

AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF KUNZANG CHODEN 'S
NOVEL *THE CIRCLE OF KARMA*

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Abstract

The paper studies the contribution of Kunzang Choden's novel "The Circle of Karma" to the seminal ideas of ecological conscience and environmental protection using sub themes that intertwine ecocriticism with feminist criticism. It also focuses on the association between oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by dominance of Patriarchy. Patriarchy enslaves women and nature for their own selfish greed and motives. Through an ecofeminism lens the paper also focuses on the effects of the parallel oppression on women and nature. The women in her novel are not mere victims but are strugglers who become strong survivors and dare to shun violence and dominance. A message that Kunzang Choden gives through her novel is that women are closely connected to nature and find solace in the midst of nature. Kunzang's deep ecological urge is a boon for peaceful co-existence as well as for the better, bright and happy survival of mankind on this Planet. The novel gives a message and calls for all humans to save women, nature and non-humans. The novel is studied with an eco-feminist perspective to show eco-feminist consciousness and explores to deepen the understanding of the novel with the same approach.

Keywords: *ecocriticism , conscience , patriarchy , ecofeminism , feminist criticism , dominance , ecology, parallel oppression*

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Introduction

Ecofeminism has gradually evolved from feminism and ecology. As a terminology it has recent origin although, as a practice it is perhaps as old as civilization itself. The concept of connecting women with nature dates back to the times of ancient classical mythology. Nature is feminized because it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women at the time when most of the romantic writing was produced. The description is seen in almost in all genres showing interconnectedness of both. Women are closely connected to nature and find nature as a great source of peace, security, wonder, happiness and solace. As a political movement ecofeminism began in the 1970's. The term was first used in France by Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book *Feminisme Ou La Morte* in 1974. She called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet (Merchant 184). The term represents a concept which chooses to create a union of the radical ecology movement, or what is more popularly known as 'deep ecology' and feminism. Thus this movement leads many to study the roles and relationships between women and nature in various fields, including literature. Ecofeminism is an environmental movement which concerns with cultural and social aspects. This movement believes that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and degradation of nature. Consequently it is better understood this, as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature. Kasturi Basu rightly says it is the 'twin domination'. Karen Warren has used an 'Umbrella' term for a wide variety of approaches. Ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of interrelationships between humans, non-humans others (animals) and the earth. The deep connection that is created between land and women, who are considered the primary users of nature (land, forest and

water) because they are most of the times responsible for gathering food , fuel and fodder. A woman old or sick has to ensure that her family has food to eat, water to drink and feed the animals that the family has. It is not surprising that the women pay a greater price when environmental degradation takes place. Women all over the world are more involved in environmental activities and are the most affected by degradation and pollution. The domination and exploitation of women, of poorly resourced people and of nature is at the core of ecofeminist analysis.

'Most eco –critical works share a common motivation the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems.' (Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm).

This paper focuses on the consequences faced by the protagonists. It also finds the parallel oppression and exploitation of women and nature due to the dominance of Patriarchy. The novel "*The Circle of Karma*" is read by using the lens of Ecofeminism. The paper also describes the contribution of Kunzang Choden's novel "*The Circle of Karma*" to the seminal ideas of ecological conscience and environmental protection using sub themes that intertwine ecocriticism with feminist criticism. It throws light on interconnectedness of women and nature and how they search happiness, peace and solace in nature. It also focusses on the association between oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by the dominance of Patriarchy. The protagonist go a slow transformation and refuse to be a victim. She identifies herself with nature and finds solace in nature.

About Kunzang Choden

Kunzang Choden was born in 1952, in the year of dragon, in Bumthang, Central Bhutan. She spent her early childhood in Bhutan and came to India (Darjeeling) for her primary and secondary education . She has a BA Honours in Psychology from Indrapastha College in Delhi and a BA in Sociology from the University of Nebraska, USA. She has worked for the United Nations Development Program in Bhutan . From 1990 onwards , Kunzang has been

writing on Bhutanese oral traditions, folklore and women. She lives in Thimpu Bhutan with her husband and continues to research and document Bhutan's oral traditions. She is the first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English. "*The Circle of Karma*", published in 2005, is her first novel in English. It takes place in 1950s , the initial period of imperially regulated modernization in Bhutan . The first novel by a woman to come out of the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is rich in detailed descriptions of ritual life. The measured pace of its prose, the many nuances of the story, the different levels at which the narrative works, weave a complex tapestry of life in which the style and content are closely interwoven, each informing and enriching the other. In the chaotic ebb and flow of human affairs Kunzang sees writing as a way to correct wrongs .The main character,a Bhutanese woman is forced to deal both with the traditional, restrictive gender roles of pre-modern Bhutan and the new kind of sexism developing as men gain economic freedom. The primary theme of the novel though reflects Kunzang's desire to project a positive outcome in life, even under the worst conditions her central character Tsomo triumphs over adversity and forgives those who have oppressed her. The central theme of the triumph of good over the evil is no doubt the source of the book's great success and that is achieved by the protagonist by her close association with all beings of nature irrespective of race and gender. She finds solace in amidst of nature . The protagonist cares for the animals , plants , trees , farms and shows concerns about her own country as modernization sets in and brings degradation of land and pollutes the environment .This perspective leads us to view this novel through an ecofeminist lens.

Tsomo being a daughter.

The beginning of the novel draws our attention to Kunzang's description about the trees around the house telling us about her love and observations about nature . Tsomo the protagonist of the novel is alone in the house helping her mother. The description depicts the afternoon scenario "The late afternoon wind hisses through the bare trees and beats against the bamboo mats, rattling them noisily under the roof. Its 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 “ Kunzang through this description portrays that Tsomo is a lover of nature who feels affinity towards nature which makes her a keen observer of every little minute changes in her garden and surroundings. Tsomo loves spring. She enjoys rambling in the fields and looking at flowers Through this we come to know of her association and interconnectedness with nature. Mother knows that adults and children will return from fields, tired and hungry so she gets busy in making arrangements to cook for them which shows that the entire family responsibilities of feeding the family members lie on Mother. Tsomo is just fifteen and she also has to help her mother in cleaning the pots and help her in cooking, which clearly tells us how a girl from her childhood has to do all the household work. Through the kitchen in which the story takes place and the description of housework, the concept of social ecofeminism can be seen. Social eco-feminists insist that women are close to nature through their long-time social roles which are pregnancy, giving birth, raising children and doing housework . Tsomo has always longed for religious knowledge which is denied to her, as it is not considered the domain of women. Whereas her brothers are allowed to study and travel far away from their hometown showing the tradition set up of patriarchy and the system in favour of men. There is resentment against culture and society which gives preference to male children. This also creates a acute awareness of the tragic fate which comes with the feeling of being born as a woman. The lessons on flexibility, adjustment and submissiveness hinder the development of strong opinions and commitments in a girl. The bewilderment of a growing girl who is coaxed and conditioned into stereo-typical role has been delineated by Kunzang . As a child, an astrologer had told Tsomo’s mother that her daughter would be restless, always wanting to travel. “Where is the furthest I can travel to?” Tsomo asks her mother, who teasingly replies “Where? I don’t know. Where can a girl travel to ? Perhaps as far North as Tibet, and as far south as India. The gender discrimination is clearly seen here the mother convinces her daughter and suppresses her by saying that she is a girl and cannot travel far like her brothers who were given religious education. So, even the mindset of her mother cannot be changed as it is forced upon the mother by her ancestors and age old traditions by the so called patriarchy and followed by women without justification. Tsomo is denied what her whole soul longs for. She

wonders how girls would ever accumulate more merit for their next life, if they were not taught religion. Other women in the family including her mother have surrendered to the inevitable humiliations of the family , and society but not Tsomo who does not prefer to be victim but takes up the challenges and fight the problems which we get to know further through her journey of life. Tsomo is a very obedient daughter who takes care of her mother and her younger brothers and sisters . She cares for nature which makes her take utmost care of her garden and she sees that it is well maintained on time. She knows importance and knowledge of seasons and knows to enjoy all seasons happily. She is happy to see the flowers bloom and gets captivated by them easily. In the stillness of the night Tsomo could hear the ruminating of the cows and she feels good with their presence. She eagerly waits to hear the cows ruminating and relaxing showing her attachment with the animals. The novel offers continual reminders of the nature and the description of the peach, pear and walnut trees , the pink blossoms , the buds swollen on the walnut trees . Kunzang takes the readers gently in the midst of nature showing her interest and love for nature and creating in them love and affinity towards nature. She strongly portrays through her protagonists that statistically women are more closely connected to nature.

Tsomo's Mother.

Tsomo's father is a priest. Tsomo's mother had agreed to this marriage because she was religious person herself and she liked the idea of being the wife of a priest. What she did not realize was that a religious practitioner would be so busy with religious activities that the entire burden of farming would fall on her. Father was there all the time and yet he was out of their lives, detached and aloof, quite oblivious of what the rest of the family was doing. His voice had a disciplining effect on the family. Mother was a devoted wife. She was always thoughtful and respectful and fiercely loyal to her husband. "You must never say against your father,' she would say, especially when she detected any signs of rebellion among the children. She never complains. She is burdened with too many responsibilities but she bears all of them as she has accepted it to be as woman's fate . Her husband even though he doesn't earn is considered as

the head of the family as he is the senior most male member and she has the secondary position even though she is the main supporting member of the family. She does not have the liberty and freedom of speech and most of the time she is seen quiet and inexpressive. She does not have the authority to take decision, to educate her daughter and fulfill any of her desires.

Simon de Beauvoir explicits this situation of a woman ' The situation of woman is that she –a free and autonomous being like all creatures--- nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other '. (29)

Kunzang has portrayed this character in true sense as a dominant figure in the house where no body can question him for his acts. Tsomo is the third child and the first daughter among the twelve children that Mother had borne. Mother stands like a tree which gives way to man's exploitation .Trees stand quietly even when they are cut and chopped brutally. Mother is pregnant for the thirteenth time. Her biological reproductive capacities are exploited to the fullest. Its understood in 1950s where family planning may not have been introduced and so women had to face so many biological health problems which they were forced upon the way it is forced upon on land which gives agriculture production and people keep on harvesting crops by adding fertilizers and pesticides and somewhere deep down reducing the texture of soil and the quality of it . Pesticides harm the women who work on agricultural farms as they work without protection and the contribution of women on farms statistically is more than men. The exploitation of agricultural land and resources is continuous burden on Planet mother Earth. Even though family planning was introduced after that still women have been exploited and forced upon to give birth to male child. Killing of female feotocides is seen in most of the traditional and orthodox places. Women are denied human rights and exploited by all means. Tragedy gets added to Tsomo's life as she sees her mother gasping for life. Tsomo tries her best to help her mother during her pregnancy but mother's health keeps on detoriating as she becomes weak and is unable to take up responsibilities. Mother takes her last breath during the childbirth with the last labour pain of her life and dies with the child in her

womb. Tsomo was helpless could not do anything to save her mother. She looked at the dead body and thought of what must have happened to the baby which was breathing with mother but then they get to know baby also has accompanied mother in the journey to another world. Mother was not ready to die. She died worrying about all her children and her unfinished tasks. Tsomo knew that. Her worries and attachments were evident in the weight of the corpse. Tsomo was more attached to mother and she feels lonely without her as mother was there for her who guided her from time to time. Father has not much been affected by this as one day he explained 'A person in my position cannot do without a wife. There must be a woman to welcome, entertain guests and see off guests to the daily affairs of the house. The house should not feel like a cold cave' and they all stared at the shy awkward girl, no older than Tsomo was going to be their step mother. The situation leaves them baffled and perplexed. Tsomo and Kesang her sister had worked hard to continue doing whatever their mother had done in the same way as she had but their father never saw that. Tsomo was unhappy with father's decision. She thought aloud one day 'Why so soon? Couldn't he wait until the third death anniversary? Kesang resentfully answers with eyes filled with tears 'How could he do this? He has already forgotten our mother.' At last they decide not to grudge him as Mother would not like to be disloyal to him. From this situation Kunzang portrays how men can be so mean, selfish and ungrateful. Father took advantage of Tsomo's mother in every aspect and her death has least effect on him. It doesn't even take time for him to forget her so quickly and easily. So easily he forgets the pains she bears for him and to bring up the children. She as a woman has given everything body and soul without expecting anything only a few words of love which he failed to give those as he was always busy with religious activities. To have physical pleasures he used her body whenever he desired whereas she longed for emotional support and love. He didn't even understand the difference between love and lust. Her fulfilling his demands was only expression of her love to him. Kunzang has depicted the men's mentality very effectively that it touches the hearts of the readers. Men exploit women to the fullest and when they don't need them they forget them easily in the same manner they exploit Mother earth and don't pay attention to the consequences and the sufferings that humans will face in future. They exploit

animals, brutally cut down trees , exploit resources , exploit human resources leading to imbalance of ecology and adding chaos to the existing world. Kunzang has used Tsomo mother's pregnancy and her death as figurative to show the parallel oppression of women and nature. A melancholic tone and a deep feeling of the oppressions and tensions faced by the women in society can be witnessed in this novel. A woman's struggle to save her family, farms, and nature makes readers sympathetic towards women.

Tsomo's two unsuccessful marriages and her transcending bitterness

Tsomo has lost hope. To give peace to mother's soul she wants to light butter lamps and for this she needs to visit pilgrimage places. She moves out of her house for the first time. Beginning here her travel begins to find herself, to grow as a person and a woman. During this journey of hers she meets a handsome young man named Wangchen and she gets attracted to his talk and acts. She gets swayed and spends some time with him .Tsomo returns home after her journey and waits for Wangchen to propose her as she finds herself pregnant and is worried whether her father would chase her away out of her home. After few months Wangchen proposes her and they get married. One more tragic incident breaks her morality that is she has an accidental miscarriage and loses her baby. Wangchen had been out for few days and he returns to see this and is quite upset with this incident but does not express anything. Tsomo has no energy to do any work further and is seen resting all the time. One day Tsomo finds Wangchen in her sister's bed .May be he thought that now Tsomo was incapable of becoming a mother and due to her illness she had no charms left to attract him. This deceitful treatment almost breaks her down and she decides to leave them and go out of the town and start a new life. Fleeing from this cruel betrayal, she joins a labour camp on the Thimpu Road. She prefers working on the construction site of roads where she finds many other women working in inhuman conditions. Kunzang has depicted all the real problems caused due to constructions and how female labourers face problems which Marxist eco-feminists argues and proves how women are exploited at work place some are denied salary and asked for sexual favours. The black Tar causes breathing problems and the dust

detoriates the health of women is portrayed very well. Polluting the environment and destroying nature by constructing roads and buildings is depicted in the novel .The exploitation of women in all the fields in portrayed by Kunzang in a realistic manner which makes the readers rethink and introspect their acts. The few coins Tsomo earns that fuel her longing for vengeance. She would return, having turned the obstacles into opportunities. She would show her own people that she had made something of her life. It is here that she meets her second husband or partner, a dodgy unreliable character, very well drawn by Kunzang .She is betrayed by second husband. She is torn apart with all these tragic incidents. Years later, after long journeying, after becoming a nun suffering from great privation and humiliation, she emerges with no thought of anger or revenge. She forgives both her husbands. She has achieved a great detachment, great humanity. From these harsh experiences she has reaped blessings. She finds happiness and solace in the vicinity of Himalayas and in nature .Women though oppressed still have the heart to forgive and let go. Kunzang depicts the patriarchy mind set up and draws true picture of society which reflects vulnerability of this set up. She has the urge and desire to bring about the change in the conditions of women and nature and her novel moves the readers.

Conclusion

It is a tale that harks back to time when mindless technology had just invaded the bloated narcissism that often attends Man's blind journey into that world we so often smugly call human progress. Through ecofeminist approach this novel portrays the fatal consequences of exploiting women and nature. It also teaches us not to seek control over the things around us. Rather our redemption is found in honouring all life, both human and nonhumans. This also can be taken as a serious warning regarding global warming, environmental devastation and destruction of nature in the name of progress. Kunzang Choden creates awareness about the deteriorating conditions of nature, women and non humans. So the ecofeminists gives a clarion call for all humans to rise for noble cause to Save Planet Earth and the Non humans (animals) and women. Her urge to make this Earth eco friendly should be supported by the

readers. This novel proves a mediator to convey the message of the ecofeminists to save women and nature which will bring about peace and harmony between humans and nature and save their own existence on Earth.

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