

# The Problematic of Class Relations and Gender in Bhutan: Situating Marxo-Feminist Praxis in Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma*

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Literary theory negotiated (and altered) the literary semantics good deal with its overbearing intellectual discourse in the enlightened contemporary academia. The curious saga of literary inquiry has come a long way from simpleton traits of Liberal humanism which shirked from the explanation of the totalizing realities and the 'grand narratives'. The congenial discourses forged by the literary theory could be, with an intellectual comfort, characterized as clenching the intellectual universe from its parametric ends and vouch for something which was earlier glossed over and in the process flinched from ethical responsibilities of discursive information and ethical imagination. And the ethical angle of literary performance is conspicuous in Swearingen's observation where he avers that literature as a "rhetorical" transaction involving "author, text and reader" is essentially an ethical project that presupposes a community of readers (Swearingen 145). The contemporary literary theory, as a resolute adversary to make the unheard thin phenomena more vocal and explanatory, is hence bent upon taking a rational dip into the subterranean networks of words and sieve meanings and, as said earlier, contribute towards the newer productions and, consequently, codifications repotentiating the literature with political energies drying up in the complacent lap of liberal humanism. Already, the omnipresent dictatorial beckonings of the "linguistic-relational abilities of humankind" by the global capitalist regimes bring forth the "common places" of language, the generic logical-linguistic forms which establish the pattern for all forms of discourse" (Virno 35-36) Literary theories like Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Postcolonialism, Marxism, Psycho-analysis, Feminism, Gender Studies, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Eco-criticism, etc. suffuse the literary with a vigor, able to elevate the language and in the process its biopolitical offspring literature, from Aristotelian 'common places' (*topoi koinoi*) and facilitating a reach out to its 'special places' (*topoi idioi*). Hence, the earlier unassuming literary verdicts of the liberal humanism stand effeminate when the currents of neoliberal, neocolonial global order are redesigning the matrix of the capitalist world order. And literary theories have successfully infused fresh dialectical angles to broaden the academic and philosophical horizons of the proponents of the same as the word literary today, has to include its emerging forms and culture defying easy codification. Hence, the theories bind this ethico-political potential of literature with the cultural, the social and the political of the contemporary discourse. In the current paper, I take up the much politicized feminist semiotic beside the material worldview suffused Marxist thought as the starting point of interrogating the socio-cultural dynamics of a pre-colonial economy in the times of neocolonial and neoliberal economies and its cultural production like the English novel. Bhutanese society with its irreducible particularity of antiquated socio-economic and cultural determinism and class relations becomes the apparent theoretical problematic of feminism and Marxist validations.

*The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden can be deduced as a seminal work in the archives of the South Asian Women's Fiction since Choden purports to be the first

woman writer of English novels from her country Bhutan. Kunzang Choden's novel delves deep into the recesses of the multi-layered dialectics of Bhutan and its position and treatment of women. Choden, in her debut novel, has faithfully reflected the socio-economic status of women in Bhutan from her own empirical understanding of the phenomena. The novel, thus works on two different planes combining the feminist approach and understanding as well as the socio-economic structure of the Bhutanese writing in English. It is a feminist text as it chronicles the socio-economic tropes of women and the identities thereof in the patriarchal set-up in the fledgling countries like Bhutan and critiquing the notions of male dominance which is allied to reason and logic while the women is relegated to the incoherence and chaos. Along with feminist shades, the novel also results from the social, economic and political structure of the country Bhutan where various class struggles are taking place goading the writers like Choden to render this materialistic picture before the world. The social and political dialectics of the writer herself and her principal character in the novel Tsomo are the direct products of this social consciousness and a distinct ideology. Thus, the novel concerns itself with the feminist issues pertaining to the women and the women writing and also exposes itself to Marxist ideas of base and superstructure which lead to the production of a literary work and the adoption of a peculiar literary genre by the author after smelling the socio-economic situation of his/her nation state. Hence the term Marxo-Feminism has been coined to underline various issues and to critique the novel on the basis of these two literary 'isms' which correspond and reason the content and the form of the novel in a distinct socio-cultural setting. Marxist criticism highlights the direct relationship between the production of ideas, concepts consciousness and material life of the people and feminism focuses upon the outcome of these denominations on the situation of women. Feminism being a social and cultural construction and ideology emanating from the sexual politics and history has affiliations with the Marxist philosophy of social relations.

Marxist criticism is based upon the premises of base and superstructure. According to the Marxist point of view, people's social relations are linked to the way they produce their material life. It means that the economic system determines the nature of social relations. The productive forces and the relations of production form the economic base. It is the base that engenders different social institutions, ideas or systems like education, law, politics and aesthetic ideals. These institutions and beliefs regulate the conflicts of the base and its social relations. These regulatory systems and elements arising out of the base are called superstructure of the society. Coming on to feminism, it is a sort of literary criticism which foregrounds the position of women in the society, the way woman is reflected in the literary texts and aims to change what happens to biological women due to the social structures of gender and sex. As per Ruth Robbins, "...feminisms are therefore politicized discourses which uncovers the symptoms of oppression, whatever their grounds, diagnose the problem and offer alternative versions of livable realities" (Robbins 7). The novel *The Circle of Karma* is dotted with numerous Marxist elements as the matrix of the novel is the socio-economic fabric of one of the poorest and underdeveloped nations of the world Bhutan from which the writer arose and attempts a traditional, almost Victorian style of novel. Its feminist flavour rises from the depiction of the oppression of patriarchal hegemony which the

writer has tried to contest via her women characters in the novel. Hence the term Marxo-feminist

The protagonist of the novel is a girl Tsomo whose odyssey from her childhood to maturity attaining numerous life changing experiences forms the major theme of the novel. Tsomo longs for religious education which is denied to her, as it is the male sphere in Bhutan. Tsomo represents the laidback and docile women of Bhutan who are born to cater to the whims and fancies of the male counterparts and domestic and homemaker trainings are imparted to them from the very childhood to be ideal wives and mothers. Tsomo wonders how girls would ever accumulate more merit for their next lives if they don't get versed in religious education as per the Buddhism statutes. She ponders: "Being born a male is already the advantage of a better birth and now they are being helped to accumulate more merit for their next birth.....Being a girl was equal to being in a bad situation" (Choden 20)

Tsomo lives through terrible marriages. In first, she finds her husband Wangchen, whom she had a love-marriage with, in bed with her own sister. Such anguish results in her losing her unborn child. She tears herself apart from this ruthless betrayal and treads a weary path of self-discovery. She joins a road labour party and starts earning some rupees in a bid to return to her betrayers and slap them with embarrassment. Here she meets Dechen Choki, a jovial girl with same victim - record as Tsomo. Dechen had been molested by her step-father whom she had run away from and is also almost got ravished by the *lajab* or the contractor when she is saved by Tsomo. Both of them reach Kalimpong where Dechen gets happily married while Tsomo gets ensnared in other barbaric marriage with Lhatu, a nefarious character, who marries the diseased Tsomo and then deserts her. Two unsuccessful marriages and infidelities leave her in shambles and Tsomo attains infinite peace from her physical and mental pain through spiritual path through Riponche, Buddhism preacher.

The novel abounds in the scenes where women are engaged in various agrarian chores like milking the cattle, farming, chaffing the grains, etc. not for commercial ends but for subsistence of the family. This has direct connection with the pastoral economy of Bhutan whose economic and social parameters are set by the two classes of landlords and the labourers, the 'straight tax-payers' or *threl pa nagjang* and the serfs. It is the social relations of these two classes in Bhutan which produces its material wealth. Such an ancient system of production and distribution creates gaping holes in the social fabric where the ruling class defines and dominates the cultural and social production, which has been referred to as superstructure above, like education. It is the ruling class's hegemony and diktat in Bhutan that the women be denied religious education, which by the way, is the only kind of enlightenment delivered. "Tsomo represents many Bhutanese women who were born in the Thirties and forties and felt strongly deprived of education. She represents a generation", says Choden. (Choden, web) Tsomo's father, a religious teacher, very conventional, reticent and indifferent, comes down from the aristocratic Bhutanese family, which has now weakened though, and sets the regulations for the system of education and other social institutions and ideas. Such a categorical definition results in a consciousness of every individual about his role in the society which is ideology. John Frow makes a point: "in moving from a theory of social domains to the theory of class agents who live them, we move

from a theory of the superstructure to a theory of ideology" (Frow 709) Tsomo and Tsomo's mother are the class agents who translate into the ideological tenets laid down by the patriarchal society.

This brings us to the feminist discourse as Tsomo and Tsomo's mother observe what happens to their biological womanhood under the structures of gender and sex. The household roles of Tsomo and her mother are accorded to them by the patriarchal society which further politicizes the matter. Tsomo wants to have the religious education and wishes to go farthest in its quest but mother's words: "Where? I don't know. Where can a girl travel to?" (2) makes her quizzical and question her identity and the sexist politics indulged in by her father.

The attitude of father is actually the conservative patriarchal ideology which treats feminine as inadequate in reason and meaning. Luce Irigaray, the eminent French feminist has made a highly critical observation in which she argues that the subject of knowledge and reason is always defined in the western tradition as masculine.

(it) comes into being through the subordination of the feminine, which is associated with the inchoate, undifferentiated, formless, in(de)finite materiality of the world that must be transcended, objectified, and categorized into proper identities if rational speculation, the power of reason to form concepts and rational representations of the world, is to engage in ideation and describe truth. Only abstraction from matter can constitute the transcendental subject of as an autonomous body elevated above the specificities of empirical existence. The concepts and representations of the subject of reason mirror the world, and the material world, has meaning only as it provides reflection of rational ideas (Irigaray 112).

Thus, the woman becomes a mere representation of the subjective knowledge connotated by the masculine. Irigaray uses the term "speculation" in a double sense of mirroring (specularity) and conceptualizing (or rationally speculating) to describe the relation of male reason to female matter. By disconnecting reason from matter and by permitting matter to be taken as a separate object of knowledge that mirrors rational concepts, speculation establishes the self-identity of the masculine subject of knowledge. Thus, they are relegated into oblivion by the rhetoric of the male politics which refuses to acknowledge the power of the woman discourse on which the male discourse of reason and logic thrives due to sociological dynamics. Subjugation of women in the society is an important element of such social patterning. Tsomo's father believes in this patterning whereby education is a preserve for the male reason and the womanhood is just the mirroring necessary for the reflection of truth. Tsomo and her mother, for father, represent inchoate, undifferentiated, formless, in(de)finite materiality of the world on the subjugation of which lies the autonomy of his family.

Tsomo's mother dies a wretch's death while performing her assigned role of a homemaker to perfection under unbearable pain due to fatigue and the baton is passed on to Tsomo, next in order of women in the family. The mother's drudgery and tragic death has been graphically rendered by the woman author Choden as a cathartic experience. Tsomo observes that her mother had married her father a *gomchen* or a religious preacher out of admiration of the job but didn't realize the responsibilities which entail such a marriage. She did her household job with a religiosity and never grumbled. Writes Choden:

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Tsomo never heard Mother complain. She was a big strong and brave woman and she did not complain about anything. Tsomo thought she had a strange fixed expression on her face. It was a funny expression, a smile that verged on sadness. When she had this expression she would stare into the space as if she missed something and Tsomo thought that she would have complained if she could. Father was right when he said, 'Your Mother never complains. She doesn't know how to complain (6)

Thus, Father, in a way, indoctrinates the womanhood culture of subalternship in Tsomo to keep alive the patriarchal politics and socio-cultural exercises of his community. The feminist undertones are visible in the text.

The socio-economic situation of Bhutan permits women to just confine themselves to household chores or the agrarian activities since agriculture provides the main livelihood for 80% of the population and accounts for about 40% of GDP. Although the living conditions of most of the people of Bhutan do not seem as dire as that of the poor people of other third world countries mainly owing to small population but, without doubt, it is one of the least developed countries of the world. More than 90% of the people live on the subsistence farming, scattered in sparsely populated villages like one large family across the rugged terrain of the Himalayas. Informed with such a not-so-impressive scenario for women in Bhutan, Choden's novel is a direct product of the material base which her country provides. Her understanding of social norms and the ideological framework in the social relations of her country goads her to attempt a literary representation novel which again is linked to the rise of a particular class and a contestation in the social relations of a particular epoch. Despite being a representative of the rare educated elite of her country and a novelist well aware of the postmodernist and contemporary literary expressions, Choden has chosen a rather tardy linear narrative style of 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolic of an insular socio-cultural fabric of Bhutan. The conservative ideology of the Bhutanese society justifies the cultural production like literature and literary forms like novel to be old-fashioned and traditional. Forms, according to the Marxist thinking, are the byproducts of social realities and the changing ideologies. While quoting Leon Trotsky, writes profoundly hued Marxist critic Terry Eagleton: "Form changes because of the changes in the ideology. The new ways of perceiving reality find expression in a changed form. It implies that the change in the ideology is ushered by a change in economic base that is reflected in the changed ideology" (Eagleton 183)

Since the Bhutanese society has come of age recently in terms of social and economic realities leading to class struggles which feature bourgeois consciousness too, the slow and measured pace of the novel harmonizes with these Bhutanese social practices. The age old patriarchal hegemony is also a key element of such societies and hence finds an expression in Choden's feminist leanings. Thus, the feminist novel form arises out of the social practices of Bhutan and its complex cultural framework qualifying the novel for the tag of 'Marxo-feminist' discourse.

Tsomo is betrayed by her husband Wangchen who had been sleeping with her sister Kesang when Tsomo was recovering from the traumatic experience of a miscarriage. Wangchen resorts to physical abuse which makes Tsomo ruminate: "Tsomo felt that she was neither a frog nor a bird. She didn't belong in the pond, so she could not stay in it, nor could she fly away like a bird out of the marriage. She was

Wangchen's wife in name only. Kesang blossomed and she withered." (92) Wangchen's treatment of Tsomo is positing of the masculine "reason" and "rational speculation" whereby he dumps Tsomo in her pain as useless object and embraces Kesang as his right since staying tied to a sterile and diseased woman is irrational for his lineage and domesticity. For Wangchen, in Irigarayan tenets, she has to be "transcended, objectified and categorized" into "proper identities" for his masculine discourse to flourish. It is the Bhutanese social structure which allows a man to keep two women which translates itself into an ideological framework adopted by men and legitimized by the dominant class to which Wangchen in the novel belongs. Same holds true for Lhatu, Tsomo's second husband who deserts her when realizes that Tsomo is growing older and is sickening further to the point of no return. Tsomo's materiality is preventing Lhatu to establish himself as an autonomous body which is encapsulated in his desire to be a religious preacher under the condescence of his patrons. He cannot achieve his "rational speculation" for "ideation and describing truth" until his empirical existence with Tsomo is transcended and abstracted. Tsomo is just his reflection for rational ideas which is expendable without any harm to his rationality.

Tsomo walks out of home and joins a labour party in India where she chums up with a cheerful girl Dechen Choki who had been a victim of sexual abuse by her stepfather in the knowledge of her mother who is afraid to death to rebel. Dechen is further raped by the *lajab* or the contractor of the road pointing at the female subjectivity getting codified by the male. Rape or the sexual abuse is the outcome of the patriarchal ideology whereby female is something natural and preordained while feminine refers to the traits that biological woman acquires in society through different experiences. Treating this difference in its own way patriarchy associates certain traits with femininity and universalizes them (Moi 2007). *Lajab* in the novel speaks for this patriarchal hegemony whereby Dechen's helplessness and physical weakness worsened by her low social status is a feminine trait accorded by the male dominated society of the fifties and sixties. He acquires a political right to violate Dechen owing to his power knowledge of masculine as well as the class differences legitimizing the repression on the lesser breeds. The novel depicts through Dechen episode Choden's class consciousness and struggles which are the basis of all discursive practices as per the Marxist philosophy.

Failing in her second marriage too, Tsomo takes refuge in a Buddhist Monastery under the influence of Tibetan spiritual guru Rinpoche who becomes her guiding light. She starts ascribing her physical and mental sufferings to a *karmic* illness which never deserted her from her childhood. Tsomo's finding relief from her life-long ailments under the religious precincts and a political commitment to the cause of women like her after becoming a nun has a relation with the Bhutanese religious superstructure with which Choden herself is related to. Being primarily a Buddhism dominated country the socio-cultural pattern of Bhutan is steeped in Buddhist tenets of *karma* which Choden subscribes to. Marxist critic Goldmann's genetic criticism comes into play here where he takes into consideration the structure of thought or the world vision of the writer as determined by his class or the group to which he belongs. A work of literature gives expression to common mental structures of a social group.

These include common perceptions, ideas and values at a particular phase in history. In this system the term structure refers to the categories of mental behavior and the term genetic means the historical development of these mental structures (Neb 96). This model studies the origin and development of different art forms out of social life and the process by which these works take different forms. Goldmann, instead of relating the structure of a work to the biography of a writer, relates it to the mental structures of the author's social group. Choden's herself being a Buddhist and a discerning Buddhist rather who critiques the misinterpretations of Buddhism by the Bhutanese patriarchy. Her social consciousness and mental structures are collective in nature being a legatee of an educated and prosperous farmer father in central Bhutan's Bumthang district who endowed her with a critical faculty to question the politics of religion and gender space. Her curriculum vitae boasts of being on the women's definitive magazine *Femina's* cover as the chosen Miss IP (Indraprastha Collge, New Delhi) in 1973 which speaks volumes about her acute feminist consciousness and developing "questioning" mental structures about religious and gender based disparities of Bhutan. Her such nonconformist stance stems from her Sociology degree from the University of Nebraska which has helped her understand "how women were made to carry out a sustenance role through much of Bhutanese history, how a sly male interpretation of Buddhist texts prevented women from accessing the religious scriptures and how denied of knowledge, the destiny of Bhutanese women was never in their own hands" (Bhuthalia, web).

Thus, *The Circle of Karma* doesn't remain an autonomous work but a literary expression rooted in the common social behavior of Bhutan. In Goldmann's terms, Choden's structure of her work is homologous with the mental structures of the Bhutanese social group and its specialty lies in the coherence that the author has provided to the preexisting mental structures and hence it becomes genetic in nature. Thus, there is a clear link between the literary work and the social reality as in Marxist terminology which feminism is also a part of.

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