

## **Navigating Cultural and Personal Challenges in Bhutanese Society in**

### ***The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden**

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#### **Abstract**

This article see the sights of Kunzang Choden's novel *The Circle of Karma* based on the main character Tsomo's journey within Bhutanese society as she experiences cultural, societal, and personal struggles. The novel is critically read through the lens of culture and personal journey of the female character. The analysis utilizes knowledge regarding gender roles, identity in culture, and individual transformation that shed light on Tsomo's experiences and also life at Bhutan. This paper examines how Choden employs the life of the protagonist to critique the conventional social setup, demonstrating the quest for self-determination against cultural restraints.

**Keywords:** gender roles, cultural identity, personal transformation, Bhutanese literature

#### **Introduction**

Bhutan, a small beautiful Himalayan kingdom, is globally known for its distinctive development philosophy based on Gross National Happiness (GNH), which focuses on overall well-being rather than economic prosperity. The core of Bhutanese society is the deeply rooted religious and philosophical precept of karma, a Buddhist principle that influences individual conduct, social norms, and moral decision-making. Karma teaches that what a person does in this life will affect them in future lives, thereby defining how individuals navigate cultural duty and individual wishes (Harvey, 2000, p. 56).

Despite its strong cultural foundations, Bhutan is coming to terms with the realities of modernization increasingly. The tide of globalization, economic growth, and exposure to other cultures externally tests the conventional systems heavily, creating a dynamic tension between conserving and individual aspirations (Ura, 2015, p. 70). The evolving role of karma in the context is talked about in this work, elucidating how the Bhutanese people reconcile their cultural foundations and personal desires in the modern networked world.

By investigating karma as a social bonding mechanism and an individual decision-making guide, this research aims to gain a deeper insight into its value in contemporary Bhutanese society. Moreover, it discusses how young generations comprehend and practice the concept of karma in response to the evolving social conditions, including urbanization, greater education access, and the omnipresent influence of digital media.

The above mentioned landmark representation was literally portrayed in *The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden. first Bhutanese woman to write a novel in English. This novel tracks the life of the central character, Tsomo and her journey. In the context of Bhutanese cultural tradition, the narrative presents a compelling critique of gendered expectation and social constraint, offering very perceptive relationship with karma. (Varley, 2011, p. 39).

## **Literature Review**

Karma, an axiomatic doctrine of Buddhist thought, represents the moral principle of cause and effect by which a person's virtuous actions control their future experiences. In the view of Harvey (2000), the moral value of one's actions directly affects future consequences, providing a context for ethical accountability. Under the prevailing spiritual practice of Vajrayana Buddhism in Bhutan, karma heavily influences individual behavior as well as societal norms. Everyday participation in religious practices and an innate care for gaining an auspicious rebirth continue as the main staples of Bhutanese existence.

Phuntsho (2004) emphasizes the position of karma in the construction of individual and group identity within Bhutanese society. Yet Zangmo (2019) points to how younger Bhutanese have to

negotiate hybrid identities, where their cultural heritage is reconciled with plans for the future. This balance represents a societal trend more generally, negotiated against changing individual and work-related aspirations.

The dynamics of modernization bring in new forces that test traditional Buddhist values. Schuelka (2012) observes that economic prosperity and personal success, which are increasingly prioritized in modern Bhutan, tend to conflict with traditional Buddhist teachings, including the principle of karma. However, Ura (2015) contends that instead of being undermined, karma is in the process of transformation in accordance with Bhutan's changing social and economic environment. Modernization, he contends, provides openings for the reinterpretation of older beliefs so that they remain valid in a rapidly changing world.

### **Choden's Cultural Identity**

The Bhutanese understanding of karma is felt in personal and social means of coping with the difficulties of life. It provides a system by which people explain their experiences, assigning personal and collective occurrences to moral causation. Traditionally, Bhutanese have drawn upon karma not merely as an explanation of life's adversities but also as a principle for ethical behavior. It provides a feeling of continuity and stability, associating individual behavior with larger spiritual and social outcomes. Yet with modernization altering Bhutanese society, new generations are under growing pressure to reinterpret and redefine these ancient traditions.

The protagonist of the novel, Tsomo, illustrates this tension in that she must navigate societal pressures alongside spiritual development and individual independence. She finds herself torn between the inevitability of karma and the urge for self-control: "Karma was a cycle that you couldn't escape, regardless of how far you fled or how intensely you sought to alter your fate" (Choden, 2005, p. 112). This conflict represents a wider cultural challenge in Bhutan: how to balance respect for tradition and the need for progress. Although Bhutan has traditionally been dedicated to the maintenance of cultural heritage, globalization and technological change are transforming its social world. Urbanization, especially, has disrupted traditional community structures, undermining the communal framework of karma. When Bhutanese migrate to urban centers in search of employment and education, exposure to different worldviews and lifestyles

usually creates tensions between religious and cultural practices and new ambitions. This change is emphasized by Tsomo's awakening—"That was the way of the world, Tsomo's world" (Choden, 2005, p. 45).

Choden's book is firmly rooted in Bhutanese cultural customs, infused with rich descriptions of rituals, prayers, and nature that form the outlook of Tsomo. "The mountains have their own wisdom, and they teach you patience" (Rotaru, 2020) captures the religious and individualized teachings learned through living in symbiosis with nature. Choden criticizes through Tsomo's experiences the structural limitations placed upon women in conventional societies. Tsomo's disqualification from school is not an individual loss but reflects a wider situation of gender inequality in Bhutanese society. Her interactions with characters who abide by patriarchal norms serve to further entrench the deeply rooted social assumptions that curb the autonomy of women.

Through these changes, Bhutan remains to walk a fine line between upholding its cultural heritage and embracing modernity. "Karma is like a circle. Whatever you do, good or bad, it comes back to you" (Duong, 2023). He summarizes the novel's theme of circularity of actions and repercussions. Through incorporation of Buddhist philosophy in state policies, Bhutan aims to combat modernization challenges while being faithful to its cultural roots. This evolving interpretation of karma suggests that while Bhutanese society is undergoing significant change, the fundamental principles of karma remain relevant, adapting to new social realities while retaining their core essence.

### **Tsomo's Personal Transformation**

The growing focus on individualism in Bhutan is reframing the more traditional understanding of karma. Although traditionally conceived as religious dogma for regulating moral causality, young Bhutanese are now increasingly looking at karma as a model for individual development and personal growth. This shift is part of worldwide trends under which religious beliefs are reframed in terms of personal freedom and self-actualization. While these changing meanings can generate intergenerational conflict, they also provide the potential for more fluid and personalized understandings of karma.

Choden's *The Circle of Karma* brings this conflict between societal norms and individual action vividly to life. The protagonist of the novel, Tsomo, is this conflict, especially in the context of gendered oppression. "Women were meant to serve, to suffer in silence, and to be content with their lot.". That was the way of the world, Tsomo's world" (Altmann, 2015, p. 78). The spiritual quest of Tsomo highlights the contradiction between fate and self-determination. Her travel to India and Nepal is an odyssey towards autonomy, testing the conventional interpretation of karma as an ineluctable power. This contradiction is contained in her musing: "The Buddha's words gave her comfort, but they also made her question her own suffering.". Was it all karma? Or was it something she could change? " (Choden, 2005, p. 126). The episodic nature of the story reflects both the randomness of life and the circularity of karma, supporting themes of resilience and survival.

"With every step, she felt a little lighter, as if each mile took her further away from the pain of her past" (Mirivel et al., 2023). Fundamentally, *The Circle of Karma* examines the limitations placed on women by Bhutanese cultural norms. Tsomo's childhood in a rural village is governed by strict gender roles, particularly her being denied formal education. Her mother's death acts as a turning point, driving her to flee home in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and self-discovery. The novel's foray into spirituality is especially engrossing.

Tsomo's journey is not just physical but also highly philosophical, challenging her to redefine the concept of karma and suffering. Choden uses Buddhist philosophy to construct Tsomo's suffering, challenging readers to consider the intricate dance of personal choice and destiny. Tsomo's musings on karma are particularly moving as she grapples with believing that her suffering is an outcome of previous decisions. "Karma was a circle that you could not escape, no matter how far you ran or how hard you tried to change your destiny" (Choden, 2005).

This passage summarizes the novel's main thematic tension—the balance of acceptance and resistance. In spite of her enormous struggles, Tsomo's strength is a characteristic feature of her personality. Her life is characterized by loss, betrayal, and physical hardship, but she constantly yearns for a sense of belonging and purpose. The novel describes her evolution from a submissive village woman to an independent woman who, in spite of societal limitations, struggles for autonomy. "Sometimes, in order to find yourself, you must lose yourself first" (Brunner et al.,

2022) captures the theme of self-discovery that is prevalent throughout the book. The episodic nature of the novel also captures the uncertainty of life and the cycle of karma.

"In the end, it is not the challenges, but the manner in which you decide to overcome them" (Martin-Seaver, 2023). This research looks at the changing understandings of karma in Bhutanese culture, especially where there are cultural and individual difficulties. It seeks to explore how people balance social obligation, religious principles, and individual decision in a karmic context. By combining anthropological, religious, and sociological insights, the research traces the ways through which karma forms identity, decision-making, and social standing in Bhutan. The results suggest that although karma continues to be an influential force in forming behavior and social relations, its meaning is evolving in response to the impacts of globalization and modernization.

Finally, this research underscores the dynamic relationship between cultural tradition and individual agency in modern Bhutan. Thus showing how old customs change in accordance with the societal and economic circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* provides a rich examination of the lived realities of Bhutanese women, negotiating the convergence of cultural, spiritual, and personal dilemmas. Through the journey of the protagonist Tsomo, Choden critically interrogates conventional gender roles while celebrating the strength and agency of women who, in spite of societal restrictions, strive to forge their own future. The novel's vivid rendering of Bhutanese culture, along with its subtle critique of patriarchy and spirituality, makes it an important addition to both Bhutanese and international literature. Though firmly based in Bhutanese customs, Choden's work speaks universally to anyone who has ever had to wrestle with identity, home, and self-determination.

The principle of karma continues to be the focus of Bhutanese culture, but its meaning is adapting to contemporary challenges. Moreover, in recent times, there is a growing emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy. With the rapid socio-economic change in Bhutan, the balance between preserving culture and individual freedom has become a pressing concern. The process of modernization, such as urbanization, globalization, and technological progress, is transforming the way people view and interact with spiritual and cultural practices.

Notwithstanding these changes, karma continues to be a core paradigm for conceptualizing life's adversity at both personal and collective levels. Bhutan's distinct model of development—captures in its Gross National Happiness (GNH) ideology—is testimony to how traditional concepts such as karma can be transformed into a modern reality. Through the inclusion of Buddhist concepts like karma in national policy-making, Bhutan provides us with a model of development that integrates spiritual welfare with modernization.

Finally, the shifting understanding of karma in Bhutan is a symptom of a wider process of cultural negotiation that occurs in many societies in an interconnected world. The Circle of Karma is a fascinating literary study of this shift, demonstrating how characters balance the tightrope of tradition and autonomy. Choden's book reinforces the common desire for identity and self-determination, making it a worthwhile contribution to world literature and cultural scholarship.

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