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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE RELIGIOUS FRESCOES IN KUNZANG CHODEN'S NOVEL THE CIRCLE OF KARMA

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Abstract

The paper examines the thematic exploration of religious identity in Kunzang Choden's novel *The Circle of Karma*. It takes a critical look at the transformation of the protagonist Tsomo from an ordinary village girl to a spiritual nun, elaborating on how religion played its role in this evolution. Choden has graphically portrayed the length and breadth of religious rites and rituals that prevailed in Bhutan. The novel follows, in the person of Tsomo, deep-rooted Bhutanese cultural and religious traditions, going to the depths pertaining to questions of karma, suffering, and peace considering life's misfortunes on the journey to enlightenment.

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Introduction:-

Bhutan, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, gets its name from the Sanskrit term *Bhotanta*, meaning "the end." It is believed that Lama Ngawang Namgyal is the founder of Buddhism in Bhutan, though Bhutanese refer to their country as *Drukylu*. Yet another reason Bumthang district seems to be considered as the historical and religious heart of the country is that King Sendharka was converted to Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche. Other districts, such as Paro, Punakha, and Kur, have different religious customs and rituals. The legendary Sindhu Raja of Kamarupa introduced Buddhism to Bhutan. The first king of Bhutan, Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck, took the initiative to grow the seeds of Buddhism in this fertile land. Historian Gedun Rinchen referred to Bhutan as "the southern land of forests" while writing his *Religious History of the Country*. It is believed that Gautama Buddha himself brought the lights of Buddhism to those darkened regions of Bhutan and spread it to the illiterates to enable them to shape their identity. During the mid-seventh century, two temples arose, Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang and Kyerchu Lhakhang in Paro, marking Bhutan's full transformation into a mainstream Buddhist society. The Bhutanese contact with Guru Padmasambhava during the early diffusion period prompted many other Buddhist temples in the Himalayan region, thereby definitely establishing Bhutan as a Buddhist country. Open Buddhist activity in Bhutan declined with the advent of Tibetan Prince Tsangma and the Dorji brothers and hence Buddhism spread to Tibet from Nepal and North India. As Michael Aris comments in his book *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, "Bhutan is to Buddhism as Nepal is to Hinduism. The only remaining polity in which this faith remains the established state religion." (Aris 345)

The first Bhutanese woman novelist in the English language, Kunzang Choden, in her debut novel *The Circle of Karma*, has given an insight into the rigid religiosity and resilient tradition of Bhutan. Born into a traditional feudal family, Choden witnessed the harsh and marginalized reality of females in Bhutanese society. The protagonist of the novel, Tsomo, epitomizes Bhutanese women. As the Puranas overwhelmingly dominate Indian culture, religion dominates Bhutanese culture. The novel takes one through the religious culture of Bhutan, pointing to the

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transformation from tradition to modernity, individual to society, and, more interestingly, Tsomo's transformation from being a docile subordinated woman to a literate nun. Whereas there is major scope in interpreting the novel from a feminist perspective, this article is more concerned with the traces of a Buddhist religious identity represented by the author.

Kunzang Choden was born in Bumthang, Bhutan, in 1952. Her country was opening from self-imposed isolation at the time to catch up with modernization and socio-economic development. Much of her country's rich cultural heritage was likely to be absorbed during this period, which caused concern for her. Interest in folklore motivated Choden to compile the folk tales of this remote Himalayan kingdom. She was educated in Catholic convents in India and now works for the United Nations. Their family home in the Tang Valley, Bumthang, known as Ogyen Choling, is the most extraordinary, multi-storied temple-with walls that one can hardly see because they are covered in such rich religious frescoes, plus many other sacred objects, and an entire floor devoted to Tara and Guru Rinpoche. Published in 2005, *The Circle of Karma* presents Tsomo's life, which defines the traumas of conventional limiting gender roles in pre-modern Bhutan and the changing sexism, when men are in power. Tsomo's journey begins when her mother died. Choden shows Tsomo's mother from her father's perspective as an ordinary household caretaker whose role is to take care of their children.

Bhutan and its Religious Frescoes

Different customs, traditions, and histories are followed in each district region of Bhutan. For instance, Bumthang is considered the heartland of Bhutan since it constituted the historic and religious centre of this country because Guru Rinpoche converted King Sendharka to Buddhism. Similarly, regions like Paro, Punakha, and Kur have their own different customs and histories. Agriculture and farming are as ancient as the country itself. Historically, the Bhutanese people worshiped the protective deity of Mahakala, whose beginnings established the followers before the arrival of Buddhism. Such followers may be referred to as Proto-Bhutanese. It is said that Buddhism was incorporated within Bhutanese society through the event of Suryagarbhasutra, where Buddha cast rays of light into the dark land of Bhutan, thus illuminating the mountains, rivers, and forests. This metamorphosis made the people feel that their land was blessed with the fountain of dharma. Later, with the constant revolution, Buddha emerged as the chief spiritual figure, and thus, Buddhist monasteries, temples, and practices developed all over Bhutan.

Religion in Bhutan has always been used to validate and act out the superiority and inflated ego of the male section of society over their subordinate females. In the essay, *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?* A. K. Ramanujan describes theories of karma and talaividior head writing. As he explains:

Karma implies the self's past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility. Talaividi is one's fate inscribed arbitrarily at one's birth on one's forehead; the inscription has no relation to one's prior actions; usually in such explanations past lives are not even part of the scheme. (Ramanujan 44)

The culture of Bhutan is a very traditional one. When Tsomo was born, the astrologer declared that she would "have a restless spirit" and that her "life would be marked by travel, citing as evidence her birthmark and the monkey year of her birth." As such, the astrologer told Tsomo: "Monkey year is not considered a good year to be born in. The wheel of birth mark, kye tag khorlo, is located on your knee" (Choden 2). The Bhutanese believe strictly in reincarnation and astrology, and they accept the presence of spirits and ghosts as a natural part of life. Tsomo's father explained, "There were many spirits everywhere. Human beings had to share the world with spirits, that this was the natural order of things, but they must not get in each other's way." (Choden 9)

Going by the short story collection, "Folktales of Bhutan" and "Bhutanese Tales of Yeti," Kunzang Choden explained that spirits and ghosts are part of Bhutanese culture. For them, supernatural beings form a significant element in their worldview; some of them are amicable, while others are very hostile. Oral traditions teach the young the art of coexistence with such spirits and hence merge myth with magic in cultural reality. Being an extremely religious country, Bhutan has numerous ceremonies to mark special occasions. The women, otherwise barred from participating in the religious mainstream, take charge of organizing prayers and rituals in every home. There are long life prayers, rituals for the cattle, and special prayers on holy days. One such religious ceremony is called chod. It was, according to Tsomo's father, popularized by MachigLhapdron, a miraculous Tibetan saint. Chod is an offering of one's body and a feeding for all beings that satisfy every desire. The rite-usually performed at night-is accompanied by instruments such as hand drums and a single bell, which provides an eerie atmosphere.

According to Choden: “MachigLhapdron was a miraculous woman, a great Tibetan saint who had popularized the practice of chod. It was the offering of one’s body to feed every conceivable kind of being, to satisfy every kind of desire.” (Choden 22)

Another religious practice carried on in Bhutan is tshangma which is a ritual of purification of the pregnant women. Only the rich and the noble class used to have wedding feasts and wasn’t practiced by commoners. Narrated by the village elders.

When an unmarried woman became pregnant, she was obliged to announce it and have the purification ceremony called tshangma, for a pregnancy was seen as unclean unless purified. That was really a bad time for the girl unless she had a willing father for the child. If a woman did not perform tshangma, she would be held responsible for any natural catastrophes that befell the village that year. (Choden 36)

Women gained more power by asserting the possibility of unpurified pregnancies, which could displease the birth gods and local deities. An unmarried girl that was known to be pregnant but had refused the ceremony would be responsible for natural disasters, illnesses, or deaths among humans and cattle in the village. The event of tshangma was very important, with the special room of the altar packed with the villagers. The woman who performed the ritual wore a white, traditional scarf around her neck, called a khoda. On another mat like that mad of dough, sat the man being crowned as the father of her future child. The yurung was the sacred object that the father drew through the window next to the altar room. It is said that the father created a swastika with barley grains on a mat, then covered this with another mat. It was on the second mat that sat the bride and the bridegroom. Then, at the end of the ceremony, the top mat had to be removed to predict the couple’s future. The yurungitself signifies thoroughness, and as such, for any occasion, it is a very auspicious element.

The couple had to sit on this, and at the end of the ceremony, the top mat was taken off to foretell the future of the couple. The yurung symbolizes stability and continuity and is, therefore, very auspicious for such an occasion. (Choden 40)

Karma and the concept of Incarnation

The American school of Transcendentalism holds the belief that actions executed through the body, mind, and words are of the same consequence. Similarly, Bhutanese society also upholds a strong influence of the belief in karma; thus, the present life of humankind perceives to be the decaying result of past actions. Bhutanese people, since childhood, followed many religious rituals attributing evil spirits to illness. The society is patriarchal, and men enjoy the privileges of accessing altars and studying religion while the women are greatly limited to the household chores and childbearing. Dominated by men and Lamas, Bhutanese society is filled across the mountain valleys with Buddhist chants and prayers, the people strictly adhere to customs of worshipping supernatural beings.

Another major religious practice is the last rites for dead persons. In this regard, Choden elaborates on the rituals at the death of Tsomo’s mother. Among the most important practices is the reading of the Book of the Dead or thotrol, chanted to enable the soul of the dead person to be liberated through bardo, the transition from life to death.

Father gently led Kesang out of the room. He had already arranged for a reader to come and read the text of thotrol, the Book of the Dead, which benefits the dying and the dead by liberating them through hearing in the bardo or the transition from living to dying. (Choden 59)

According to Bhutanese custom, a dead pregnant woman cannot be cremated with the child inside her womb. Unborn life must see the light, view the sky, occupy space, and experience the wind, or else a penalty will have to be paid in coming rebirths. This again brings out the Bhutanese belief in karma and rebirth.

Astrology and becoming monks or saints are common professions among the youth in Bhutan. Such religious priests are known as Rinpoche in Bhutan; they are considered successors of Gautama Buddha. Nidup Tshering, the younger brother of Tsomo, opted for the field of astrology, and renouncing Bhutan, he went to India where he joined a monastery and became a saint, renouncing worldly pleasures. The nomadic life of Tsomo began when her mother died, which took her all the way to the Indian borders in search of livelihood. She becomes enamoured with a man named Wangchen. The relationship goes well for some time, but she later realizes Wang Chen’s true nature and leaves him. She then searches for employment and finds one in very difficult conditions, with less food and water

during the reconstruction of the Thimphu dzong. Out of her karmic disease, Tsomo suffers from swelling in the belly, so people mistake her for pregnancy. Everything in Tsomo's life—her mother dying, a sequence of relationships gone sour, and the illness itself—she believes is the result of her karma. It is in this afterlife that a Native woman reflects on her life.

It's all our karma. Our lives are like a lamp on the altar. We are born and we live for a while like a lamp. We can neither shine brightly nor flicker, but we all must die. Life is transient." We are just passing through. You can think of yourself as a pilgrim on earth and in your own body because that too you must let go. A pilgrim also has a sense of purpose even if limited to the period of the pilgrimage. A pilgrim aims to gain merit and pray for all beings. We can all be pilgrims. (Choden 145)

Conclusion:-

Buddhism and political thoughts coexist in a traditional religious society like Bhutan. As the 13th-century Christian theologian St Thomas Aquinas defines, "Religion is not faith but the proof of faith with external signs." Here, aesthetics become very important for the Bhutanese; Buddhist stupas (chortens), paintings of Buddha, and sacred texts are considered manifestations of spiritual expression. Art becomes a way to gain religious merit and power and hence becomes a factor behind the shaping of identity of the nation. In the novel, Kunzang Choden traces the changing journey of Tsomo from an ordinary village girl who was marginalized from religious teachings by her father to a peaceful nun dedicated to spirituality. The development of Tsomo, as deftly brought out by Choden in the novel, is a pointer toward personal reformation. By the end of the novel, all is well with Tsomo's restless life. Spirituality helped her find the meaning of life as she became a disciple under the teachings of Guru Rinpoche. For her, detachment from worldly pleasures was enlightenment about the presence of divinity within humans. Through Buddhism, she found meaning and created her settled serene nun identity. Reflecting on this is how religion shapes the national identity of Bhutan. Tsomo is the central character in the novel, and through her, the reflections on Buddha's teachings of suffering en-route to "Ultimate Truth." Her journey shows that peace in life is attained by surmounting the past struggles and giving up materialistic desires—echoing Buddhist principles.

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