

## ECOFEMINIST CONCERNS IN KUNZANG CHODEN'S *THE CIRCLE OF KARMA*

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper attempts to explore Kunzang Choden's The Circle of Karma from the perspectives of ecofeminism. The term 'Ecofeminism' coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book "Feminism or Death" (1980), the primary concern of writing this book is to raise the feminist consciousness toward an ecological revolution to save the planet Earth. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism which deals with the connection between women and nature. It also focuses on the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by the dominance of the patriarchal set up of the society. Both nature and women enslaved by the oppressive practices of the patriarchy, which exploit them fully to fulfil their own selfish motives during the ages. In the novel, The Circle of Karma, Kunzang Choden portrays the life of the protagonist, Tsomo who is closely connected to nature. She finds peace and solace in the midst of natural surroundings. During her uneventful life, Tsomo is betrayed by her close relatives such as both her husbands and also from her own sister, Kesang. After all these tragic incidents, years later after long journeying, she decides to become a religious practitioner. She suffers from adverse situations of life and the deteriorating condition of her health. Eventually, she detaches herself from the great humanity; she finds happiness and peace in the vicinity of Himalayas and in nature. Kunzang Choden creates awareness about the deteriorating conditions of nature, women and non-humans. So, the ecofeminists, appeals to all the human beings to rise for a noble cause to save the Planet Earth, women and the non-humans.*

**Key words-** ecofeminism, exploitation, dominance, oppression, patriarchy.

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The term “ecofeminism” originated from the two critical perspectives i.e. “ecology” and “feminism”. It is a branch of feminism which deals with the connections between women and nature. The term was coined by the French feminist Françoise d’Eubonne in her book *Feminism or Death*(1980), the primary concern of writing this book is to raise the feminist consciousness toward an ecological revolution to save the planet Earth. It is an activist academic movement which intends to highlight and eliminate all forms of domination of women and nature. According to Webster’s New World Encyclopedia (2013): “Ecofeminism is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues. It can be observed, Nature has the same possessing qualities as women so it is feminised in the concept of ecofeminism. Women find nature as a great source of harmony, peace and security.

Ecofeminists believe that, there is a close connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. In the words of critics:

There is no simple relationship between the ways in which nature has been gendered both positively and negatively as female over the past two and a half millennia, and the roles of women in society. Nature has been revered as an animate mother, feared and degraded as an unpredictable witch, and ploughed as virgin land. Yet forces such as the socialization of women and care takers/nurturers, the degradation of women’s livelihood and bodies, and the double burden borne by women as workers and homemakers in capitalist, socialist, and colonized countries have often propelled them to act to preserve both non-human nature and themselves (Merchant 1995:1).

My paper attempts to explore the similarities between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature by the dominance of patriarchy, through the novel of Kunzang

Choden's *The Circle of Karma*. The novel contains the sub-themes of ecofeminist perspectives which reflect the amalgamation of feminism and ecology. Tsomo, the protagonist confronts so many difficulties throughout the story but, at the end of the novel, she refused to be a victim and finds solace and security in the vicinity of Himalayas after becoming a religious practitioner.

Kunzang Choden is the foremost writer of Bhutan. She was born in 1952, in Bumthang, Central Bhutan and was sent to India (Darjeeling) at the age of nine for the completion of her primary and secondary education. She has graduated in Sociology from the University of Nebraska, USA and attains the degree of BA honours in Psychology from Indraprastha College in Delhi. Kunzang Choden has written on Bhutanese oral traditions, folklores and feminism. She lives in Thimpu, Bhutan with her husband children. *The Circle of Karma* was published in 2005, by Penguin Books in the collaboration with Zubaan Books. The story takes place in 1950's, when the modernization was initiated by the imperialist powers in Bhutan.

In the beginning of the novel, Choden discussed about the childhood description of Tsomo, who is alone in the house and helping her mother in her household chores, it is the afternoon scene of the novel:

The late afternoon in which wind hisses through the bare trees and beats against the bamboo mats, rattling them noisily under the roof. It's a warm wind and Tsomo knows that spring will come soon. She has seen the buds on the willow trees ready to burst forth in blossom.(1)

Tsomo observes nature closely, by the weather conditions she finds, that the arrival of the spring is near, which portrays Tsomo as a lover of nature and her attraction towards it which enables her to observe the minute changes in her surroundings and garden. Tsomo is the lover of the spring season. In the prologue, when Tsomo is portrayed as an old woman drinking tea with her friend Lhan Yeshi and narrates her life story, they sit silently:

Tsomo sees the apricot tree that she had brought Lham Yeshe, some years ago. The pale green sapling had come to her in an empty Nescafe tin one early spring day. The sapling, just a few centimetres high, had been nurtured like a child. 'Not many people have this variety as yet. It's Japanese and it has delicious fruit. Take proper care and you will see,' she had said with authority, sounding like an enthusiastic Agriculture Extension Worker. (viii)

The above description reflects Tsomo's deeper knowledge to take care of plants as a professional for the growth of saplings and her association and interconnectedness with nature. Tsomo cries bitterly when her chilli seedlings were destroyed by a woman from the next door. A woman poured hot scalding rice water on it. When Lham Yeshe asked about those tiny plants: 'No chilli seedlings,' Tsomo blurts out as if she was just waiting to be asked. Then her lips tremble and tears gather in her eyes and roll down her round flat cheeks.(ix)

Choden discussed about the close relation between woman and nature. Most of time Tsomo's mother, busies herself in collecting fuel and fodder because she knows as her family members return from the fields they need food and water. So, the entire responsibility of feeding children and people is totally on her even in the death ceremonies in their village she had to prepare a whole basketful of *tsog*, a special kind of bread. When Tsomo was a teenage girl she was forced to domesticity and had to help her mother in cooking, cleaning and farming. Since her childhood, Tsomo yearns to attain religious education, in order to accumulate merit as the boys who were taught religion and were asked to read and perform rituals in the altar room but, Tsomo was not allowed to read and learn religion as it is not considered a dominion of woman. Tsomo insists her father to teach her but he replies sternly with a great conviction: "You are a girl. You are different. You learn others 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". (21)

Unlike, Tsomo, her brothers are free to take any decision pertaining to achieve religious education and to travel where ever they want, it shows the gender discriminative

practices of the society where woman is confined to domestic sphere and was denied for her rights because she is born as a female. When Tsomo was a small girl, an astrologer predicts and told her mother that her daughter would be restless, always wanting to travel. Tsomo asks her mother: “Where is the furthest I can travel to” where can a girl travel to (2). The question arises in mother’s mind because in Bhutan woman is not independent to travel far or make her choices according to her wishes; her socio-cultural conditioning hinders the development of a woman which expects her to be obedient, submissive, docile and flexible because she is regarded as an inferior being both intellectually and physically. Thus, the mindset of mother is also ingrained with such thoughts that a girl cannot travel like her brother and it is because of male domination of woman during the ages which she accepts as a woman’s fate to accept her inferiority which was forced upon her by the age old traditions.

As an elder daughter, Tsomo is a dutiful and obedient girl. She loves nature and captivated by the natural surroundings. She lives in the biggest house of the village which is made of rammed earth and the animals were kept here in the ground floor. At night Tsomo could hear the ruminating sounds of cows even in her old age Tsomo thinks she is in her own house and yearns to hear the cows and animals which provide her a sense of relaxation. It shows her attachment and love towards non- humans (animals).

Tsomo’s ideas hovers around the nature throughout the novel which is a constant reminder of her love and affinity toward natural imagery ‘the pink of the peach blossoms is visible through the outer skin of the dark green buds. The buds on the walnut are swollen and dark.’(3) Apart from this, Tsomo and her friends play near the pond which filled with the rain water every time, and in summers it appears as a shallow depression in the ground surrounded by thick and thorny bushes which provides a secluded place to children for playing wild games. Tsomo and her friends hide them in the bushes and push the boys into the pond to take revenge. Who teased and taunted them in front of the village elders: ‘splashing and wallowing in the musky water, they eventually landed in a squishy heap of wet bodies. The whole area rang with shrieks of laughter.’(26).

Nature is helpful in curing and preventing them from various skin and bad infections. Tsomo and Chimme waits for the arrival of the Spring. Chimme says: 'that they should wait until the peach trees were in bloom. 'She continues by saying: 'My grandmother said that ears which are pierced at the.' (46) 'time of the peach blossoms never get infected.'(46)

Women prefer natural ingredients or herbs for the treatment of various diseases, for child birth and nursing mothers. Aum Nalay, Chimme's mother recommends her daughter crushed garlic when she was recuperating from child birth. She says: "Garlic is very good for a recuperating mother, so, Chimme, you will have to eat a lot of garlic. When you were born we had nothing in the house except garlic. I ate garlic with everything."(49)

Tsomo's father is the senior most member of the family and nobody could question him for his actions. He is the religious practitioner and always busies himself in copying manuscripts and in performing rituals. Father is the patriarch of the family. When Tsomo's mother conceives for the thirteenth time, her reproductive capacities well totally collapses and was burdened with many responsibilities but she accepts it as her fate. She is a dutiful wife. She does not have rights to assert her position in the family. She is seen quiet and most of the time expressionless.

Tsomo never heard Mother complain. She was a big strong and brave woman and she did not complain about anything. Sometimes Tsomo thought she had a strange fix expression on her face. It was a 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 have complained if she could. (6)

She does not have any authority to take decisions for her daughters in order to educate them and freed themselves from their subordinated status. Tsomo helps her mother during her pregnancy but as the time passes mother's health keeps on deteriorating The tips of her nose and cheeks were covered with dark patches of skin but she dismissed them s the 'usual pregnancy dead skin' which would disappear gradually. Tsomo hoped she was right. She has had so many children, she must know, she

thought.(57)But Tsomo's mother dies during the childbirth and she cannot save her mother from death , within a year, Tsomo's father decides to remarry with a girl not older than Tsomo. He explained:

A person in my position cannot do without a wife. There must be a woman to welcome, entertain and see off guests and see to the daily affairs of the house. The house should not feel like a cold cave,' he explained, when the children stared at the shy awkward girl, no older than Tsomo. (64)

Tsomo's father exploits her mother fully which leads her to die, Mother was a dutiful wife, who appears as a natural resource which provides man everything but Man appears as a brute and exploits these natural resources to fulfil his materialistic purposes, by the Tsomo's mother multiple pregnancies it can be observe that in 1950's family planning was not introduced and women have to confront so many reproductive health problems which were imposed on them by the patriarchal culture, in the same way people keep on harvesting the crops by adding fertilizers and pesticides which reduce the quality of agriculture and soil and leads to the devastation of the planet Earth due to the continuous exploitation of the agricultural lands and natural resources. In the same way woman is forced to give birth to a male child and she conceives several time to fulfil the demands of her family, and the female child is unwelcomed in the conservative patriarchal set-up. But it's harmful for women having many children. It can also observe, women are the main contributors who work on agricultural lands their health get affected by adding pesticides on the crops.

Tsomo's father took advantage of mother in every aspect of her life; he burdened her with all, the responsibilities and as a priest, he does not care what his wife needs in return. Tsomo's mother only expects love and care but he fails. He only uses her body for the gratification of his sexual needs and after her death he easily forgets her and remarries. In the same way Men also exploit the natural resources which lead to the devastation of the planet Earth.

Men do not pay attention and used nature as a commodity or machine rather than as living organism which plays the vital role for the imbalances in ecology and several natural calamities occurs on Mankind as a threat by nature. Choden discussed in Bhutan the rights of marriage is under male hegemony they court young girls without their consent and if they pleased by those girls, they announced their marriage otherwise they left a girl for public humiliation and the total blame imposed on girls for any natural calamity befalls on the village, if the girl conceives and fails to undergo the purification ceremony known as *tshangma*. Choden writes:

Unpurified pregnancies disturbed the gods and the locality gods. Until the woman had performed the ceremony, she was accountable for all severe weather conditions, illness and deaths among humans and even cattle. Whenever there was an unusual hailstorm, people immediately suspected a pregnant girl. (36)

But the natural calamities befall not because of women's pregnancies, it is the outcome of the exploitation and devastation of the natural resources in the name of development and modernization but in a patriarchal set up woman is blamed for everything which is out of her control.

After the death of Tsomo's mother she went to Trongsa, a pilgrimage to light the butter lamps for the peace of her soul and this is the first time she moves out of her house. During this journey, she met a young attractive man, Wangchen. Both of them get attracted and spend some time with each other. Tsomo returns home and waits for the proposal from Wangchen as she finds herself pregnant, and after few months Wangchen proposes Tsomo and they get married, and it is the beginning of her tragic life, she delivers a baby without birth breath. After the death of her baby Tsomo is broken both mentally and physically so she fails to fulfil the family responsibilities even she is betrayed by her husband and her own sister, Kesang both of them indulged in the illicit relationship and marry after few days. Tsomo decides to leave the house and to enter in a new life. She joins labour camp at the Thimpu Road. She works for the road construction where she met many other women who were working in adverse conditions. The novelist tries to depict the actual problems of workingwomen on the road side some are denied salary and asked



for sexual favours like Dechen Choki. On the roadside women have to work in an unfavourable environment, pollutants, tar and dust deteriorates the health of women. Construction of roads leads to air pollution. Tsomo earns for her living and was not dependent on others. As the novel progresses, Tsomo met a man Lhatu and she decides to marry a gomchen, Lhatu but he was dodgy unreliable person who is already married.

Eventually, Tsomo decides to become a religious practitioner. She forgives all her close relatives who betrayed her without having feeling of anger or revenge. She detaches herself from the entire humanity and finds peace in the vicinity of Himalayas and in nature. Thus, the novel depicts the parallel between the subjugation of woman and exploitation of nature and highlights the ambivalent relationship between woman and nature. Through the ecofeminist approach, novel conveys the message to Save Earth, women and animals and intends to explore awareness about the devastating condition of Nature which is the outcome of exploiting nature by all means in the name of development and progress. Kunzang Choden urges to make Earth eco-friendly to bring about harmony and peace between the humans and nature for better future and for our own existence.

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