

even in the works of the future poets like Langston Hughes and their poems like *I, too* bubbles up with the suppressed aspiration for independence with greater vigour and more impulsive fervour.

Just as the 'lordly flowing' Niger is not a mere river but a representation of freely flowing sensation of freedom which as a current continues even in the dream, the poem as a whole is also not a mere cry for sheer political liberty. It is a poem with profound spiritual teaching that ultimately no shackle can keep the human soul bound- it is ever free and ever blissful. Hence in vain the powerful on earth prides oneself on their strength and earthly wealth and wastes their energy in enslaving, torturing and mercilessly killing others instead of utilizing the same in preaching the gospel of love and brotherhood and enjoy eternal bliss realizing all are the sons of same God discarding the idea that –

Their colour is a diabolic die.

(*On Being Brought from Africa to America*- Phillis Wheatley)

and sing out to own self as well as to the world-

Remember, Christians, Negro's, black as Cain,

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (*ibid*)

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Resistance Against Patriarchal Hegemony : Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma*

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Abstract: The Bhutanese writer, Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* (2005) provides a cross- cultural reading which tells its story across the boundaries of nation , religion and time. The novel gives vent to a kind of female subjectivity which refuses to reconcile to the dictates of a male dominated society. It traces the history of a woman's struggle for space in social structure , against hegemonic control and oppression. It questions the notion of patriarchy , subjugation of a woman's life to her sexual functions , and the guilt which society induces in her when she demands freedom or thinks of her own emotional needs. The chief protagonist, Tsomo's life is a series of ordeals which make her look within and initiate an inward journey as well. *The Circle of Karma* is a feminist text which questions the aesthetics of the traditional theoretical assumptions with a view to reassess the relation between the androcentric social order and the female body in order to subvert the phallogocentric discourse. This paper attempts to analyze Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* as a specimen of gynofiction which seeks to resist patriarchal hegemony and is concerned with what Elaine Showalter terms as "articulation of women's experience".

Keywords: Hegemony, gynocritics, patriarchy, sisterhood, androcentric, hierarchy, gynofiction.

Contemporary women's writing in English has moved away from the confines of domesticity to engage with the historical, political, cultural and economic dimensions of the public space. Recent years have witnessed women writers from different regions of the world gaining better visibility in the literary domain, making a more conscious and articulate attempt to speak for themselves and of the areas of experiences related to their lives. The postmodern 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. These attempts are part of the process of 'reading' the past, controlling the present and shaping the future. Jasbir Jain rightly observes :

Women, as producers of goods, of knowledge, of posterity, as carriers of tradition and agents of change, refuse to be passive objects of desire or of subordination ... it is not only society but art as well which has had to accommodate the change in women's self-perception. (Jain 21)

Contemporary women writers of SAARC fiction, apart from dealing with the traditional themes of man-woman relationship, subjugation of women, women empowerment etc., depict the larger issues of existence.

Once they shift from the familiar reality and touch upon the socio-political and cultural reality of the civilization vis-à-vis the national reality, they attain a stature which is definitely greater than that of those writing purely of domestic issues. Kunzang Choden is the first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English. Published in the year 2005, *The Circle of Karma*, is her first novel. Set in the 1950s, the initial period of imperially regulated modernization in Bhutan, the novel is rich in detailed descriptions of ritual life in Bhutan. 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 from a relatively unknown part of the world in which style and content are closely interwoven, each informing and enriching the other. Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* seeks to expose patriarchal practices and is concerned with the articulation of women's experience. Though women all over the world are not a homogenous category there is a human component to literature which a woman writer can more easily discuss with another woman writer, even across an ocean than she can with the literary men next door. Along with George Eliot, many other critics argue that when we look at women writers collectively, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation is seen which is very different from traditional male preoccupations and roles. This led to a new current of feminist literary criticism that grew alongside and in response to the analysis of patriarchal writing. To define it, Elaine Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics' that actually set out to invent or to discover an alternative, co-existing, literary tradition for women writers, in which the values of feminine culture and female biology could be explored and valued on their own terms with as little reference as possible to pre-existing male tradition. Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* portrays the numerous facets of women's experience emphasizing in particular the trials and tribulations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. It tells the story of Tsomo, a young Bhutanese woman, who embarks on the difficult and lonely journey of life. Tsomo's travels, which begin after her mother's death, take her away from her family and lead her across Bhutan and into India. All the while, Tsomo attempts to break out of the pre-ordained, pre-defined shackled roles and seeks to find herself and grow as a person and woman. 'Karma' according to Buddhist philosophy is not predestination or fate, but is the infallible law of cause and effect that governs our lives and for that matter the universe. World is a physical entity formed by intricately interrelated phenomena just like the dynamics of ecosystem. Whatever we do by our body, speech, or mind will have a corresponding effect or result. Thus, we dwell in a circle of Karma. Kunzang Choden, portraying a roller coaster of events that happens in Tsomo's life best exemplifies this circle of Karma.

The Circle of Karma unveils the experiences of a woman whose feelings erupt in a series of disastrous choices but who overcomes it to search her 'self'. The argument of the 'self' has long been notable in the feminist

philosophy for it is central to questions about personhood, identity, the body and agency that feminism must address. In some respects, Simone de Beauvoir's trenchant observation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (Beauvoir 16) sums up why the 'self' is such an important issue for feminism. To be the 'Other' is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent – in short, mere body. In *The Circle of Karma*, the protagonist deconstructs the concept of personhood in order to reconstruct it as inclusive of woman. Patriarchy appreciates docility, passivity and voicelessness in women in the game of sexual politics. Tsomo, as a young girl, aspired to learn literature and practise religion but in the medieval Bhutan girls were obligated to excel in household chores and fieldworks. Tsomo's mother advises her to become a 'good' woman while her father, a faithful gomchen i.e. a religious scholar, teaches the boys and his sons to become good gomchens. When Tsomo expresses her desire to learn to read and write, she is sternly told by her father: "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 21). As bitter tears of rejection sting Tsomo's eyes, she looks at her mother in anticipation for some support. However, 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 smile spreading on her own face". (21) For most of her young life, Tsomo had seen her mother either pregnant or suckling a child at her soft sagging breasts:

The image of her mother sitting by the hearth, stirring a pot of something on the stove with her right hand and feeding a baby in her lap, rasping for breath, her belly swollen in pregnancy, is the image that fills Tsomo's mind even now (56).

The birthmark on Tsomo's knee indicates her thirst for knowledge, her desire to travel and know the world. However, bound by social and cultural constructs how far can Tsomo go? Her mother smiles at the irony of the situation:

'Where is the furthest I can travel to Mother?' Tsomo asks her Mother dreamily. '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 south as India.' (2)

Little Tsomo has to look after her siblings and perform fieldwork and household chores. She envies and admires the fates of her brothers who can learn religious scripts only because they have the privilege of being born as males:

In her eyes, the boys in the altar room are special. They're being educated. They are being taught religion. She longs to be educated, to learn to read and write and chant those beautiful prayers like them. These boys will one day become religious practitioners. They will accumulate merit through religious practice. They will be asked to read and perform rituals in various households . . . Being born a male already

has 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. (20)

Tsomo wanders what her next birth will be: "Perhaps she can have a better chance if she hosts many readings of the scriptures when she grows up and has her own house. She has seen that this is one of the ways of getting some merit as a woman"(20). Tsomo realizes very soon that women by birth are doomed. It is their karmic fates that have made them females:

All she can do is to bury her dream of learning religion deeper and deeper, until it becomes a distant unfulfilled dream. If only she had been born a boy- but she had not accumulated enough virtue to be born a boy . . . 'I am only a woman.' She keeps repeating this phrase in every situation . . . She repeats it like a mantra until she begins to believe that many things in life are different for women and men. The older women approve of her newfound wisdom and often encourage her, 'Yes, we are women, Tsomo. We are different. We must be less ambitious and more subdued. We are not like the men'. (22-23)

Tsomo understands that a woman has almost no choice or very few choices of her own. Her childhood passes observing the rich ritualistic life in the Bhutanese village; the gender difference between a boy and a girl, the culture of teasing and night hunting, the humiliation and pain of conceiving illegitimate child, the beauty and joy of consensual courtship and marriages, to mention a few. In this way, before Tsomo turns fifteen she excels in the mundane customs and becomes a good homemaker which earn her praise from her mother and neighbours. The middle and lower middle class people of Bhutan generally do not have elaborate weddings because of lack of finance. Men and women choose each other and start living as couples. However, the problem starts once the woman conceives :

But when a 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. Unpurified pregnancies disturbed the birth gods and the locality gods. Until the woman had performed the ceremony, she was accountable for all severe weather conditions, illnesses and deaths among humans and even cattle. (36).

While men are at liberty to indulge in such affairs and then accept the paternal responsibility or decline it, women have to pay a heavy penalty if disowned by men. After her mother's death, Tsomo undertakes a journey to Trongsa to light the butter lamps at the altars for the peace of the departed soul. On this journey she meets Wangchen, a young man already married. She returns to her village pregnant with Wangchen's child but Wangchen leaves his first wife and marries Tsomo admitting the paternity of her unborn child. However, Tsomo's karmic actions and her fate, as she believes by now, are against her. Consequently, she delivers a stillborn

child and her body takes an odd shape with a protruding belly which is the result of a disease that remains untreated. Tsomo's protruding belly not only causes her great inconvenience and misery but also turns out to be an embarrassment and shame for her as it later becomes the subject of "secret male laugh" (160) who often confuse it with pregnancy. Tsomo loses her grace and whatever position she had in her family. Wangchen abuses her mentally, verbally and physically and courts her younger sister, Kesang, 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 home. What a circle of Karma!

She felt humbled and ashamed and most of all she was afraid. She knew it was now her turn to bear the suffering she had caused another woman, not so long ago. This was karma, the consequence of her actions, she could not escape from it. In the pitch darkness of the night, she extended her thoughts and reached out to an unknown sister somewhere. Wangchen's first wife. She felt an unexplainable bond to this woman, whose name she hadn't even bothered to find out. (90)

Sometimes filled with anger and resentment, sometimes with envy and vengeance, and often with a mind obsessed by malicious thoughts, Tsomo opts to move away from them and one night she flees from her home leaving nothing but tears of empathy for her father, little brothers and taking nothing but some valuable items that her mother inherited her. Tsomo leaves her home and takes the arduous task of cutting stones for constructing roads in the hills. Henceforth, her life turns into a painful series of journey via Thimpu, Kalimpong, Kathmandu, Dehradun and Delhi. During the course of this journey, Tsomo survives another betrayal and deception in her second marriage to an unscrupulous man named Lhatu who exploits her to the full and then leaves her completely depleted both emotionally and financially. Tsomo also forges new relationship with several other women belonging to different generations. She gets a new ray of hope in the form of a young girl, Dechen Choki, who runs away from the sexual abuses of her stepfather and takes shelter in Tsomo's make-shift bamboo tent :

Together they cooked their meals as they chatted and teased each other. They shared their deepest secrets and accepted each other. Kesang and Tsomo had never been so close. Sometimes Tsomo thought that she had lost a sister and found a new one who was not only a sister but also a friend. (109)

The need for female solidarity as expressed by Bell Hooks in her epoch making essay "Sisterhood" emerges as one of the major themes of this novel: "To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs, and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood." (Hooks 67). *The Circle of Karma* celebrates the coming together of women from different strata of the society – Tsomo, Pema Buti, Dechen Choki, Sita and many others- as friends and sharers of pain and sorrows. In this feeling of sympathy for one another, an identity is

struck which ultimately forges the binding vine of sisterhood crossing the boundaries of caste and class. After Tsomo leaves for the capital, Thimpu, to labour on the road south to India, she tells her similarly suffering friend : “ Our stories are so similar and yet so different. Everything happened because we are women. You loved a man and suffered. I hated the man and suffered.” (109) At another instance she tells Dechen Choki, “It's not your fault. Your only problem is being a woman. We cannot change that but we have to stay strong” (121) The experiences of women under patriarchal domination and those of the colonized subjects are, in many ways, similar. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak points out: “Sexual difference is doubly affected. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadows” (Spivak 28). Kunzang Choden uses her narrative to raise such important issues as a woman's right to her body. “Patriarchy requires violence or the subliminal threat of violence in order to maintain itself”. (Steinem 259). As body is “a practical direct locus of social control” (Bordo 236), it has always been an important site for feminist discourse. Female body is most often rendered 'docile' under the domination of patriarchy and becomes the site of forced colonization which the male master uses and abuses. It becomes primarily a source of social control in an androcentric social order. Cringing under patriarchal domination and subjugation, it is never free. Rape is the most drastic epitome of the inequality of men and women, and of the degradation and oppression of women by men. It is not a sporadic deviation but a deeply entrenched social practice that totally dehumanizes the victim and turns her into an object of complete domination and subjugation by the male. Dechen Choki's stepfather rapes and molests her and she faces the same humiliation even after escaping from her home. Silence becomes the ultimate reality when bodies are subjugated and self-dignity is mutilated. Luce Irigaray rightly claims that- “It is important for us to guard and keep our own bodies and at the same time make them emerge from the silence and subjugation” (Irigaray 421). The solidarity and sisterhood which Tsomo is able to construct with love and sympathy function as a strategy of empowerment as well. By the story's end, surviving brutality, poverty, betrayal, and abuse at the hands of men, Tsomo finds fulfillment through her religious quest and opts to become a nun. She says, “I want to devote the rest of my life to religion. I have always wanted to learn religion but because of my female body I was denied that privilege”(145). Tsomo is eventually able to purge herself of all remorseful thoughts:

Women internalized their problems and grief and believed that they were all at fault. Women were the thieves, stealing husbands from each other, living in suspicion and in hate... Tsomo thought, 'We had it all wrong. We have to learn to rethink our roles and obligations. Our obligations to ourselves and to each other.' (270)

Shaving her hair off and wearing a maroon dress, Tsomo finally chooses divinity and, in so doing, fulfils her childhood wish to practise religion

though she cannot read or write when the Rinpoche ordains her to become a nun. Tsomo vows to reform her life and seek a better path. Finally, as she reaches the end of her life, she embraces a philosophy of detachment and forgives old injuries. Tsomo “could now smile a smile free of all memories and free of all malice” (296). Kunzang Choden, in *The Circle of Karma*, attempts to break the long silence of Bhutanese women by transforming the prevalent androcentric discourse to a feminine voice-over. Renowned feminist theorists, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, contend that patriarchy is a specifically cultural and historical construct with power relations. Since language is based on binaries (male/female, presence/absence, etc.), it produces a patriarchal order which places the feminine as subordinate to the masculine. Strangely enough, the dominative discourse tells the story of half of humanity through the voice of the other half. Women's writing, often slotted and discussed as 'separate' category, comes in for several dismissals as limited, autobiographical, romantic, writing about domesticity, limited in its viewpoint or designed for a female readership. The phallogocentric tradition did not allow woman her say. Women, therefore, need to invent another history which is outside narratives of power, inequality and oppression. Gayle and Kahn aptly remark :

History has been a record of male experience written by men from a male perspective ... as long as war and politics seem more significant to the history of mankind than child rearing, women remain marginalized or invisible... It is therefore imperative for the historians of women to reconstruct the female experience. (Gayle and Kahn 13).

Feminists have found the irrelevance of considering women as a single and unified category and have begun to emphasize the need for local, specific and historically informed analysis, carefully grounded in both spatial and cultural contexts. Above all they call for “the recognition and celebration of difference(s), and the importance of encouraging the recovery of previously silenced voices and an acceptance of the partial nature of all knowledge claims.” (Parpart and Marchand 517). There is an increasing need to work with the concept of differences between women, paving the way for the emergence of a meaningful dialogue around both differences and similarities and “not guilty avoidance and angry accusation by women or a hierarchy of oppression, nor an undynamic pluralism of position which does not recognize power differences”. (Robinson 21) Kunzang Choden, in *The Circle of Karma*, portrays the vulnerable conditions of Bhutanese women who live in a society structured by strict religious, familial and tribal customs. 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. *The Circle of Karma* thus becomes a critique of wider social pattern of patriarchy and an exposure of the maltreatment and oppression of women in the name of social custom. The issues dealt with in this novel are very current and even go across