



# The Circle of Karma: A Realistic Approach to Bhutanese Gender, Culture and Religion

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**Abstract**— *The Circle of Karma*, a novel published in India in 2005 by Zubaan Books in collaboration with Penguin Books. It is explicitly a Buddhist novel but one that concentrates on the everyday struggle to apply religion to the protagonist- Tsomo's life. The writing is rich with rich Buddhist imagery but the story firmly grounded in mundane realities of gender and cultural issues, in short an excellent novel about one woman's hard life, set against vivid gender, cultural and religious background. The novel applies the theory of Nemesis in practice. It deals with the importance of Karma/action. There is message that each human being will experience the Consequences of karma whether good or bad, in one or other way, in this or other birth. There is no escape. The novel is a story of Tsomo the central character, a fat girl compelled by her own restless spirit and later by circumstances to leave her family and go on series of endless travels. Hope and tragedy mark her path in equal measure as her story gives a look of microcosm of Bhutanese society. It is informative regarding the cultural, religious and gender issues in Bhutan which is a Buddhist country.

**Keywords**— *Buddhist, Mundane, Nemesis, Circumstances, Culture, Gender, Religion.*

Jagdish S. Joshi has rightly remarked regarding the novel *The Circle of Karma* in one of his articles:

... 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.

(J. S. Joshi. *Search for the Self in The Circle of Karma*)

Gender discrepancy is one of the problems of Butan region. There is male dominated society. Everything is gauged by male point of view. Even the education is biased, female is not considered to be educated. The

protagonist Tsomo is circumscribed restriction imposed by gender system. As a girl she cannot read scripture just as she is not allowed to travel. As an elder daughter her duty is to help her mother in household and learn the skills of housekeeping. Tsomo learns the art of weaving which is the traditional skills that is passed on from mother to daughter in the village of Bhutan. To take the birth of girl is the result of karma or action, there is remark in the novel on the death of Tsomo's siblings, "It was their karma or the result of their actions in their previous lives". (TCK). Tsomo's father has great reputation in the community. He is highly educated but he is gender biased. When Tsomo asks him to teach her, he replies sternly, "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." (*The Circle of Karma*). Bhutan is a patriarchal country. The sense of gender is inherent in everyday life of

Bhutanese society. It is well expressed in statement during *Chod* rituals :

“I am only a woman’. Yes we are women, Tsomo, we are different We must be less ambitious and more subdued. We are not like men.”

(TCK)

Butanese culture is primitive in nature. Despite the restrictive nature of culture the tradition of courtship and marriage system are obviously far more liberal than in mainstream European and Asian countries. Instances from Tsomo’s life can be taken for reference. The birthmark on Tsomo’s knee “*Kye Tag Khorlo*” and her birth “*monkey year*” are the indication of her restless spirit and travelling fate as marked by a soothsayer. Her mother thinks, where can a girl even restless one travel to? and when Tsomo asks to her mother, “*where is the farthest I can travel to mother*” ? she wonders at her question and replies, “*where can a girl travel to...perhaps as far as Tibbat and as far as India*”. (TCK). Tsomo’s journey begins soon after her mother’s death. The death is the result of still born baby. She decides to go to *Trongsa* – a holy pilgrimage, to light “*butter-lamp*” on her mother’s first death anniversary. In her journey meets *Wangchen*, a young married man and falls in love

with him. She returns to her village with a baby in womb. Further he returns to her and claimed his fatherhood in “*purification ceremony*”. Tsomo delivered a baby without breath after that she got a permanent swollen belly. Wangchen deceived her for beautiful and young sister *Kesang*. Here, Tsomo realized that she is suffering the consequences of her Karma, she too snatched Wangchen to his wife and know her own sister did the same with her. So she neither protests nor complains and decides to get rid off this mental suffering and leaves her home and village. This departure makes the beginning of series of journeys and sojourns from Thimphu to Kalimpong, Tibet, India, Nepal then Thimphu again. She has self-respect, though she suffers a lot in her journey without any support and money, but still she thinks, “*She would go home only she could say look what I made of my life all on my own*”.

The novel The Circle of Karma gives a realistic outlook of Bhutnese region. Tsomo’s journey and her realization of spiritual life unfolds difficulties and accomplishments of true happiness. During her journey she met a number of persons,

*Dechen Choki* is one of them. Both have suffered a lot in there gone days, specially gendered and sexual harassment is few of many. Gradually they develop sense of

sisterhood/sorority. They shared their life’s incidents with each other. But soon

*Dechen Choki* gets married to Tenzing, son of Pema Buti. Choki’s departure made Tsomo lonely. So she leaves for pilgrimage and in her way got a marriage proposal by *Lhatu*. But he too deceived her. Anyway she reaches in the touch of *Lama Riponche* and due to disillusionment from life she turns to spiritual life. The benevolent Riponche makes a turning point in her life. She realized it and says, “*my Lama, my Lama, I take refuge in you*”. (TCK). But the irony of the life is that only bearing the clothes of nun and shaving head do not make one nun. She questions, “*how does one suddenly stop being the person you are and become a new person?*” (TCK). She has many problems yet have to live by her own. Her desires are not mute, they were evoking her old thought and habits:

Her old thoughts and habits clung to her. She had to deliberately stop herself from going to the cinema. It was difficult for her to pass by and not glance at film posters advertising films. Even a quick sideway glance was enough for her to immediately recognize the Kayta and Keyti, and the goonda, in the movies and she sat in prayer in front of her alter, their images competed with the image of her teacher. (The Circle of Karma)

In short, we see that Tsomo’s personality evolves through three stages set forth by Elaine Showalter as imitation, protest and self-discovery. Prof. V.P. Singh has rightly remarked:

What is true in literary terms according to Showalter is equally true to the Tsomo’s life. She conforms to the mores of society obligatory upon women by trying to adjust to an unjust marriage. She walks out of the marriage in silent in silent protest and grows gradually to discover herself through her subsequent experiences of which the most significant is her pursuit of spiritual life.

At the last stage Tsomo becomes pure devotee in a chorten and moves towards spiritual life that brings salvation. She says for herself, “*she is everywhere; she is there as if she is meant to be there*”.

Thus, we notice that in the novel, The Circle of Karma, Kunzang Choden sketches a realistic portrait of gender, culture and religion covering Tsomo’s journey and sojourns through Thimphu, Kalimpong, Dorjiten (Bodhyagaya), Kathmandu, Dehradun, Delhi, and finally Thimphu again that literally completes a circle where she imitates, protest and discovered her true goal that is spiritual achievement.

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