teach her to read, or her husband's abandonment of her for her sister. But Tsomo finds her strength to leave her village and embark on an itinerant life of hard labour, poverty, failed relationships and rootlessness, all the while clinging on to her religion as a source of solace.

Written by a woman about a woman, the perspective of the book is somewhat feminist. Being feminist is to support the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the

sexes. Women are portrayed as victims since time immemorial. As in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay *Under Western Eyes*, the problems are generalised in spite of the differences in caste, creed, religion or place. In this novel too Kunzang Choden portrays how survival is hard for a woman, especially when their potentialities are not realized and recognized. But on the different edge and a positive side, the protagonist's heart aims at higher achievements even after several betrayals and she achieves what she deserves and desires..As rightly remarked by *The Hindu*:

"In a nation where the home is the only secure resort for a woman, here is one who travels around many parts of the world confronting and defying all dangers but finally settling down to a life of peace and tranquillity."

The novel flows easily with a solid and static representation of Tsomo's experiences. The events unravel slowly a bit like life itself. The power of the book lies not only in its revolutionary nature but also in its attempt to introduce the rest of the world to the ritual and rural life of twentieth century Bhutan. As a teenager, Tsomo fell in love with another woman's husband, named and is soon pregnant, leading to much family strife. She flees, and finds work pounding stones to pave the first roads laid across Bhutan. Though years and dates aren't specified in the book, these events place the section of the story a few years after the Chinese suppression in Tibet.

"Tsomo is the third child and the first daughter among the twelve children that Mother has borne."(1) Her childhood seemed to be completely different from the other children. She learned all the household chores at a very tender age. Being the 'eldest daughter' she was expected to take care of her siblings and apart from that be a helper of her Mother who continued to bear children and finally gave up on her thirteenth. Life was not easy for Tsomo who was inspired and influenced by Mother at every step. Mother married Father as "she liked the idea of being the wife of a gomchen."(6) But she remained unconscious of the situations that were to follow. Father hardly had any time for the family and all the responsibilities fell upon Mother which she carried out without any complain as Mother preached: "You must never say anything against your father"(9) Tsomo had an urge to learn the religious scriptures: "She longs to be educated, to learn to read and write and chant those beautiful prayers..."(20)

As the Psychoanalytic theory puts forward, "Desires remain as lack". Father straightforwardly rejected the idea with the opinion that she being a woman needs to be engrossed in household chores like cooking and weaving. No one dared to question Father and whatever he said was final. This is how a male figure gets portrayed. Gradually an opinion grew in Tsomo's mind that it was curse being a girl and if only she had been born a boy. Tsomo's real tough times started when Mother died and all the responsibilities of looking after the house and her siblings and apart from that the field works fell upon her. Father brought in a new mother for the children as according to him: "There must be a woman to welcome, entertain and see off guests and see to the daily affairs of the house. A house should not feel like a cold wave."

If we try to concentrate on the last line that Father said and interpret it we find that even though male dominance seems to be overpowering everywhere a woman is the one who can alter a house into a home. However, the loss of Mother was irreparable. Tsomo spent sleepless nights until she decided to go to Trongsa and light butter lamps for Mother's first death anniversary. This probably was the first ever decision made by her and it brought about some amount of surprise for Father as Tsomo proposed to go alone though he agreed. This journey unfolds a different chapter in Tsomo's life where she had to go through another phase of patriarchal dominance, besides her father. She came across Wangchen who already had a family back at home but woos Tsomo for marriage. Tsomo embraced betrayal at the end when Wangchen began a live-in-relationship with her younger sister Kesang and abandoned Tsomo, with a swollen belly or an unknown disease after her child with Wangchen died.

Tsomo's journey to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan began as she no longer could remain a part of that scenario. She got herself engaged in construction works but she continued to aim higher as: "She had dreamed of being a good woman-a good wife and mother with a big family"(102) Tsomo decided to make a little money for her forward journey because of which she continued the hard labour. Her friendship with Dechen Choki, another tormented woman showed up the struggle of woman and their survival once again. Dechen Choki had initially been molested by her step-father and as she came up to begin a new life just like Tsomo, she was raped by her employer. Tsomo could not console her in any other way but just by remarking: "...it's not your fault. Your only problem is being a woman. We cannot change that but we have to stay strong."(121)

Tsomo always had that positivity lingering on her head even though she experienced and observed hardship and turmoil of being a woman. She decided to travel to Phuentsoling for a change of place that might possibly bring a change of mind both for her as well as Dechen Choki. She was unaware of the whereabouts of that place except that it was somewhere further along the road, near the Indian border. She felt free to move about and explore even though she struggled all through. Tsomo travelled all the way from Phuentsoling and dared to cross the border moving up to Kalimpong in search of her brother. She succeeded in meeting him who was serving as a gomchen with Karsang Drakpa Rinpoche. She imagined:

"Kalimpong was the place that was going to give her a new life. A life of religion and prayer. A life of peace and forgetfulness. She wanted to forget all that she had left behind." (130)

As clearly visible till now, Tsomo had tried to view life differently and positively after every fall which made her hopeful. Dechen Choki's life took a different turn with new love and a new family when Tenzing fell in love with her. They got married and settled down in Sikkim leaving Tsomo alone yet again. A final resolution that Tsomo took was to devote herself entirely to religion:

"I want to devote the rest of my life to religion. I have always wanted to learn religion but because of my female body I was denied that privilege...but I want to try and become a simple pilgrim."(145)

The moment Tsomo got the opportunity, nothing could hold her back. Even though she struggled for survival, a ray of hope kept lingering around her.

Tsomo decided all of a sudden to travel to Bodhgaya. On reaching she visited the main pilgrimage sites, lighted butter lamps and prayed. Later on she planned to become a nun. She went up to Rewalsar in Himachal Pradesh where Lhatu, another man became a part of her life. But this relationship too unwrapped betrayal when she learned that he already had a mistress. Tsomo thought: "How could she be cast aside so easily after all these years? She was not like an old shirt that could be easily discarded and forgotten?"(262)

At last Tsomo settled down in Thimphu with a shaved head leaving the life of a nun. She did not want her relatives to bear the financial responsibility for her death because of

which applied for a government stipend and her obligation was to say a certain number of prayers every month for which she received a given sum of money. Thimphu kept growing and laws kept changing which bound Tsomo to change her dwelling. But religion was her ultimate destiny. For Tsomo: "The sound of the mantras on the lips of the devout, the clicking prayers and the whirl of the hand-held prayer wheels was her world ..." (301)

In the epilogue, as mentioned, Tsomo is at the age of seventy five. She had renounced the worldly pleasures and joined Buddhism as a nun. What she could not find with people around her, she found it beside religion. *The Circle of Karma* is a novel depicting the predicament of a woman, who is brought up under patriarchy. Tsomo felt alienated in life as she had been cheated by her own relatives viz., sister and the society in general. Tsomo got help from the immigrants in host land and their attitude was positive, however she struggled through man folk in patriarchy. Though she had many obstacles, she never gave up. Her journeys that started from Thimphu and reached up to India opened up new insights to her life every time, and the best part was her attitude which laid down momentarily but gathered up again altogether to form a new, strong and bold woman. Thus Choden tried to build up a woman who knew every inch of suffering and struggle, from remaining uneducated to being abandoned by her husbands and finally, surviving brutality, poverty, betrayal and abuse at the hands of men, she finds fulfilment through her religious quest; all the efforts being handled by a woman alone.

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