

Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Kunzan Choden's *The Circle of Karma*

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Abstract

Kunzan Choden in *The Circle of Karma* portrays the daily activities of the household. The relationship between mother–daughter, sister-sister, and woman-woman, how each like the other knows the truth yet fails to understand one another. The circle covers the life of Tsomo who wishes to study religion and become a nun. Caught in the materialistic world she endures the sufferings she faces which she calls her Karma. She worries of what her next birth would be like if she could not gather any merit in this birth. When it comes to gender, she portrays the different attitudes of society based on gender. The Postmodern world has provided arena for women to present their views, and thus Kunzan Choden outshines to become the first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English with the publication of her first novel *The Circle of Karma* in 2005. The novel is rich in detailed descriptions of the ritualistic life in Bhutan. The author seeks to expose patriarchal practices and its effect on women. The readers travel to Nepal and India along with the protagonist Tsomo, who is led to new places by circumstances acquiring new experiences across cultural differences.

Keywords: Gender, marginalization, religion, karma.

Literature serves as a map of changes mainly for women. They have played a momentous and crucial role in enhancing the quality and quantity of English literature. When we look into Women writers collectively, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation is seen which is different from traditional male preoccupations and roles.

The concept of Feminism is always presented differently from time to time and place to place. Feminism in Literature is essentially concerned with the representation of women in society and their corresponding fluid position. A Woman is considered more as a product of social norms and restrictions are put upon them and often they are restrained to act, sit passively or

live their own way portraying them as an object or merely as a product of nature. The Subjugation of women in a patriarchal social set up varies according to class, caste and race. Feminism actually is a thought process which tries to identify the prejudices against women in a patriarchal set up. These prejudices cover diverse areas such as economy, society and politics. These pre-conceived notions about women have been responsible for their unequal participation in the affairs of the society along with the male counterpart. Liberalization grants women a space for their presence and thereby provides them opportunities to develop multiple identities for themselves. Women from different cultures are evolving new strategies to challenge or subvert dominant patriarchal ideology and to

represent other images of sexuality. As Simone De Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*:

“The *World has always belonged to males, and none of the reasons given for this has ever seemed sufficient. By reviewing prehistoric and ethnographic data in the light of the existentialist philosophy, we can understand how the hierarchy of the sexes came to be. We have already posited that two human categories find themselves face-to-face, each one wants to pose sovereignty over the others: if both hold to this claim equally, a reciprocal relationship is created, either hostile or friendly, but always tense. If one of the two has an advantage over the other, that one prevails and works to maintain the relationship by oppression. It is thus understandable that man might have had the will to dominate woman: but what advantage enabled him to accomplish his will?*” (Beauvoir 1949, 1732).

The first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English, Kunzan Choden is the author of *The Circle of Karma*. The novel was published by Zubaan Books in collaboration with Penguin books. It is explicitly a Buddhist novel but one that concentrates on the everyday struggle of the protagonist, Tsomo's life. The novel is set in the 1950s, with beautiful detailed description of the ritualistic life lived in Bhutan. Kunzan Choden as a woman writer portrays her female characters from the perspective of a woman. The author in the novel seeks to expose patriarchal practices and is concerned with the issue of discrimination and inequality. It tells the story of Tsomo, a young Bhutanese woman, who embarks on the difficult and lonely journey of life. It is from childhood that the issue of gendering is faced and brought up in the Novel. And we come to understand that it is not only the Men folk that discriminate women but

sometimes the women themselves are their own enemies. Women in the novel are expected to do domestic works, care for the family and be obedient to her husband. Whereas Men have the privilege to pursue Education, go out work and command over the family.

Tsomo is the echo of the society and symbolic of the women crushed at the extremity of society. Mary Daly in her book *Gyn/Ecology Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* says that Knowledge is a male defined project, and that patriarchal society has created a lie or deception towards the female which is very much applicable in the society where Tsomo lived. They had lived according to the demands and wishes of the male figure. They were also made to believe and think that they cannot exist without a male figure as their support. We see in the novel the mother was just as hapless as Tsomo woven in the web of deception and belief that a woman is born to serve and be confined in the household.

When Tsomo ask her Mother of the furthest distance that she can travel to, she replied:

“*Where? I don't know. Where can a girl travel to? Her old thoughts are stirred by the childish question. Then, gently, teasing, 'Perhaps as far north as Tibet and as far as South of India'*” (Choden 2005, 2)

Simone Beauvoir in the introduction of her book *The second sex* writes

“*With the advent of Patriarchy, the male resolutely claimed his posterity; the mother had to be granted a role in procreation even though she merely carried and fattened the living seed: the father alone was the creator*” (Beauvoir 1949, 830).

This same patriarchal system is seen in Tsomo's Family. Patriarchy appreciates docility,

passivity and voicelessness in women. While the Father a faithful gomchen, i.e a religious scholar is the head and teaches the son how to read religious text, educates them and teaches his sons to be good gomches, the mother merely advises Tsomo to be a good woman. In the novel it is seen that being born as a male already had the advantage of a better birth while being born as a girl was equal to being in a bad situation. As a Child Tsomo was always interested in being educated and learned but she was only taught the household chores and not religion. She longed to be able to read, write and chant beautiful prayers like the boys, but the response she got was:

“You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a good Wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not need to know how to read and write.” (Choden 2005, 21)

As she cries at her father's response, she looks at her mother for some support but mother only smiles and says nothing.

“Tsomo only sees the same curious expression on her face, a smile that merges into sadness. A smile of resignation and acceptance. Tsomo feels the same spreading on her own face” (Choden 2005, 21).

This makes us realize that the concept of gender inequality is put into our heads at a very young age and thus the discrimination based on gender. Under evaluation of Fminity is the seen through plight of Tsomo's Mother. She defines her identity and finds meaning of her life through her husband and children so much so that she loses her own identity. Though she is described as a brave and strong lady yet she is never really able to complain or stand up against her husband. It is because of the culture of man being treated superior and equivalent to God.

“Tsomo never heard her Mother complain. She was a big strong and brave woman and she did not complain about anything. Sometimes Tsomo though she had strange fixed expression on her face. It was funny expression, a smile that verged on sadness. When she had this expression she would stare into space as if she missed something and Tsomo thought that she would complain if she would.” (Choden 2005, 6).

The mental, physical and emotional consequences of gender discrimination are shattering. The ritual of marriage is an act of hegemony by the men. They feel they have the right over the female body. In the novel, it is seen how Men comes in the middle of the night making promises but when the day breaks they themselves leave and disappear leaving the girls humiliated and shattered. And the worst thing was when the girl gets pregnant, she is forced to announce her pregnancy and organize a purification ceremony called *Tsangma*.

Purification Ceremony must be done to purify the pregnant woman who is thought to be unclean until the purification. When Tsomo's friend Chimme becomes pregnant and the father of the child refused to own the child, She faces the first instance of betrayal but she herself is betrayed when her husband Wangchen leaves her for her much younger Sister. Tsomo's Karmic illness, i.e her protruding belly causes her great inconvenience and misery but also turns out to be an embarrassment and shame as it later becomes the subject of “secret male laugh” (Choden 2005, 160). Tsomo loses her grace and whatever position she had in her family. Her husband abused her mentally, verbally and physically when he began courting kesang (Tsomo's Sister) in her presence which degrades her completely. This makes Tsomo think about the pain and humiliation that Wangchen's first

wife and children would have endured when Wangchen left them and came to her. It was a complete circle of Karma.

Mary Daly considered the foreground of the Patriarchy as objectification, stereotyping, alienation, deception and confusion and hence we see how Tsomo in her childhood till her marriage suffers, she is objectified by her parents and husband undergoes alienation, deception and confusion when her own sister becomes her husband's mistress. She leaves all of these behind to find her life. Mary Wollstoncraft argues in her book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that if a woman is given education it will lead to many good things. It will lead them to make judgment based on rationality than emotions. We see Tsomo taking decisions based on her emotions by being silent towards her sister (another woman) rather than claiming her husband Wangchen back. It was her husband who become unsatisfied with her and turned to another woman. If not her sister it would also have been another woman. However, Tsomo instead of finding out the reason of her husband's betrayal she humbly accepts her defeat.

Ap Thinlay a character in the novel plays sexual politics with Tsomo by making her believe that she was vulnerable without Man's company.

“You are a woman, alone and so far away from home, I am concerned for you. I feel like a parent to you and I feel I have to advise you. You should have a husband. Gomchen Lhathu is a good man and he is quite well educated too. I must tell you his parentage is clean, tax payers on both of his parents' sides, like yourself” (Daly 1978, 196).

Choden portrays Tsomo who submissively consents patriarchy as the mandate of their life and suffers from it. Apparently she was not so amused in making

Lhathu a part of her life, but as she was drilled and filled with the concept of respect for Man, she started caring for Lhathu, and lives with the deception that Lhathu loves her, and even though he humiliates and deceives her in many ways she is unable to stand up for herself as she is bound by chains of her belief that women are inferior to man and must always remain submissive. In the latter part of the story when Tsomo senses that Lhathu is cheating on her, she follows him to Phuntsholing and sees him with a young pregnant girl. Feeling helpless she decides to let Lhathu go. Tsomo is actually “not fighting with matter but life” (Beauvoir 1949, 725) Tsomo took on the blame silently.

“Women internalized their problems and grief and believed that they were all at fault. Women were the thieves, stealing husbands for each other, living in suspicion and in hate. We had it all wrong. We had to rethink our roles and obligations, our obligations to ourselves and to each other” (Beauvoir 1949, 270).

Both Men in Tsomo's life are the personifications of a misogynist society which claims rightful possession over the female body and soul. They leave her shattered and devastated and represents how women are even discriminated when only she wants is to love and be loved. The role that Tsomo carries out as a daughter and wife is not endowed to her during her birth rather it is socially constructed. The discrimination based on Gender continues and prevails in the novel but gradually Tsomo is able to break down several walls of discrimination and inequality as she evolves from a timid, submissive and dependent girl to a bold and independent woman.

Tsomo faces betrayal from her own, that is, from her own women folk. Even though her mother is brave she is unable to sympathize or

bring her up the way she wants to. She is further betrayed by her own sister who becomes the other woman and in a way she also betrays another woman by taking away a father and a husband when she marries Wangchen. But other than this, the novel celebrates the coming together of women from different strata of the society-Tsomo, Pema Buti, Dechen Choki, Sita and many others as friends and sharing of pain and sorrow. In this feeling of sympathy for one another, an identity is struck which ultimately forges the bond of sisterhood crossing the boundaries of caste and class. In one instance Tsomo sympathises with a Dechen.

“Our stories are similar and yet so different. Everything happened because we are women...” (Showalter 1979, 109). In another instance she also adds that it's not the woman's fault.

“Your only problem is being a woman, we cannot change that but we have to be strong” ((Showalter 1979, 121).

As the story develops, Tsomo's personality develops and as shown by Elaine Showalter, Tsomo goes through a phase of imitation, protest and finally self-discovery. She becomes a nun and it becomes possible for her to endure any obstacles in a composed, peaceful and serene manner. Through her journey, the author has created a realistic portrayal of gender inequality and self discovery. Her journey starts from Thimphu and ends there thus creating a perfect circle of shedding of gender inequality and discrimination and rediscovering herself.

Kunzan Choden has portrayed the vulnerable conditions of Bhutanese Women who live in a society structured by rigid tradition and custom and also religion. They are subjected to discrimination and violence on a daily basis.

This violence is often not conceived as a violation of human rights but rather as a normal aspect of lives of Bhutanese Women.

Women are aware of the discrimination at the societal and household levels. They receive more discrimination in the societal level comparing to the household level. Married Women experience more discrimination in mobility, property and education. Similarly, unmarried women perceive more discrimination in mobility and modes of behaviour. They consider gender and customary practices as major factors responsible for discrimination. Thus, on a broader level the novel becomes a window for showcasing the social patterns of patriarchy and an exposure of the maltreatment and oppression of women in the name of social custom. The issues dealt in the novel are current and even go across geographical boundaries.

If the women folk are expected to be more judicious and grow in every aspect of their life, they must be set free from oppression. As Mary Wollstonecraft states in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

“ Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of men will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet” (Wollstonecraft 2014, 186).

The novel is a representative of how women have to tussle to survive in the male-dominated society. Through Tsomo's journey the notion of patriarchy and gender inequality is defied and even though the novel's exposition is murky it is positive in tone.

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