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*International Journal
for
Bhutan & Himalayan
Research*



 Bhutan and Himalaya Research Centre
College of Language and Culture Studies

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College of Language and Culture Studies
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In celebration of His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's 40th birth anniversary and His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuk's 65th birth anniversary.

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International Journal for Bhutan & Himalayan Research

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International Journal for Bhutan & Himalayan Research

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PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD

This year has been fraught with struggles against uncertainties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It has created a global crisis on a massive scale that even Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan kingdom, did not escape unscathed. However, Bhutan has fared well in terms of life and livelihood due to the selfless leadership of our beloved Druk Gyalpo King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Great Fourth Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and our Prime Minister. Our Kings toured the frontlines of the country with unwavering courage and relentless determination, giving the Bhutanese hope that we will emerge from this pandemic a more resilient and united nation.

As an academic institution, the year also brought about its own unprecedented challenges. The College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS) and The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) were faced with the challenge to keep students' learning alive through the transition to remote learning. Lecturers and students alike struggled with what we have now started calling the 'new normal' and with the new phase of 'online-learning', especially in the Bhutanese context.

Despite the many challenges the college faced, we are delighted to bring out the inaugural issue of the *International Journal for Bhutan and Himalayan Research*, published by the Bhutan and Himalaya Research Centre in CLCS. The launch of this journal with 'Contemporary Bhutanese Literature' as this year's theme is a proof that we are doing our job as an academic institution to create a research-based knowledge and add to the repertoire of Bhutanese scholarship even amidst a pandemic!

Although the year 2020 started with much unease and uncertainty, I am glad to say, inspired by the compassionate leadership of His Majesty the king and the proactive response of the government, we have surpassed and even bettered these turbulences. Therefore, let us celebrate the year by engaging ourselves in recollecting, rewriting and revisoning contemporary Bhutanese literature.

Trashidelek

Lungtaen Gyatso
President
College of Language and Culture Studies
Royal University of Bhutan

LETTER FROM BHRC

The idea for the *International Journal of Bhutan & Himalayan Research* (IJBHR) was conceived when we founded the Bhutan and Himalaya Research Centre (BHRC) in 2017 in order to create an interdisciplinary network of research, teaching and networking on Bhutan and Himalayan region. In 2018, Professor Holly Gayley, University of Colorado Boulder was invited to give the inaugural BHRC Lecture Series at Office of the Vice-Chancellor in Thimphu. Our conversations during her stay initiated the idea and work towards the journal's launch. The President and Deans of the college supported the idea and approved the plans for the journal.

Our plan matured along the way when we convened a panel on Bhutan titled “Contemporary Bhutanese Literature” at the Association of Asian Studies conference in Denver, Colorado in March 2019. We are excited to finally launch this journal on the auspicious occasion of 65th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and dedicate it to the ongoing celebrations of the 40th birth anniversary of His Majesty the King.

IJBHR aims to advance research and scholarship in all fields pertaining to social, culture, religion and humanities relevant to Bhutan and Himalayan region. The journal expected to be an annual publication will include a wide range of papers in English and Dzongkha based on theoretical or empirical research, perspectives, conference reports and book reviews which can contribute to the scholarship on Bhutan and Himalayan studies.

BHRC is immensely grateful to Professor Holly Gayley for accepting to be the Guest Editor for this inaugural issue. Her continuous advice and support have been instrumental in making the publication of this journal possible. We extend our appreciation to the members of our Editorial Advisory Board and Dasho Sonam Kinga. President Lopen Lungtaen Gyatso and Lopen Ngawang Jamtsho, Dean of Research and Industrial Linkages deserve a special note of gratitude for believing in us and supporting our initiative.

We are optimistic that the launch of this journal will encourage interdisciplinary scholarship on Bhutan and Himalayan Studies.

Sonam Nyenda
Coordinator
Bhutan & Himalaya Research Centre
College of Language & Culture Studies

PREFACE

Why Bhutanese Literature Matters

A University does not just teach. Its role extends beyond the classroom, textbooks, exams and grades. It gives society new knowledge, fresh insights and options for bettering life.

By using the tools of inquiry and investigation for a rational understanding of phenomena, universities stimulate new ways of seeing reality. Through use of analytical methods and generation of evidence, it may propose alternative ways to organize life more efficiently or show different pathways to social progress and improvement. Bhutan, one of many homes to the Himalayan region's rich civilization, is known for its pristine mountain ecology and biodiversity, vast reservoir of social, cultural and religious knowledge and practice, sophisticated philosophical and liturgical Buddhist literature, poetry – both classical and pastoral, art and architecture, music, dance and festive expressions. Often humoured and made light-hearted by folklore, native wisdom and proverbs and intriguing shapes and colours evocative of life, causality and wholesome action, all of these continue to be inspired by the consummate teachings of the Buddha.

Bhutan has shown the world a unique view of development - a mind-treasure revealed and proposed to humanity by the Dharma King His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo - that puts the collective wellbeing and happiness of its people first. There is limitless opportunity for University teachers and researchers within Bhutan and beyond to explore these fascinating areas of knowledge of which I have mentioned a few here.

It is heartening indeed to see The Bhutan and Himalayan Research Centre at the College of Language and Culture Studies in Trongsa gear up to launch a brand-new journal - *International Journal for Bhutan and Himalayan Research* - on 11th November, the birth anniversary of our beloved Monarch the Fourth King. I consider it a special opportunity to be associated with the launch of this edition of the journal whose thematic focus is on contemporary Bhutanese literature.

Bhutanese literature may be broadly classified into four categories. The first category covers the fairly extensive corpus of Buddhist literature comprising mostly of philosophical writings, treasure-texts, commentaries, history and biographical works, liturgical texts, poetry and praises, instruction and practice manuals, and occasional writings authored by generations of Buddhist teachers and scholars. Notable authors in this category include

Buddhist Masters and scholars such as Longchen Rabjam, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, Gyalse Tenzin Rabgay, successive Je Khenpos of the past, Je Sherab Gyeltshen, Lopon Gangchen Zhenphen Rolpey Dorje, Chumed Drungpa Gembo Dorje, Geshe Tenpa Rinchen, Je Geshe Gedun Rinchen, Tshangkha Rinpoche Lopon Norbu Wangchuk, Je Ngawang Tenzin Doendrup, Lopon Pema Tshewang, and Kunzang Thekchog Yeshey Dorje, to name a few. These Masters laid the foundation for serious Bhutanese writing, research and scholarship. This genre of writing continues to this day.

The development of the second category of Bhutanese literary works consisting mainly of writings produced in Dzongkha or Choe-kyad by Bhutanese scholars may be traced to the 1960s when Dzongkha was adopted as the national language of Bhutan. The development of this genre has led to the growth of rich literature in the form of scholarly commentaries on the works of earlier scholars, biographies, elegant sayings, poetry and proverbs, short stories, music, dance and traditional songs, essays, and occasional writings, to name a few. Notable writers in this category include Gyaldoen Thinley, Lopon Pema Tshewang, Dasho Shingkar Lam, Lam Nado, Lopon Dachoe Lhendup, Dasho Lam Sang-ngag, Dasho Phuntsho Wangdi, Dasho Tenzin Dorje, Lopon Gembo Tenzin, Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi, Dasho Sherab Gyeltshen, Dasho Sangay Dorje, Lopon Kuenzang Thinley, and Lopon Pema Dendup, to name a few.

The third category of Bhutanese literature consist of works in English produced by university educated Bhutanese writers in the 1990s. Their writings have drawn for form and style on literature in Choe-kyad and Dzongkha by Bhutanese writers, and on creative prose fiction, prose non-fiction, folklore, and poetry in English from the West and South Asia. In this category may be included different forms of Bhutanese oral literature sometimes known as 'orature'. A number of writers (e.g. Azhi Kunzang Choden, Dasho Karma Ura, Dasho Sonam Kinga, and Gopilal Acharya) have translated fascinating pieces of orature into English. Bhutan's rich oral heritage must be promoted through Dzongkha and English. Left on their own, these literatures are at high risk of becoming extinct. While English continues to grow rapidly and Dzongkha is promoted vigorously as the national language, the lingua franca of the country, Bhutan's many oral languages and the rich literary and cultural heritage they embody will likely disappear if they are not written down and read especially by the younger generation.

As the noted African writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o rightly said, language "carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values

by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (1986). The efforts made by Bhutanese writers who have produced English translations of the rich funds of knowledge available in the oral form have helped to draw the literate society’s attention towards our own knowledge traditions. These efforts continue to this day. Going by current trends with regard to the third category of Bhutanese literature, it is likely that efforts to produce English translations of oral literature will continue.

Bhutanese writers of the past few decades who have translated oral literature into English have influenced the growth of a new generation of writers writing in English today. The fourth category of Bhutanese literature may be attributed to an influential group of writers that include Azhi Kunzang Choden, Dasho Karma Ura, Thakur S Powdyel, Dasho Sonam Kinga, and Dr Karma Phuntsho, among others. Their works include both long and short prose fiction, prose non-fiction such as topical essays, dharma talks, scholarly commentaries on questions of general interest, exploratory writings on culture, history and heritage, personal reflections, poetry, and blogs.

A number of writers have talked about the need to preserve the oral traditions and the cultural value they represent and how their loss will lead to the gradual depletion of the depth and diversity of a society’s cultural character. For example, Skutnabb-Kangas in 2000 said that if genuine efforts are not made to preserve the world’s oral languages and the cultures they carried, “we may kill over 90 percent of the world’s oral languages in the next 100 years”. Similarly, noted linguist David Crystal warned in 1997 that “When a language dies, so much is lost ... Oral testimony, in the form of sagas, folktales, songs, rituals, proverbs, and many other practices, provides us with a unique view of our world and a unique canon of literature ... Once lost, it can never be recaptured. The argument is similar to that used in relation to the conservation of species and the environment”. These insights are useful to the discussion of contemporary Bhutanese literature especially with regard to the critical questions about its philosophical/cultural anchor, form, subject, and style.

I am both delighted and encouraged that the initiative to launch the *International Journal for Bhutan and Himalayan Research* holds great prospects for generating academic discourse in the critical areas of Bhutan and Himalayan studies generally. Works published in this journal can lend society fresh perspectives on the myriad knowledge treasures available in this part of the world. The need to study and contemplate upon the wisdom of the past and use it for a rational understanding of the present and of emerging realities is

now more than ever before paramount.

I am excited to read the articles published in the inaugural edition of the journal and hope to gain fresh insights and perspectives from the works included in this issue. Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsan's (1182-1251) words come to my mind:

མཁས་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་དབྱུང་བ་ཡི།
ཤེས་བྱ་ཤེས་ན་མཁས་པར་བགྱང།
བ་ལང་རྒྱན་གཞོན་དཔྱོད་པ་ལ།
སྤྱོད་པོ་མཁས་ཀྱང་ཡོན་ཏན་མིན། །

bKra Shis bDe Legs (Trashidelek)!

Dorji Thinley, PhD
President, Paro College of Education
Royal University of Bhutan

Editorial Introduction to Special Issue

“Our mountains have begun to rumble.” In this way, leading writers Chador Wangmo, Rinzin Rinzin, and Namgyal Tshering characterize the emergence of contemporary Bhutanese literature since the 1990s. Showcased in the annual Mountain Echoes literary festival, promoted by publishers in Thimphu, Delhi, and Bangkok, and lauded with South Asian literary prizes, contemporary Bhutanese literature is coming of age.

This special inaugural issue of the *International Journal for Bhutan & Himalayan Research* explores the evolution of contemporary Bhutanese literature, including genres and works in Dzongkha and English. While Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan, influenced in its written form by classical Tibetan, English has served as the medium of classroom instruction in Bhutanese schools since the 1960s and connects Bhutanese writers to a broader South Asian literary world as well as an international audience.

The research articles gathered here treat distinct issues, genres, and moments in contemporary Bhutanese literature including styles of poetry from the early twentieth century as literary antecedents, the challenges faced in the development of Dzongkha literature since the 1970s, the role of Bhutanese works in English in forging a new national literature, and recent novels by Bhutanese women writers. Through these topics, this special issue delves into the relationship, transformations, and tensions between oral and literary forms, colonial and post-colonial influences, religious and secular themes, and national and international languages in the formation of a multilingual body of contemporary Bhutanese literature.

In “One Journey, Three Poems; One Serf, Three Lords: Literary compositions during Ugyen Wangchuck’s peace Mission to Lhasa, 1904,” Sonam Kinga discusses the styles of poetry used to commemorate Ugyen Wangchuck’s mission to Lhasa three years before he became the First King of Bhutan. The article is a masterful exploration of a single journey captured in distinct ways: erudite poetry (*snyan ngag*) by Zhabdrung Jigme Chogyal in *chokey* or “dharma language” (*chos skad*, synonymous with classical Tibetan), an acrostic poem (*ka rtsom*) by Nyinzer Latshab in official Dzongkha, and a lyrical ballad in the vernacular by Tshewang Peldon, a female serf famous for her spontaneous oral compositions. Kinga’s fascinating and erudite account provides a glimpse into the literary world of Bhutan just prior to its consolidation as a kingdom under the Wangchuck dynasty.

In “Challenges to the Development of Dzongkha Literature: A Comparison of Namthar and

Sprung,” Sonam Nyenda traces the systematization of Dzongkha as a written language in the 1970s and its subsequent literary production. In particular, he compares two narrative genres, *rnam thar* or religious biography heavily influenced by classical Tibetan and *srung* or contemporary stories and novels in Dzongkha which are now under pressure to compete with and conform to English literary models. In this way, Nyenda illustrates how Dzongkha literature is caught between two *lingua franca* in the region, classical Tibetan which connected Buddhists across Himalaya and Central Asia until the first part of the twentieth century and English which gained predominance in South Asia due to British colonial rule of neighboring India and Burma and remains a prevalent medium for literary production across the linguistic diversity of South Asia.

In “Exploring National Identity through Literature in Bhutanese English Curriculum,” Tshering Om Tamang delves into the complex history of Bhutanese literature in English. Specifically, she focuses on the impact of curricular revisions in 2006 to the national syllabus, which included Bhutanese literary works in the English curriculum for the first time, such as *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* (1996), an eighteenth-century lyrical ballad translated from Dzongkha by Karma Ura and *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* (2004), an Anglophone novel by Kunzang Choden. Tamang demonstrates that the inclusion of these and other works by Bhutanese authors in the English curriculum have played a significant role in shaping a new national literature, even as the use of English as a unifying language complicates the expression of indigenous Bhutanese culture and values.

My own contribution to this special issue, “Karma and Female Agency in Novels by Bhutanese Women Writers,” focuses on Anglophone novels by Bhutanese writers who unflinchingly confront gender issues, including sexual abuse and human trafficking, through the lived experiences of an array of female characters. In particular, I focus on the deployment of karma as a narrative device and its relationship to female agency in Kunzang Choden’s *Circle of Karma* (2005) and Chador Wangmo’s *Kyetse* (2017). These novels have in common that their protagonists must overcome significant hurdles to fulfill the aspiration to become a Buddhist nun. Yet being set in different eras, the vibrant worlds of Kalimpong in the 1960s and Tashigang in the 1990s respectively, their coming of age stories provide the reader with a rich sense for distinct generational sensibilities and gendered challenges. As a result, these novels poignantly capture the lived experiences and struggles of women navigating the crossroads of tradition and change in contemporary Himalayan societies.

These four research articles were originally presented at a panel on “Contemporary Bhutanese Literature” at the annual conference of the Association of Asian Studies held in March 2019 in Denver, Colorado, USA. Our thanks to the AAS and Tibet Himalaya Institute at the University of Colorado Boulder for providing support for the panel in the form of travel funds for presenters from Bhutan.

Also included in this special issue is the invaluable survey titled “Perspectives on Contemporary Bhutanese Literature” by Chador Wangmo, Rinzin Rinzin and Namgyal Tshering. These writers describe the profound transition from religious texts in *chokey* and oral storytelling in various dialects to the growth of Bhutanese literature in Dzongkha and English, first by setting down folktales and followed by a burgeoning of histories, novels, essays, and collections of poetry and short stories. In the process, the very idea of Bhutanese literature shifted from primarily Buddhist texts composed and studied by monastics to include secular works in Dzongkha and English that have emerged since the 1990s.

As a second perspective featured in the journal, Ugyen Tshomo and Pema Wangdi share their views on “Contemporary Children’s Literature in Bhutan.” This essay discusses some of the standard features of children’s stories, illustrated with vibrant examples from Bhutanese children’s stories.

Two shorter pieces conclude this issue: a review by Eben Yonnetti of a recently published collection of Tibetan short stories, *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet* (2017) edited by Tenzin Dickie, and a report by Anden Drolet on the inaugural International Society of Bhutan Studies Conference at Oxford University in January 2019.

Please enjoy the resonant “rumble” from the mountains and valleys of Bhutan that are echoed here in scholarly explorations of contemporary Bhutanese literature.

Holly Gayley
Associate Professor of Buddhist Studies
University of Colorado Boulder

One Journey, Three Poems; One Serf, Three Lords
Literary compositions about Ugyen Wangchuck's Peace Mission to Lhasa, 1904

Sonam Kinga

Abstract

What has come to be known as the Younghusband Mission concerning the British Invasion of Tibet in 1904 was actually for Bhutan a Peace Mission led by the then governor (*Penlop*) of Trongsa Ugyen Wangchuck. He was the principal mediator in the conflict. His successful role earned for him and Bhutan tremendous goodwill and respect by both the British and Tibetans. Three poetic compositions of different genres capture the historic moment as well as the national mood of Ugyen Wangchuck's departure for Tibet, participation in the negotiations and successful return.

Zhabdrung Jigme Chogyal, the head of the Bhutanese state then, is deeply aggrieved by the destruction wrought by the invasion on a holy land and the painful decision to depute Ugyen Wangchuck. His half-brother, who was officiating as the lama of Nyinzer gang monastery in Wangdi Phodrang district, expresses anger and dismay in his poem about what he sees as the barbaric intent and behavior of the British and obstinacy of the Tibetans. Tshewang Peldon, a serf and a cow herder, is far more jubilant in her oral composition that chooses to celebrate the success of the mission.

Except for brief references to them in Bhutanese histories, these compositions have neither been studied in detail nor compared from a literary perspective. This paper draws attention to them, analyses their styles and structures, and reveal the diversity of indigenous literary genres, both written and oral. In the process, we gain an understanding about how the Bhutanese perceived the "Younghusband Mission" although the primary concern of the paper is more literary and less history.

Key words: Buddhist, composition, conflict, invasion, lozey, mediate, mission, serf, state

Introduction

Three years before his enthronement as the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck joined the Younghusband Mission (see below) to Lhasa, Tibet in 1904 to mediate between the invading force of British India and the Tibetan government. Maharaja Kumar Sidkeong Tulku of Sikkim have also joined the mission as a mediator. In Lhasa, there were other mediators like Captain Jit Bahadur of Nepal and the new Chinese Amban Youtai¹ But Ugyen Wangchuck was the principal mediator right from the commencement of the mission. At the time, he was the governor or *penlop* (*dpon slob*) of the eastern province of Trongsa. This position made him a member of the State Council or *lhengye tshok* (*lhan rgyas tshogs*) of the monastic government which was first founded around 1626 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.² The other members of the State Council were the governors of Dagana, Paro, Wangdi Phodrang, Punakha and Thimphu,³ and the chamberlain (*gzim dpon*) to the head of state or prince-regent known as *gyaltshab* (*rgyal tshab*).⁴ The prince-regent was theoretically the source of both political and religious authority. They were derived from him and exercised in his name by a civil ruler called *desi* (*sde srid*) and chief abbot or *Je khenpo* (*Rje mkhan po*) of the state's monastic community. Although the State Council was headed

by the civil ruler, Ugyen Wangchuck had established himself as the de-facto leader of the country. The civil ruler and other members of the State Council were mostly his appointees. The British rulers in India also chose to engage with him directly for bilateral matters rather than the civil ruler or prince-regent.

His participation and success in the Younghusband Mission earned for him and Bhutan tremendous goodwill and respect from both the Tibetans and the British. His stature as a national leader, diplomat and statesman were further enhanced. Bhutanese historical records of his participation in the mission as the principal mediator in British-Tibetan conflict do not provide enough details for us to construct and understand the breadth and scope of his engagement. The British and Indian sources provide far greater details. Since I have discussed them in detail elsewhere,⁵ my focus in this paper will be to analysis the three poems which were written in connection with Ugyen Wangchuck's journey to Lhasa. I have not come across any historical events in Bhutan, not even his coronation as the First King, which saw the composition of such diversity of poems, oral or written. Before analysing different aspects of these poems, it is first important to briefly introduce the Younghusband Mission.

One Journey

As early as the 18th century, the British in India had been looking for a trade route to Tibet. Access through Nepal had been closed. British missions sent to Nepal to negotiate an agreement did not yield any results. Nonetheless, an opportunity arose in 1773 when the British agreed to a mediation by the Panchen Lama of Tibet in their conflict with Bhutan. The British came in support of Cooch Behar (at its request), who were fighting a war with the Bhutanese. Although the Bhutanese lost, the British agreed to return the captured lands at the intercession of the Panchen Lama. Warren Hastings, the Viceroy of India then sent George Bogle to Bhutan and Tibet in 1774. An agreement was signed to permit transit of British goods through Bhutan. Thereafter, George Bogle went to Tashi Lhunpo Monastery to meet the Panchen Lama. Although they did discuss the matter of a trade route to Tibet and Panchen Lama even mentioned it to the Chinese emperor during his visit to Beijing, it never materialized as the Panchen Lama died in Beijing. George Bogle also died soon after. In 1782, Hastings sent another envoy, Captain Samuel Turner, to congratulate the Regent of Tashi Lhunpo on the birth of the re-incarnation of the Panchen Lama. The regent committed favourably to the issue of trade. However, the Nepalese invasion of Tibet in 1792 put an end to the idea as

the Tibetans suspected British support for Nepal.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1885, the British government sanctioned a new mission to Lhasa. The Tibetans objected; the Chinese approved but the British abandoned somehow. Instead, the Tibetans invaded Sikkim in 1886. Rather than go to the defence of Sikkim as was obligated by a treaty, the British approached the Chinese to ask the Tibetans to withdraw. The Tibetans ignored the Chinese and attacked Sikkim again. This time the British acted and removed the Tibetans. The Chinese intervened and a treaty was signed at Calcutta in 1890. Amongst other matters, this treaty decided the borders of Sikkim but the Tibetans, who were not signatory to the treaty, rejected its provisions. Owing to the weakening of the Qing dynasty, the Chinese could not enforce implementation of the provisions.

In 1889, Lord Curzon became the Viceroy of India. He resumed efforts to communicate directly with the Tibetans. But his letters sent to the 13th Dalai Lama either received poor responses or were returned, sometimes even unopened. The British anxiety increased when it learnt that the Dalai Lama was instead befriending Russia who the British suspected of invading India. Hence, a mission to Lhasa was approved in 1903 to be led by Colonel Younghusband. It had to withdraw after a

few months due to the objections of the Tibetans (Collister, 1996, p.138).

All along, the British were uncertain whether Bhutan would support the Tibetans. Not only did Tibet and Bhutan have close cultural and spiritual ties, they were neighbours and the mission to Tibet would pass near Bhutanese borders. Hence, they approached Ugyen Wangchuck for his intercession to negotiate with the Tibetans. It was in this context that Ugyen Wangchuck joined the British when the mission resumed. He became the chief mediator in the conflict. Tibetans would refuse to meet the British without Ugyen Wangchuck. In Lhasa, he played a key role shuttling between the Tibetans and British. He was instrumental in moderating British demands on Tibet. He came to be admired by both sides earning tremendous respect and goodwill. The Younghusband Mission returned in September 1904 after the signing of a treaty. Ugyen Wangchuck and Younghusband parted their ways from Phari.

Three poems

Poets and poetess, lords and serf

Poems in connection with the mission were composed in Bhutan by authors from different socio-economic and political backgrounds. The first was by Jigme Chogyal, who was the fifth mind incarnation of Zhabdrung Ngawang

Namgyal and the last prince-regent. He was thus the head of the monastic state having been enthroned at a young age of seven years around 1869.⁶ By the time of the Younghusband Mission, he had served for almost thirty-five years as the prince-regent. He died in 1904 when Ugyen Wangchuck was in Tibet.⁷

The second poem was composed by a lama called Nyinzer Latsab (*Nyi zer Blatshab*) who must have been officiating for the lama of Nyinzer gang temple in Wangdi Phodrang district. This temple is the seat of successive incarnations of Ügpa Lingpa who first came to Bhutan in the 13th century from Tibet and settled in Nyinzer gang. The people of that community were said to be suffering from certain afflictions, possibly epilepsy. Relying on his tutelary deity Rahula, Ügpa Lingpa subdued the evil spirits who were believed to be causing the affliction. Even today, the temple is popular for epileptic patients, who go to seek blessings and cure. Nyinzer Latshab, who composed the poem, was the half-brother of Jigme Chogyal. His mother was the younger sister of Jigme Chogyal's mother. They had the same father.⁸ It is possible that he was installed as Nyinzer Latshab between the death and birth of a Nyinzer Trulku. A notable Nyinzer Trulku of recent times had been the 67th Je Khenpo Thinley Lhendup who passed away in 2005.

In contrast to traditional scholarship including literary genres which were mostly written or composed by men, the third poem was composed by a woman called Tshewang Peldon. She is certainly one of the very few known female literati in the traditional world of Bhutanese writing, compositions and scholarship.⁹ She was born in Gelekha, Wangdi Phodrang but worked as a serf in the household of a noble in Lokhachi. Her immediate lord was called Tshering Dendup although the house belonged to Samdrup, who once served as the governor or *dzongpon* (*rdzong dpon*) of Trashigang. The relationship between Tshering Dendup and Samdrup is not known. Perhaps they were siblings, or they might have been close relatives. Her popular name was Jachi Tshewang Peldon. Two plausible explanations are given for the prefix *Jachi* to her personal name.

One, it was a name for a summer house called *jachi* (*'Byar khyim*). Many families in western Bhutan traditionally kept two houses for summer and winter. The summer houses were built in higher and cooler areas compared to winter houses in the low-lying sub-tropical valleys. Especially after paddy planting in early summer, most family members moved up to their summer houses along with their cattle and came down during the time for harvest in autumn. It is said that Tshewang Peldon lived in one of those summer houses in Lokachi. Hence her name, Jachi

Tshewang Peldon.

Two, it has been customary in many parts of Bhutan to have names for particular households.¹⁰ These houses may belong to anyone, nobles as well as the laity. It is said that Samdrup spent some time building his house and returned to Tashigang after the completion. He was at a loss as to what his new house should be called. On his way back, the traditional highway took him through the village of Nobding which is located opposite to Lokhachi across the Dangchu river. It is said that he was so impressed seeing how beautiful his house was even from that distance and hence, decided to call it *jachi* (*'Ja phyi*) meaning 'beautiful.'

Some maintain that rather than *Jachi*, Tshewang Peldon's name was prefixed as *Jam/Jamo*, which meant a serf. She uses this once in her composition. So does Choki Dendup (1998) in his compendium of *lozey*. Likewise, Aris (1994) refers to her in a footnote as "Jami Tsewang Pedron" (p.112). However, Ap Daw Pentang, her great grandson, whom I interviewed in 2004, insisted that she was called Jachi Tshewang Peldon. I must qualify what I mean by 'serf.' There were many landless and poor families who were bonded labour to aristocratic nobilities or monastic estates. They and their children farmed the lands of these nobles or monasteries, and were in return, fed and

clothed. Families were attached to these nobilities and monasteries for generations. While the term ‘serf’ is very generic, there were different categories of them. The two widespread forms of serfdom were the *zap* and *drap*. These categories of serfs were initially economic in character because they did not own lands and hence, did not pay taxes to the state or state institutions. However, they came to be ascribed with social meanings later. Serfdom was abolished by the Third King of Bhutan in an unprecedented socio-economic reform in 1952.¹¹

Periods of composition

The three poems relate to different periods of Ugyen Wangchuck’s participation in the mission. Nyinzer Latshab’s poem is a denouncement of the conflict particularly of the British invasion. It appears that this was written at the initial movement of the British troops into Tibet and the first confrontations at a place called Guru which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Tibetans. Padma Tshewang (1994) thinks that this poem was composed after the 1888 British conflict with Tibet. He writes that Nyinzer Latshab wrote the poem ‘during the dispute over trade routes after the first arrival of British in Tibet in 1888 corresponding to the first *rabjung*’ (p.533). Damchoe Lhendup (2008) also tend to agree to this timing of the composition (pp.145-146). I think

this was composed in 1904. The major engagement of the British troops with the Tibetans in 1888 and 1889 took place in Sikkim. Only towards the end of the conflict do they briefly venture to Yadong and Rinchengang on the Tibetan side of the border. Nyinzer Latshab’s poem gives us an impression that the scale of invasion was not only huge but deep inside Tibet as was the case with Younghusband Mission. His opening lines read, “By the order of the British in Calcutta/ The barbarians had filled the heavenly realm of the snowy region.” The 23rd – 25th lines read thus, “As the Dharma is forced to the edge/ The noble and snowy region/ Is destroyed by those mutton-eaters.” The 26th line refers to the invading British troops as barbarians who had come after crossing many mountains and valleys. It is thus more plausible that the poem was composed in 1904, sometime before Jigme Chogyal wrote his poems. The difference in timing of the composition of these two poems could not have been more than a few weeks.

Jigme Chogyal’s poem is a painful reflection on the suffering caused by the British invasion and the decision that the State Council had to take to send Ugyen Wangchuck as mediator. It is clear that he wrote the poem soon after the departure of Ugyen Wangchuck and arrival in Gyantse, Tibet. There was apparently lots of communication between the Bhutanese government and negotiation team lead by

Ugyen Wangchuck. His arrival in Gyantse must have been reported back to Punakha. The poem does not discuss subsequent developments concerning the advance of the mission. The narrative begins by a reflection on the conflict between the British and Tibetans and the news of the mission's march to Gyantse, which hastens the need for Ugyen Wangchuck to travel fast. The poem mentions about Ugyen Wangchuck's travel to Punakha from Trongsa, meeting with Jigme Chogyal, the decision and edict of the State Council, his departure for Tibet and the news of the destruction of Gyantse Dzong. From a reading of the chronology of events, it appears that the poem was written sometime towards the end of June 1904, just before his death which occurred on the 10th Day of the Seventh Month (KMT Press, p.152). It does not make any reference to Ugyen Wangchuck's arrival in Lhasa and his accomplishment as mediator. If Jigme Chogyal were still alive then, it is impossible that he would not have discussed it.

The poem I have referred to above was the one I had read and translated in 2004. Later, I came across another of his poems in relation to the mission (Lhendup, 2008, p.144). I assumed that the first part of the poem which I had translated was written after Ugyen Wangchuck left for Tibet and the second poem was after hearing the news about the destruction of Gyantse

Dzong which took place on 5 July (Kinga, 2004, p.39). Since then, I gained access to a recent publication of the biography of Jigme Chogyal. I then realized that the poem which I had translated in 2004 and the other one reproduced by Damchoe Lhendup in 2008 were not two different compositions. They were parts of one long poem which appears to have been written soon after the news of the destruction of Gyantse Dzong reached Punakha.

In contrast, Tshewang Peldon's poem was composed soon after the return of Ugyen Wangchuck to Bhutan. The evidence of this comes from the concluding lines of her poem. The news of Ugyen Wangchuck's success in the mission had preceded his arrival. Hence, the State Council organized a huge and grand reception for him in Punakha (Lhendup, 2008, p. 170). The mission left Lhasa on 23 September. So, it is very likely that Ugyen Wangchuck reached Punakha in the first or second week of October. The reception must have been of such magnitude that even ordinary people like Tshewang Peldon were there to congratulate him. She talks about the offering of a silver coin called *ngultrum* (*angul kram*) to Ugyen Wangchuck as a token of expressing her congratulations and of receiving reciprocal gifts. Hence, it is possible that her poem was composed around October. Although she was a serf and an illiterate, she was well-known for instant oral compositions. So gifted was

she that a euphemistic reference to her as an ‘embodiment of wisdom’ (*shes rab kyi rang bzhin*) was said to be very common then.

Forms: classical, official and the vernacular

Jigme Chogyal’s poem was written in classical Tibetan or *chokey* (*chos skad*), which continues to be the primary medium of scholarship in both state and non-state monastic bodies. His poem belongs to the particular category of *nyen-ngag* (*snyan ngag*) or ornate poetry, which according to MacPherson (1998, p.6) is based on the Sanskrit poetic tradition called *kavya* that ‘relies on recurring images or emblems and complex metrical and semantic pattern to evoke one or more of the traditional affect-states of Sanskrit aesthetics: charm, heroism, disgust, merriment, wrath, fear, pity, wonderment and peace, through the formal and verbal ornaments that help to produce those states.’ Trained in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Jigme Chogyal’s choice of the genre is understandable. He uses the nine-syllable metrical style. Chang (1956) attributes the odd syllable metrical composition to religious poems. “In general, the secular religious treatises usually contain an even number of syllables in each line; while the religious treatises usually contain an odd number of syllables” (p.131). He traces the origins of the odd syllable composition as attribute

of religious poetry to Buddhist canons. “Religious works: The several poetical works in Kanjur and the Tanjur, all of which are faithful translations from the Sanskrit Buddhist works of India, are in verses, consisting of two or four lines, each of seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen, or twenty-one syllables” (p.135).

Jigme Chogyal’s poem is a chapter by itself consisting of 125 lines. The first stanza with four introductory lines and the last concluding stanza of the same length were composed by Kuenga Dragpa, the author of the biography, who was Jigme Chogyal’s brother. The first 17 lines introduce the conflict between British India and Tibet and Jigme Chogyal’s sense of sadness at the events unfolding then. The next 20 lines are supplications to the arhats and tutelary deities to remember the oath they took before Lord Buddha to protect the teachings. He prays to them not to abandon the Buddha Dharma, the Dharma-holders as well as sentient beings during this difficult time. We have then another 24 lines which discusses the summoning of Ugyen Wangchuck by the State Council and his departure for Tibet. In the next 18 lines, he discusses the conduct of prayers and rituals as the only available means to pacify the situation, but this does not seem to have worked as the next 16 lines discuss the destruction of Gyantse Dzong. The final 30 lines are a

very painful rendition of prayers coupled with an expression of Jigme Chogyal's sense of helplessness and his illness from which he soon dies.

The poem is structured in such a way that a set of lines related to the conflict and mission are followed by another set dedicated to supplication and prayers. There are thus six such sets of varying lengths. Thus, Jigme Chogyal appears to be liberal in structuring his poems without adherence to any particular style except for the nine-syllable metre.

Contrary to the expectations of a lama trained in the Buddhist tradition, Nyinzer Latshab abandons classical Tibetan as the medium for his poetry. He writes in what would constitute today the official/national language, Dzongkha. Perhaps he was an official in the Wangdi Phodrang Dzong appointed as the officiating lama since Nyinzer gang temple falls under the jurisdiction of the monastic community or *rabdey* (*Rab sde*) of Wangdi Phodrang. He falls back upon a few words of *chokey* once in a while. That reflects everyday speech in Dzongkha which adds *chokey* particularly in the usage of honorific terms.

The genre he chose is popularly known as *katsom* (*ka rtsom*) in which each line begins with the letter of the Tibetan alphabet in sequential order. Since there are thirty letters in the alphabet, every *katsom* has

usually thirty lines. Some writers chose to repeat the last two letters especially when they compose *katsom* with four-line stanzas to make the total of thirty-two lines. Hence his is what is called the alphabet poetry or acrostic poem. “[I]t is a restrictive form but its alphabetical order and acrostic can help memory retrieval” (Penjore, 2009, p.12).

Alphabetical acrostic poems appear to be doing well even today as they are noticeable in the literary sections of the Dzongkha edition of Bhutanese newspapers. There were similar poems composed in some vernacular languages. Indeed, the nineteen different vernacular languages of Bhutan do not have a written script. So, composers borrow the Tibetan alphabet and use the phonetic to delve into vernacular oral compositions. Penjore (2009) has recorded the first twelve lines of such vernacular acrostic poetry in Khengkha, while I have been able to record 14 lines in Sharchopkha and recently composed one anew¹².

Jachi Tshewang Peldon's poetry is both oral and vernacular. For an ordinary Dzongkha speaker, her poem is not easily intelligible. Dzongkha combines colloquial Ngalongkha of western Bhutan with the written *chokey*. Communities in western Bhutan, which speaks Ngalongkha, have their own dialects, pronunciation as well as semantic and phonetic peculiarities that

are not easily captured while transcribing them in Dzongkha. Since Tshewang Peldon was from Wangdi Phodrang, which is traditionally known as Sha, it is the dialect of that region which is richly used in her composition. There is therefore, a strong vernacular flavour to her poem not only in the use of language but also in idioms, imagery and symbolism. This style of combining standard Dzongkha with the vernacular is specific to the genre of oral compositions called *lozey* (*blo ze*), which flourished in western and south-western Bhutan. It hardly features in other forms of writing.

Of the three poems discussed in this paper, the *lozey* of Jachi Tshewang Peldon is the longest. It has 219 lines. When Choki Dendup (1999) first attempted to record it, it had 199 lines. My subsequent research and interviews revealed that he had missed the first opening stanzas. Since this has been retrieved from oral sources, it is highly possible that even my rendition may be incomplete.

Lozey as a vernacular literary genre

Lozey is a widespread literary genre in western and south-western Bhutan although its appeal and knowledge has now spread to other parts as well. This is clearly evident from the fact that young men and women from other parts of Bhutan engage in robust *lozey* sparring

programs (see below), which are very popular on FM radio stations. Besides, scholars from other parts of Bhutan who have mastered Dzongkha and *chokey* have composed many *lozey* showing the increasing migration of this popular oral genre to textual forms.

Generally, *lozey* can be one of two types although other forms are not impossible. There have been hardly any scholarly enquiry or independent research of *lozey* tradition besides recording and translating them. The most popular ones have been oral compositions used for the purpose of poetic sparring between individuals or groups. These sparring sessions were spectacular pastimes witnessed by neighbours, friends and sometimes the entire community. *Lozey* are not read but recited from memory. The level of contest would be so intense and prolonged that it would continue throughout the night into the following day when each side refused to admit defeat. The sessions would end when some members of the audience volunteer as middle-men or mediators to bring about a resolution without declaring any side as the winner or loser (Thinley & Tshering, 2009). There is no particular standard for length. Each independent composition would be memorized and recited aptly in response to what the other had spoken. The choice of subject, context, metaphors and symbolisms had to match in order to provide an apt counter attack in case of

sparring or harmonization in case of more benign and accommodating exchanges. Any mismatch would be pointed out critically both by the opponent as well as the audience. The audience always had members who are equally learned and versatile, and came to play almost parallel roles to that of the Chorus in Greek and Roman plays. They constitute the third voice. There are hundreds and thousands of *lozey* although the authors are rarely known. It is necessary to mention that such sparring also takes place with the singing of popular folk quatrains called *tsangmo* (*gtsang mo*) between individual or groups of men and women.

The second type of *lozey* is the one where authors are not only identifiable but they engage with a particular subject which may be political, religious, militaristic or others. The other characteristic of this type of *lozey* is that they are comparatively very long, and hence been regarded as lyrical ballads or narrative poetry. The *lozey* of Tshewang Peldon belongs to this type. Other notable examples have been the *lozey* of Pemi Tshewang Tashi and Gelong Sumdar Tashi, which were recorded and translated by Dasho Karma Ura (1995) and myself (1998) respectively. Pemi Tshewang Tashi was a chamberlain to the governor of Wangdi Phodrang Dzongpon. His *lozey* recounts his journey as a general and the subsequent battle in Trongsa, which was fought against the enemy of

an ally of his master. Sumdar Tashi was a husband, father and a farmer who was forced to join the central monastic body under a decree issued by the state in the 18th century. His *lozey* recalls the painful moment of leaving his family and village, his struggles as a novice monk and his eventual decision to embrace the Buddha Dharma honestly when he shockingly discovers that his beloved wife and son had abandoned his dying mother. Another such ballad is in Choki Dendup's compendium. It is about the deputation of a legendary mail delivery man called Garp Lungi Khorlo by the civil ruler in Punakha to the three governors of Trongsa, Paro and Dagana asking one of them to go and serve as the fort-governor of Daling in present-day Darjeeling area, which was then under Bhutanese jurisdiction. The previous governor had been murdered by the British and a replacement was being considered in that very strategic area. This *lozey* has 304 lines. Such *lozey* continue to be written and published. An impressive work of recent times has been Gonpo Tshering's (2015) celebration of the successful reign of the Fourth King of Bhutan in 964 lines, which are grouped into 241 stanzas of four lines each. This is one of the longest *lozey* of this genre written thus far along with translations in English and published as a book. I have also composed a 160-line *lozey* consisting of 40 stanzas narrating my own experiences of De-suung Training¹³ which I underwent in 2014.

Comparative analysis of the poems

It is possible to draw a comparative analysis of these poems since they were written in the same year (separated by a few weeks or months) sparked by one historical event, i.e. Ugyen Wangchuk's journey to Lhasa. There are also perspectives which are sometimes different and sometimes shared.

The *katsom* of Nyenzer Latshab and the *nyen-ngag* of Jigme Chogyal primarily see the Younghusband Mission from a Buddhist perspective. The British invasion is perceived as one that seeks to destroy Buddhist temples and teachings. Take for example the last few lines of the *katsom*.

As the Dharma is forced to the edge,
The noble and snowy region of Tibet,
Is destroyed by those mutton-eaters,
Those who come crossing many
mountains and valleys,
They are barbarians without kindness
and compassion,
They feel happy even to occupy a small
land,
Those impudent and violent soldiers,
Are closer to destroying the sacred
teachings of Atisha.

Similarly, consider the last four lines of the Jigme Chogyal's poem which talks about the destruction of Gyantse Dzong and the killings of Tibetans.

Temples are destroyed and scriptures
(Kanjur and Tenjur) are strewn all over,
Supports of body, speech and mind
of the Buddha as well as artefacts
of sacred offerings are scattered like
clouds in the sky,

The monastic community, which is the
foundation of Buddha Dharma
Are dispersed separately like guests
from a market place!

Besides these poets, even historians have described the mission as attack against Buddhism. Padma Tshewang writes "Trongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuck left to mediate the conflict between the British and Tibetans unable to bear the thought of disappearance of Buddhist teachings in Tibet and the peace and happiness of sentient beings" (pp.536-537). Part of Jigme Chogyal's poem and Tshewang Peldon's *lozey* were composed from the perspective of Ugyen Wangchuck as mediator in the conflict. Including Nyinzer Latshab's *katsom*, the three poems begin with the mention of the conflict. Nyinzer Latshab writes,

An order was issued in Calcutta
And the barbarians occupied the snowy
region of Tibet,
Looking from everywhere and thinking
about it evokes sadness.

He does not mention the conflict as directly as Jigme Chogyal, who begins thus;

In the evil year, when thunder clouds
 rolled,
 At the power of increasing vigour of
 degenerate times,
 The Dharma King of the government
 of Tibet,
 And the Viceroy of the holy land of
 India,
 At the end of exchanging many
 messages,
 Their minds like fire and water, did not
 harmonize.
 All the disputes between India and
 Tibet,
 Stole the peace and happiness of the
 people.

In denouncing the conflict, Jigme Chogyal and Nyinzer Latshab write from a woeful perspective as is evident in the last lines of the two extracts quoted above. This is understandable as they wrote at the beginning of the conflict and the commencement of the invasion. The sadness had to be concealed when matters of the state were concerned. Jigme Chogyal wrote to congratulate Younghusband after hearing of the latter's first military victory in Tibet at a place called Guru where more than five hundred Tibetans were killed. The letter said 'that when he heard that his friends had won a victory, he was greatly rejoiced, for nowadays England and Bhutan had established firm friendship, and he hoped that there would always be a firm faith and friendship between

the English and the Bhutanese' (Kinga, 2004, p.29). Obviously, Jigme Chogyal would not have celebrated or rejoiced at the killing of hundreds of Tibetans. As the head of state however, he had to take positions that were of interest to Bhutan politically. Thus, the conflict between the political role of Jigme Chogyal as the head of state and his emotional and spiritual state as the incarnation of an enlightened leader becomes clear when we read his letters and poems together.

In contrast to the woeful perspective of the poems of Jigme Chogyal and Nyinzer Latshab, Tshewang Peldon writes from a joyful perspective because she is in a celebratory mood. Her *lozey* was written after Ugyen Wangchuck's successful return to Bhutan. The focus of the former two is on the conflict and the destruction of Tibet as the land of Buddha Dharma while hers is on Ugyen Wangchuck's success as a mediator. Although she was an illiterate woman-serf, her poetry is far richer in terms of the usage of metaphors, symbols, evocation of moods etc. Unlike the two Buddhist scholar-lamas, she uses an apt metaphor to describe the conflict.

Then, a lady from India,
 And a lady from Tibet
 Were said to be setting yarn for
 weaving.
 People wondered what they were
 weaving!

It was a herder's bag that could never
be washed clean!

These lines are packed with rich symbolism as well as deep irony. First, setting yarn and weaving a bag from yak's fur are metaphors for the conflict. As it is, such bags are very thick, dark and not easy to wash and clean. This points to the complexity of the conflict. Second, her usage of the metaphor of the herder's bag is a reflection of her own place in society as a herder in the Jachi household. Thus, she can relate to it very easily. Third, the Dharma King of Tibet (Dalai Lama) and Viceroy of British India mentioned in Jigme Chogyal's poem are referred to as a lady each from India and Tibet. Weaving is an art and skill associated with women. Since the metaphor for conflict she uses is the setting of yarn and weaving, she transforms the two primary actors in the conflict into women.

Despite the difference in mood of her *lozey* and Jigme Chogyal's *nyen-ngag*, both of them share a perspective. It is one of Ugyen Wangchuck going to mediate between the British and Tibetans to resolve the conflict. Jigme Chogyal mentions this in the beginning whereas Tshewang Peldon mentions it in the end after the conflict is mediated and resolved. Jigme Chogyal writes in the second-half of the poem thus;

Then the supreme abbot and assembly
of monks,
I and the Lord Desi, and all ministers
issued an edict,
In order to save lives of Indians and
Tibetans,
It was vital to go and mend the conflict!

Tshewang Peldon conveys the point directly.

He befriended the British and Tibetans
And then returned towards the south.

Another comparative perspective between Jigme Chogyal and Tshewang Peldon is the shared narrative at the beginning. Both introduce the conflict first, one directly and the other metaphorically. Then, both makes mention of earlier attempts to mediate the conflict. Jigme Chogyal refers to the exchange of letters between the British and Tibetans as well as British correspondences with Ugyen Wangchuck seeking his intervention. On the other hand, Tshewang Peldon mentions the efforts made by Kazi Ugyen Dorji, who is referred to as the Raja of Pasakha. Ugyen Dorji was the grandson of Pala Gyeltshen whereas Ugyen Wangchuck was the grandson of Pala's brother Pila Gonpo Wangyal. The latter had appointed the former in 1900 as the government agent or *kutshab* (*Sku tshab*) for the administration of southern Bhutan stationed at the headquarters in Pasakha. Hence Tshewang

Peldon's reference to him as the Raja of Pasakha.

Thereafter, both Jigme Chogyal and Tshewang Peldon talk about Ugyen Wangchuck's journey to Tibet. Jigme Chogyal mentions about Ugyen Wangchuck's visit to Punakha whereas Tshewang Peldon skips this part. Perhaps she did not skip this part of the journey to Punakha but was not recalled by those whom I interviewed to recount the *lozey* orally from memory. Tshewang Peldon talks about the raising of militia by Ugyen Wangchuck as his guards and attendants before he begins the journey. Jigme Chogyal only mentions that Ugyen Wangchuck came surrounded by his attendants. We know from other sources that there were 50 attendants and 200 soldiers in Ugyen Wangchuck's entourage.

In three lines, Jigme Chogyal summarizes Ugyen Wangchuck's travel to Tibet.

The supreme ruler, born of virtue and merit,
Took to the road on the auspicious day
of an evil month
And gradually reached where Indians
and Tibetans had gathered.

The Tibet he mentions must be the place called Dromo Rinchengang, where Ugyen Wangchuck stayed for a long time before moving to Gyantse to meet

Colonel Younghusband. In contrast, Tshewang Peldon's *lozey* takes us further to Lhasa metaphorically describing Ugyen Wangchuck's mediatory role and success. Her narrative brings us all the way back to Punakha with Ugyen Wangchuck's return.

Thus, Nyinzer Latshab only describes the conflict between British India and Tibet whereas Jigme Chogyal describes the conflict and talks about the deputation of Ugyen Wangchuck. On the other hand, Tshewang Peldon describes the conflict, the journey of Ugyen Wangchuck as well as his mediation and the successful return. It is as if each of the three poems builds upon where the former had left off.

Contemporary access to the three poems

All the poems were composed in 1904. The 115-years old poems are certainly not contemporary. So how do we think of them in the present? In the first instance, it is important to know that these poets certainly must have written many other poems of which we are not aware today. That includes Tshewang Peldon as well. Most of her *lozey* are forgotten now. Owing to the spread of modern public education and predominance of English as the medium, most Bhutanese are not able to read and enjoy these poems. But their historical and literary values continue to be acknowledged and re-published and made available to contemporary audience.

Jigme Chogyal's poem was partially re-published in Padma Tshewang's *History of Bhutan* (pp.535-536). Damchoe Lhendup's biography of the First King quotes two long stanzas of this poem (p.144 and pp.155-156). KMT Press had published the entire biography of Jigme Chogyal in 2016. Both Padma Tshewang and Damchoe Lhendup have re-published the *katsom* of Nyinzer Latshab. Although they have left out Tshewang Peldon's *lozey* because it was not available in textual form, Choki Dendup had made the first attempt by transcribing it and including it in his compendium. Aris (1994) wrote that "a minor verse epic recounting the whole story of his mediation is said to survive in some people's memories" (p.90). In the footnote to this sentence, he wrote, "It is attributed to one Jami Tsewang Pedron but has never been committed to writing" (p.112). Choki Dendup's attempt to commit to writing four years after Aris's observation is really the first effort. I went back to Tshewang Peldon's village in 2004, interviewed her great grandson and others, recorded their oral narration of the *lozey*, transcribed them in Dzongkha and took a step further by translating it into English for the first time. Likewise, I have translated partially¹⁴ the poem of Jigme Chogyal and *katsom* of Nyinzer Latshab. Karma Phuntsho had also translated the second half of Jigme Chogyal's poem and included it in his *History of Bhutan* (2013, p.500-501).

Conclusion

The Younghusband Mission is known and historicized as such from the British perspective. In the eyes of the Bhutanese however, the mission was really that of Ugyen Wangchuck. His role as the chief negotiator in the British-Tibetan conflict occupies a central place in Bhutanese historical narrative. The Younghusband Mission became the framework to narrate and explain Ugyen Wangchuck's own journey. In a way, we have to think of two journeys which begin and end separately but are undertaken jointly in the middle.

Nyinzer Latshab's *katsom* does not specifically deal with the subject of Ugyen Wangchuck's journey. It is instead a reflection on the British invasion of Tibet. It is a critique of the Younghusband Mission from the Buddhist perspective of an invasion bringing destruction to a sacred land. On the other hand, Jigme Chogyal first focusses on the historical context of the conflict that sets the ground for the decision by the State Council to send Ugyen Wangchuck as a mediator. Tshewang Peldon's *lozey* focus largely on Ugyen Wangchuck's journey. The last part of Jigme Chogyal's poem is more specific to a particular incident in the overall mission. It is an expression of horror and despair at the destruction of Gyantse Dzong and the killing of Tibetan soldiers in the battle.

In this despair is also the moral outrage of the head of a Buddhist state. The framing of Jigme Chogyal's *nyen-ngag* and Nyinzer Latshab's *katsom* as reflections or reactions against the destruction wrought by barbarians on Buddhist temples, teachings and holy land can be felt more poignantly when we factor in shared spiritual and cultural affinity between Tibet and Bhutan as well as similarity of their political systems. Ugyen Wangchuck's role is presented by Jigme Chogyal as one to mediate differences and save the lives of the Tibetans. The government of Gaden Phodrang (*dga'ldan pho brang*) under the successive Dalai Lamas compare with the government of Palden Druk Zhung (*dpal ldan 'brug gzhung*) under the successive reincarnations of Zhabdrung Namgyal. Both of them are regarded as emanation of Avalokitesvara, Buddha of Compassion. The geographic locale of the invasion may be Tibet but the spiritual site is shared between the Tibet and Bhutan as Buddhist countries. Hence the pain experienced by Bhutanese leaders. However, Bhutanese leaders had not allowed the spiritual affinity to overcome political considerations. Bhutan benefitted politically from this expedition contrary to the incalculable loss suffered by the Tibetans.

The composition of poems by a head of state, who was disheartened at the unfolding events as well as one by a serf in a celebratory mood truly reveals the

level of national engagement with the participation of Ugyen Wangchuck in the Younghusband Mission. They were composed around the same time in a scholastic, official and vernacular media, written and oral, reflecting the diversity of poetic genres. Coincidentally, the *katsom* written in Dzongkha bridges the gap between scholarly *chokey* of the monastic tradition and vernacular *lozey* of the common folks as it employs the script and structure of the former and language of the latter.

Today, *lozey* is becoming increasingly accessible through audio-visual recording, transcription using Dzongkha alphabets and translating in English especially the lyrical ballads as I have done with that of Tshewang Peldon and Sumdar Tashi. Lyrical ballads continue to be written today. The folk character of this genre is appropriated in the textual and scholarly tradition today. On the contrary, the *katsom* style and structure does not see appropriation into the vernacular. *Nyen-ngag* continues to be written by those schooled in the monastic tradition but many Bhutanese struggle to understand them, let alone write and express in *chokey* due to the predominance of English in public education. The fact that the Younghusband Mission and Ugyen Wangchuck's role in it produced poetic compositions around the same time in three different poetic genres by those occupying social positions

at extreme ends is indeed a significant moment in the history of Bhutanese literature.

Endnotes

- 1 See McKay, A, 2012, pp. 5-25.
- 2 Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who is duly revered and regarded as the founder of the Bhutanese polity, declared the formation of this government called *dpal ldan 'brug gzhung* from his monastic base at Chari in Thimphu around 1626.
- 3 While the governors of Dagana, Paro and Trongsa were known as *dpon slob*, those of Thimphu, Punakha and Wangdi Phodrang were known as *rdzong dpon*. The reasons for differences in title were historical but they were of equal ranks. There were sub-regional governors who were also coincidentally called *span slob* and *rdzong dpon*.
- 4 After the parinirvana of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1651, there came to be seventeen *rgyal tshab* before the establishment of monarchy. The reincarnations of Zhabdrung, his son Gyalsey Jampel Dorji and of another monk-ruler called Gyalsey Tenzin Rabgye served as *rgyal tshab*.
- 5 See Sonam Kinga, 2004, pp.2-53.
- 6 The enthronement of prince-regents at very young ages were more a norm rather than an exception. Except for four or five of them, all others were put on the throne before they attained their 10th birthdays. There were seven speech incarnations and six mind incarnations of Zhabdrung Rinpoche but only one body incarnation who was born as the prince of Sikkim and died young. It is important to mention that not all mind and speech incarnations served as prince-regents. Some served as civil rulers while a few served as chief abbots. When Jigme Chogyal was enthroned, the fifth speech incarnation known as Sungtrul Chogley Yeshe Ngedup was already into his 11th year as *gyaltshab*. He too was enthroned around 1854 when he was three years old. When Jigme Chogyal was enthroned, he was thus about 15 years old. There was no coup d'état of any sort to oust him in favour of the other. Rather, it appears to be in keeping with traditional monastic convention which gave primacy to mind incarnations over the speech ones when it concerned the matter of being the head of state. The mind incarnations were directly linked to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal while the speech incarnations were not.
- 7 Karma Phuntsho, p. 507.
- 8 Karma Phuntsho, p. 506.
- 9 We do not know of many Bhutanese women litterateurs who were engaged in traditional Buddhist scholarship. But this does not mean they did not write or compose. Perhaps their writings or compositions have yet to come to our attention. For example, Ashi Wangmo, the daughter of King Ugyen Wangchuck, who became a nun was a prolific songwriter. In the world of oral poetry, we know of a few other women besides Tshewang Peldon, whose oral compositions span various themes. For example, in Choki Dendup's compendium, there is a *lozey* by a lady called Yudrug Zangmo. In it, she expresses her sadness at being forced to go and marry a person she does not like. Another short *lozey* discusses an appeal made by a woman to the Chief Abbot

called Shacha Lhendup. The woman is referred to as the mother of Sithub. The appeal concerns exempting her son from the required enrolment in the monastic body. Similarly, a woman from Laya is recorded as sparring in a *lozey* with a man called Dorji from Punakha.

- 10 See Sonam Kinga, 2002, for detailed discussions on the categories of serfdom.
- 11 See Sonam Kinga, 2009, p. 92.
- 12 I posted my acrostic poetry on my Facebook page on 20 May 2020. It generated a lot of interest, and in response, many such poems in Sharchop were composed and posted in comments section.
- 13 De-suung known as Guardians of Peace is a voluntary corps established in 2011 by His Majesty the King. De-suups volunteer to help in providing social services, fighting forest fires, performing search and rescue operations during natural disasters, protecting public facilities as well as helping secure international borders as is evident during the global pandemic of Covid-19.
- 14 I had access to Jigme Chogyal's biography only recently. I found out that my translation of his poem earlier was only partial and incomplete. The complete translation will be included in my forthcoming publication bearing the same title as this paper.

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Challenges to the Development of Dzongkha Literature: A Comparison of *Rnam thar* and *Srung*

Sonam Nyenda

Abstract

Traditionally, literary texts in Bhutan were written in *chos skad*, or “dharma language” which is synonymous with classical Tibetan. As such, they were greatly influenced by Buddhist doctrine and practices, including positive values and ethics about Buddhist life. These literary works were mostly composed by individuals of high status and accessible only to the monastic community or through oral transmission. However, with the adoption of Dzongkha, also known as *Ngalongkha*, as the national language of Bhutan and the advent of modern education in Bhutan in the 1960s, a new crop of Bhutanese literary works and writing styles emerged, although the themes do not seem to have shifted significantly from Buddhist practice and cultural values. English was adopted as the medium of instruction in Bhutanese schools in large part in order to connect Bhutan to the rest of South Asia and increase global cooperation. Hence, English as a spoken and written language became quickly prevalent in the country. In addition, Anglophone literary works remain more popular than those composed in Dzongkha today. This article examines the significant challenges to the development of Dzongkha literature, given the predominance of two lingua franca in the region, namely classical Tibetan and English. The article focus on two narrative genres of contemporary literature: *rnam thar* (religious biography) which is heavily influenced by classical Tibetan and *srung*, both short stories and novels, which are shaped by the standards of modern fiction in English. In comparing these genres, this article explore how modern education system and school curriculum has and can affect the development of Dzongkha literature.

Key words: *srung*, *rnam thar*, Dzongkha literature, writing, language

Introduction

In Bhutan, most traditional literary texts are written in *chos skad*, or “dharma language” which is synonymous with classical Tibetan. As such, they were greatly influenced by Buddhist doctrine and practices, including positive values and ethics about Buddhist life. Until recently, even official correspondence in Bhutan was composed in *chos skad*. In *The History of Bhutan*, Karma Phuntsho states, “All written communications in Bhutan until the introduction of written Dzongkha in the second half of the twentieth century were conducted in classical Tibetan and much of Bhutanese literature even today is composed in this medium” (2013, p.53). This is due in part to the fact that, up to the early twentieth, Tibetan served as a literary *lingua franca* among Buddhists in Himalaya and Central Asia. Therefore, traditionally, Bhutanese literature was not very distinct from Tibetan literature.

With the adoption of Dzongkha as the national language in the 1960s and the development of Dzongkha grammar in the 70s, written Dzongkha literature started to grow in usage beyond official communications. To enhance its growth and development, Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) was established in 1986. The DDC’s mandate is to preserve and promote the use of Dzongkha as the national language of Bhutan. The

commission worked diligently to develop Dzongkha grammar and lexicon. However, due to the dominance of English language as the medium of instruction in Bhutanese national curriculum and as a *lingua franca* across South Asia and globally, the development of Dzongkha literature faces considerable challenges. In this article, I discuss three main challenges: (1) the continuing prevalence of *chos skad* in contemporary Bhutanese literature, (2) the predominance of traditional topics in Dzongkha literature, including folktales and stories with Buddhist themes, and (3) competition with English as the preferred medium for secular fiction. In tracing these challenges with respect to *chos skad* and English, I focus on two narrative genres of contemporary literature: *rnam thar* which is heavily influenced by *chos skad* and *srung*, both short stories and novels, which are being shaped by the standards of modern fiction in English.

History of Writing in Bhutan

To understand contemporary development of and challenges to Dzongkha literature, it is important to contextualize the issue with reference to early literary works. To do so, Dorji Gyeltshen’s work, *Early Book Production and Printing in Bhutan* (2016), provides substantial information on the history of literary works in Bhutan. According to Gyeltshen, written records started from the 12th century, after the

arrival of Tibetan religious figures into Bhutan. One of the earliest Tibetan figures to visit Bhutan was *Gzi brjid dpal* (1164-1224) popularly known as *Lha snang pa*, a 'Bri gung bka' rgyud follower. He visited Bhutan in 1194 and started a monastic institution in a place called *Cal kha* in Paro. He gave *Cakrasamvara* teaching to more than 1700 students and wrote many commentaries while in *Cal kha*. One of his surviving works today is *Bslab gsum lam gyi them skas rin po che'i bang mdzod* (Vajra, 2004, p. 133). There are other religious figures who visited Bhutan after him in the 13th century such as *Lo ras pa* (1189-1250) and *Pha jo 'brug sgom* who taught extensively. In 1289 AD, son of *Lha snang pa* called *Bde mchog* (1179-1265), a Vajrakīla yogi who founded Sumthrang temple wrote a commentary on Vajrakīla practice. The text titled *Dpal gsang brgyud gyi 'grel pa snyos ston bde mchog bdag gi khyad chos* is still preserved with Sumthrang Choje in central Bhutan.

Gyeltshen also mentions the production of wood blocks as important to the history of literary production in Bhutan. Prominent examples include the autobiography and spiritual songs of 'Ba' ra ba rgyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391); *Pad ma gling pa's* writings (*Pad gling bka' 'bum*) produced under the supervision of *Zla ba rgyal mtshan*, and the autobiography and writings of *Blo gro rab yangs* (1474-1570), who was the founder of *Sa skya* monastery

called *Spyi zhing bsam gtan chos gling* in Bhutan. Further, from seventeenth century onward, there were numerous other block prints initiated or commanded by *Zhabs drung ngag bdang rnam rgyal*, *Mi 'gyur brtan pa*, and *Btan 'dzin rab rgyas* (Gyeltshen, 2016).

All these examples of Buddhist literature were written in *chos skad*. Dzongkha was then not yet a written language. As a Buddhist kingdom, much of the literature and arts in Bhutan centered on Buddhism, from festivals at village temples to scholastic study at monasteries. Dorji Penjore laments about "the scholarship as an exclusive domain of Buddhist lamas and monks, and Buddhism the only proper subject of academic and spiritual pursuit" (2013, p.148). Artists and scholars then were mostly monastics and the topics of scholarship focused around dharma, whether doctrine or narrative. *Chos skad* maintained its importance for these categories of literature. Phuntsho (2013) mentions that even after the advent of Dzongkha, much of Bhutanese literature even today is composed in *chos skad*. This will be discussed further in the later part of the article.

Emergence of Dzongkha as the National Language

Dzongkha literally mean language (*kha*) spoken in dzongs (*rdzong*). It is a language

spoken in the Western districts of Haa, Paro, Thimphu, Phunakha, Wangdi Phodrang, Chukha, Gasa and Dagana. It is also referred to as Ngalongkha (*Sngolung kha*) which would translate roughly to “language of ancient settlement”. In *Language Policy in Bhutan*, George Van Driem stated “The term Ngalong probably derives from Ngenlung ‘ancient region’, a term first recorded for the people of Shâ and Paro by the Tibetan sage Künkhen Longchen Ramjam (1308-1363) during his travels through central Bhutan” (1994, p.88). As most political offices were based in Western regions, Ngalongkha became a dominant medium for official purposes. Gradually, it was used as the official language in administrative offices and monastic centres across Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013). As offices and centres were based in *rdzongs*, Ngalongkha slowly became known as Dzongkha, the language of the Dzongs. Although it uses the Tibetan alphabet, Dzongkha has great difference in its syntax and grammar.

According to the late Dasho Sangay Dorji (1990, p. *Ta*), the first secretary of the DDC and the author of *Rdzong kha'i brdagzhung*, the development of a standard orthographic and grammatical structure in Dzongkha was only started in 1971. It was in that year that Lopen Pema Tshewang, then Director of National Library, wrote a Dzongkha grammar book titled *Rdzong kha'i sgra bshad rab gsal skya rengs dang*

po which was distributed to schools.

Before Dzongkha was even recognized as the national language and standard orthographical and grammatical structure were developed, Bhutanese were already learning English as a medium of instruction in schools, given its prominence across South Asia due to British colonial rule over neighboring India and Burma. According to Karma Ura (2010), the first school was established in Bumthang with 14 Bhutanese boys, following the visit of the First King Ugyen Wangchuk to Kolkata, India in 1911 to participate in the royal visit and Durbar of King George V (1865-1936). In 1914, the king sent 45 boys to Dr. Graham's Home School in Kalimpong to study English. In the same year, another school was established in Haa where English and Hindi were taught. Decades later, yet another school with 14 boys was established in Bumthang in 1955. The government developed a formal national education system in 1955, and in 1959 decided to provide free universal modern education (Penjore, 2013). By 1961, with the start of the first five year plan, English had become the main medium of instruction in the Bhutanese school system. Therefore, English was used in schools earlier than Dzongkha, as the standard Dzongkha grammars were only developed in 1971.

Given the prominence of English as *lingua*

franca across South Asia, it became well-established in Bhutan while written Dzongkha was newly developing, and lacked lexical strength and grammatical sophistication to construct advanced literary works. Moreover, rapid globalization and its effect on Bhutan made it difficult for Dzongkha to compete with English, not only as a literary language but also as an oral medium through which international popular culture could be accessed. For these reasons, Dzongkha faced new challenges in terms of the development of Dzongkha literature as well as the broad usage of spoken Dzongkha, given the diversity of dialects across Bhutan. Phuntsho rightly emphasizes that while “Today, Dzongkha is taught in schools; most Bhutanese speak Dzongkha imperfectly and only a few can write in Dzongkha with ease” (2013, p.53).

Genres of *Rnam thar* and *Srung*

The challenges facing the development of Dzongkha literature become more salient when looking at Bhutanese publications today. Most of the books written by established writers are written in *chos skad* or Dzongkha-Tibetan hybrid. Newer publications in Dzongkha have emerged since early 2000, but there is still room for improvement in the development of Dzongkha literature. Here, I focus on examples of narrative literature, both *rnam thar* and *srung*, by Bhutanese writers in

order to trace this development and some of its challenges due to the influence of *chos skad* and English.

There is a rich tradition of recording the life accounts of great Buddhist masters in Bhutan and Himalayan culture. Such life accounts are recorded in the forms of histories, biographies, narratives, and memoirs. Among all these genres, *rnam thar* meaning “complete liberation” is traditionally the most common form of biographical writing. It refers to the biography of renowned masters, most often written by a devoted disciple or at times composed as autobiography at the request of their disciples. *Rnam thar* is said to inspire its readers and guide them on the path to enlightenment. Thus, Phuntsho (2017) notes that *rnam thar*, in general, neither gives a critical account of its subject nor the details of the worldly and profane aspects of their life. They generally present spiritual achievements and positive qualities in hagiographic fashion in order to inspire readers in their soteriological practice.

Although there are quite a number of *rnam thars* written in Bhutan, the language used, is still mostly in *chos skad*. One recent *rnam thar* on the life of *Bla ma Bsod nams bzang po*, a Bhutanese yogin who studied and practiced in Tibet and lived and taught in Bhutan in 1970s and 1980s has been written by two different authors.

The first written by Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi in 2013, is titled *The Three Shinning Stars of the East (Nyi ma shar gyi phyogs las shar ba'i skar ma rnam gsum: skyes bu dam pa rnam gsum gyi rtogs brjod bsam 'phel dbang gi rgyal po)*. The book actually contains biographies of three masters: *Bla ma Bsod nams bzang po*, *Bla ma Dkar po tshe dbang dpal 'byor*, and *Bar mtsams bla ma Pad ma dbang chen*. The purpose of the publication, highlighted on the first page, is to help readers understand the path of dharma as the ultimate root of peace and happiness, and the secondary purpose is to raise funds for Kharchu Dratsang of Namkhai Nyingpo. Another biography of Lama Sonam Zangpo, written the following year in 2014 by Lam Kezang, is titled *Blessed Activities of Drupwang Lama Sonam Zangpo, the Flow of Milky River (Sgrub dbang bla ma bsod nams bzang po'i mdzad rnam byin rlabs 'o ma'i chu rgyun)*. Lam Kezang mentions in the twelfth chapter that he wrote the biography at the request of Lama Thinley Namgyal, one of the close students of Lama Sonam Zangpo with the help of Lopen Kuenzang Thinley. Lopen Kuenzang Thinley is a writer and editor with KMT press in Thimphu. Both authors used *chos skad* to write the biographies, showing the ongoing influence of classical Tibetan on Bhutanese literature.

Chos skad is still the dominant language used in writing spiritual and religious

literature in Bhutan. For that reason, Phuntsho remarked, “Dzongkha was a *phal skad*, a commoner’s vernacular opposed to *chos skad*, the scriptural idiom” (2013, p.53). It might be for the same reason why the two authors choose to write in *chos skad*, however, their writing styles differ slightly. Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi narrates the spiritual life of Lama Sonam Zangpo presenting the subject to be more divine in order to address faithful readers grounded in a Buddhist worldview, whereas Lam Kezang offers a more historical account based on factual information. For example, while describing the subject’s birth place, Phuntsho Tashi’s *rnam thar* (196 pages long) describes the historical and spiritual significance of the place, Rinchen Bumpa where the lama was born, describing at length how it is not different from Copper-Colored Mountain, the abode of Guru Padmasambhava. By contrast, Lam Kezang’s *rnam thar* (340 pages long) just mentions it as a sacred place of Rinchen Bumpa in Kurtoe. Traditionally, a *rnam thar* is generally written to spiritually inspire faith in its readers, but according to Kurtis Schaeffer, it can also serve “to inspire yogins to practice, kings to offer patronage, commoners to have faith, and heretics to convert” (2004, p.51). If we consider Robinson’s typology with respect to three ascending and mutually enriching ways of reading the accounts of Indian *siddhas*, namely as history, hagiography and myth, the way Lam Kezang presents

the biography reads more like history compared to Phuntsho Tashi's, whose presentation is more hagiographic.

By contrast, the genre of *srung* came into being as a contemporary genre by recording folk tales. Traditionally, Bhutan had a rich heritage of folk tales, and these were later collected and recorded for use in Bhutanese school. At first, when stories were printed as school textbooks, it was mostly jāataka tales, ancient stories of the Buddha's past lives from India, that were translated into *chos skad*. Then in the 1980s, Sherab Thaye collected local folk stories and published them in Dzongkha in a series of "Dzongkha Short Stories: Book Three" (1987). Those stories were mostly local folk tales, such that the writing style of 'The Kind Crow' and 'Stories of the Demon of Nyala,' mimics oral narration.

From 2007, the Ministry of Education started implementing a revised Dzongkha curriculum from classes PP-XII in different phases (Sherab, Dorji, Lhendup, Tshering, & Drukpa, 2020). Significant work went into this: the Dzongkha textbook for class twelve was revised five times after 2006 and the latest revision took place in 2018 (Royal Education Council [REC], 2018). This textbook introduces students to modern ways of writing stories in Dzongkha, based on English literary models. The class twelve Dzongkha textbook, *Lhag rig dang rtsom rig* (2018),

provides a list of six features that should be present in a modern short story: setting, characters, conflict, climax, resolution, and theme. Such efforts in the classroom will likely lift the standard of Dzongkha story writing and literature.

The revision of the curriculum was done a decade ago and the impact is yet to be seen; it will depend on whether or not future students choose to write in Dzongkha. Nevertheless, there are a number of Dzongkha short stories and novels in the book stores today. The authors of these new books are mostly young writers who graduated from modern education system even though the majority of them did not study the aforementioned new Dzongkha curriculum. Nonetheless, these new writings attempt to offer newer ways of story writing and show significant development of Dzongkha literature within the broad genre of *srung*.

One prominent example of new Dzongkha literature that is developing could be a Dzongkha story book by Lopen Kinzang Wangdi, a high school Dzongkha teacher, called *Longing to Meet Buddha (Sangs rgyas mjal ba'i smon lam)*. He wrote the book while he was doing his Masters and published it after he completed his studies in 2018 (Wangdi, personal communication, September 13, 2019). In his acknowledgements, he mentions that he was provoked by a short Thai cartoon

to write this story and intended it as a way to share Buddhist values with Bhutanese high school youth (Wangdi, n.d).

Longing to Meet the Buddha tells the story of a poor beggar called Sudre Ta who struggles to meet Buddha. The story is divided into fifteen parts and in each, Wangdi introduces a new character to bring in conversation with Sudre Ta. As he does, another story is woven into the narrative. However, unlike traditional folk tales, Wangdi's story begins by describing India as a country, providing a clear picture of its historical context. He lavishly takes one and half pages to describe why India is called *rgya dkar* or *rgya gar*, based on its culture and religion and briefly recounts Buddha's pursuit of enlightenment. Only after that he introduces a small village called *Nya dkar grong* and the protagonist Sudre Ta. This rich description signals a new style of writing whereas in a traditional work the location might have been described in a single sentence. Consequently, in Wangdi's fourth part, *Spyang lo las sgrib dag bcug pa'i bskor*, he likewise describes the village setting and family in detail in order to situate the protagonist, the poor boy Sudre Ta who lives in a hut and encounters two rats. In my translation of his description:

Inside Su dre Ta's hut, it wasn't empty like before. It was like there was a thankful parent who raised you from

the childhood and helped you attend the adulthood, brothers who are caring, sisters who pleases you, and relatives and neighbors who would always support you. It was like everybody has gathered together and the atmosphere is filled with happiness. (n.d., p.29)

Again this depiction is more detailed and full compared to the descriptions one might find in a traditional folk tale or *rnam thar* in order to establish that the protagonist had a happy family. Of course, this alone does not make it modern. Although Wangdi attempts to adapt to newer forms of writing, his work still lacks some of the characteristics and features of modern fiction. If the six features taught in class twelve Dzongkha textbook are considered, although Wangdi's story has minor conflict and resolution, the climax is not very dramatic. Moreover, an important part of story writing, the rising action and falling actions on either side of the climax, are also not clearly articulated. For this reason, his story might not grab the attention of young readers and instead cause them to lose interest in reading Dzongkha literature.

To his credit, at certain sections of Wangdi's story, he creates philosophical conversations between his characters that may help instill Buddhist values in youth. For example, in the third part of the book, a conversation between Sudre Ta and

two rats is intriguing. Sudre Ta laments about his low life and admits his wish to commit suicide. This is where Wangdi brings in Buddhist doctrine narrating how hard it is to accumulate merits to gain a human body, in the form of the rats' advice to Sudre Ta. The rat says, "Do not say that you are going to commit suicide. The treasure of human life that you have accumulated with eight freedoms and ten acquisitions is very difficult to achieve. The bodhisattvas *Rgyal sras dnyul chu thogs med*¹ and *Rgyal sras zhi ba lha*² have explained that in three ways: cause, example, and counting..." (n.d., p. 24). He then explains with an example of blind turtle at the bottom of the ocean emerging into the middle of a golden yoke at the surface. This is a popular example of how rare and precious human life is in Buddhist literature. As the story is meant for high school students, such doctrinally-focused narrative makes for heavy reading and risks boring readers, even though it conveys important traditional knowledge.

In this way, we can see that Dzongkha literature may be burdened by the commitment to cultural preservation and instilling Buddhist values in the next generation. Lopen Lungtaen Gyatso (2004, p.237) in his "Difficulty in Teaching Dzongkha" posits that, "Every native language is the best medium of communication to relay local and indigenous thoughts and values. Dzongkha

is a language of Bhutanese religion, philosophy and culture". Thus, although Wangdi could not articulate his story according to the modern story writing features, his story shares well indigenous thoughts and values. Similarly, other Dzongkha books such as *A Bowl Full of Cloth (Go la zangs gzhong gang, 2012)* and *Garden of Suffering (Sdug bsngal gyi ldum ra, 2013)* written by Dawa Drukpa and *My Life as an Ox (Nye'i mi tshe glang gi lus rten, 2014)* written by Lham Tshering also instill similar cultural values.

In 1999, Rinchen, a graduate student at UNB, Fredericton wrote an article on "Why do children fare better in English than Dzongkha (National Language) in the schools of Bhutan in all grade levels?". He suggested nine main measures to help students learn Dzongkha and achieve the vision of preserving Bhutan's culture and tradition. Among those nine measures, some of them are to "introduce more Bhutanese literature in Dzongkha, support the development of Dzongkha articles, novels, books and magazines, and make teaching and learning of Dzongkha relevant, challenging and interesting to the students" (Rinchen 1999, p.9). Today, two decades after his suggestions, a lot of development has taken place not only for the development of Dzongkha language but also in Dzongkha literature. According to a rough list of Dzongkha publications acquired from Bhutan Communication and

Media Authority (BICMA) approximately 50 Dzongkha books were published from 2018 to 2020, while English publication is comparably higher with about more than 90 in the same timeframe. The question is: Why? Do Dzongkha books grab the reader's attention and gain widespread readership? If not, what are the reasons?

Some of the Dzongkha writers interviewed on national television and others who spoke informally with me for this research have complained about minimal readership and interest in Dzongkha books. This means that there may be less reason for writers to choose Dzongkha as their medium for storytelling. It would be a good subject for future researchers to look at the quality and standard of the Dzongkha writings and how they cater to their intended audience.

Dzongkha literature is starting to grow, and at the same time faces challenges due to the influence of *chos skad* that makes Dzongkha grammar and spelling stilted and the popularity of English with which it competes for readers. Lopen Lungtaen Gyatso (2004, p.267) compared the influence of *chos skad* to Dzongkha as how Latin is to Roman languages, since *chos skad* influenced the vocabulary of spoken and written Dzongkha. Although Dzongkha was a spoken language traditionally, it was adopted as the national language only in 1960s. By then Bhutanese were already steeped in English as the

medium of instruction in government schools. Dzongkha grammar was structured only in 1971 and redeveloped in 1990s. So while English had already taken root, Dzongkha was still in the phase of development.

And Dzongkha is still developing. For instance, debates about whether Dzongkha spellings should be aligned to *chos skad* or whether it needs to be simplified still persist. Moreover, a frequent reworking on Dzongkha language is confusing Dzongkha users and audiences. A recent article published by Lopen Tashi Phuntsho in the *Dzongkha Journal of the College of Language and Culture Studies* highlighted a good example of how inconsistent Dzongkha is in different texts published by DDC. In his discussion about connective words for possessive marker in Dzongkha, Tashi Phuntsho said, "There are inconsistency in identifying connective words for possessive marker. There are different identifications in different text. Some text has mentioned just four, while others mention five or six and others goes to mention even nine" (2020, p. 29). Phuntsho continues, "Some even identifies main connective words and constituent connective words but there are no clear distinction between the two". The recent Dzongkha curriculum evaluation findings pointed out that "the existence of different spellings for a word has often confused both teachers and students in

the schools” (Sherab, Dorji, Lhendup, Tshering, & Drukpa, 2020). This problem is faced by other Dzongkha readers and writers too.

Although English is a second language, Bhutanese seems more comfortable in English compared to Dzongkha. Rinchen observes:

English gained lots of popularity and was well-received by teachers, students and administrators. They look at it like a path finder and a means of livelihood. Now as the English language is so set in our educational system, and the interest people develop for it, our national language is at the verge of extinction. In the school children are better in English than Dzongkha (1999, p. 4).

Although Rinchen wrote this article in 1999, the problems that he highlights still persist today. Moreover, even today roughly eighty to ninety percent of teachings in Bhutanese schools are through English medium. This means a smaller readership for Dzongkha literature and little feedback or criticism that will assist in its further development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several issues that have posed significant challenges to the development of Dzongkha literature.

Most blatant is the problem of inconsistent changes to Dzongkha spelling and grammar that confuses audiences. But the deeper issue highlighted in this article is the influence of *chos skad* and English that have made it difficult for Dzongkha to articulate a full-fledged literature of its own. Synthesizing these, if the potential readership for Dzongkha gets confused by changes, or does not find the plots of Dzongkha stories compelling, then especially younger audiences will opt for literature written in English. However, if the government could encourage present high school students to cultivate interest in Dzongkha, there might be some potential for developing Dzongkha literature in the next decades. If Dzongkha literature slowly captures the reader’s attention, it might in the long run encourage more writers to publish in Dzongkha. The new Dzongkha curriculum with its training in how to write modern fiction could further help fulfil the dream of a thriving Dzongkha literature.

Endnotes

- 1 *Rgyal sras dnyul chu thogs med* (1297-1317) is the author of *Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas*. His text in thirty seven verses provides instructions on how to follow the bodhisattva path.
- 2 *Rgyal sras zhi ba lha* (Śāntideva) is an eighth-century Indian philosopher at Nalanda University. He is renowned for his work *Byang chub sems pa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa* (*Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*)

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Exploring National Identity through Literature in Bhutanese English Curriculum

Tshering Om Tamang

Abstract

This article offers an examination of the dense and complicated history of the development of Bhutanese literature in English, in an attempt to better understand its relationship with the national curriculum, and country's national identity and literature as a whole. Until the last decade, the English curriculum placed in schools in Bhutan was heavily influenced by the curriculum in Indian institutions. An attempt to create a 'nationalist' syllabus meant a major revision of the English curriculum was conducted in 2006. One of the significant changes was the inclusion of Anglophone literature by Bhutanese writers. This article presents a close reading of the works included in the English syllabus, *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* by Kunzang Choden and the autobiographical poem, *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* translated by Karma Ura as a means to examine the fulfillment of the country's nationalistic goal. The study examines the themes and issues that are prevalent in these works, and posits that their inclusion exposes students to new hybrid English that appropriately expresses indigenous Bhutanese experiences, while at the same time, contributing to the establishment of the country's 'national' literature in English.

Keywords: anglophone literature, Bhutanese literature, identity, national curriculum, English language, national literature.

Introduction

This article examines the dense and complicated history of the development of Bhutanese literature in English, and its relationship with the national English curriculum. Over the past decades, the English curriculum in Bhutan has included the study of a mixture of texts as part of students' literary training. Part of this literary study has been dominated by works from India, while the other half comprised of works by Western writers. This meant that until recently while Bhutanese students were exposed to Indian and Western literature, as part of their literary study, there was no place for the study of Bhutanese works in English in the national syllabus. This longtime lacuna in the national English curriculum prior to the 2006 revision brings into question the existence of an Anglophone Bhutanese literature in the first place.

Indeed, Bhutanese literature in itself remains quite undefined. Questions about what constitutes Bhutanese literature, or Anglophone Bhutanese literature, has not been adequately addressed by scholars, researchers or educationalists: What would one consider Bhutanese literature? Does it mean literature produced in Bhutan or about Bhutan? Or does it mean texts written in the national language, Dzongkha? Or can it include literature written in English by Bhutanese authors? Does it

need to incorporate inherently Bhutanese themes? Or can a foreigner writing about Bhutanese issues be considered Bhutanese literature? These are the same difficulties Chinua Achebe (1994) bemoaned about African literature in "The African writers and the English language." A definition of Bhutanese literature has not been reached, nor have scholars and writers come together to try to define it unlike in Africa. In the same article, Achebe goes on to suggest that African literature cannot be crammed into 'a small, neat definition' and that 'any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene... is doomed to failure' (1994, p.429).¹ Taiye Selasi in her opening speech at the International Literature Festival in Berlin, titled "African Literature Doesn't Exist" laments this tradition of defining literature by its geography and suggests that African literature is 'an empty designation' which disregards the 'complexities of African cultures and the creativity of African authors' (2013, p.1). The same might be said for Bhutanese literature and what Bhutanese literature means. Perhaps there is no need to define Anglophone Bhutanese literature, but the lack of a discussion itself about Bhutanese literature highlights a severe shortage of published works in English in Bhutan and thereby a lack of scholarly discussion about what Bhutanese literature actually means.

This dearth in scholarly analysis of Bhutanese literature could be due to the fact that until a few decades ago, Anglophone publications were rare in Bhutan. While there seems to have been a thriving book production and printing culture of early *chokey* (*chos skad*) and Dzongkha texts within monasteries in Bhutan,² the first Bhutanese book in English, Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan*, was not published until 1993³. Despite this, during the revision of the national English curriculum in 2006, there was a common agreement between educationists, curriculum developers and scholars that Bhutanese students should be introduced to literary works that reflect their indigenous experience.

The exclusion of Bhutanese works in the English curriculum can, on the one hand, be attributed to this contested definition of Bhutanese literature and what it constitutes and, on the other hand, be due to the dearth of Anglophone literature written by Bhutanese authors. But a more significant reason is the influence of the Indian sub-continent in the educational sector in Bhutan, and the country's decision to adopt English as the medium of instruction across its school. In order to understand the development of Anglophone literature in Bhutan, it is first important to understand the educational history of Bhutan, its long-standing relationship with the English language

and the factors that finally propelled the 2006 revision to include Bhutanese text in English in the national syllabus.

A Brief History of Education in Bhutan

The history of education system in Bhutan can be traced back as far as the arrival of the Buddhist scholar Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyel, in 1616 from Tibet (Curriculum and Professional Support Division [CAPSD], 1994, p.27). The establishment of numerous *Dzongs* and monasteries meant the beginning of monastic education with its own curriculum. *Dzongs* and monasteries served, and still continue to serve, as the central locus for monastic education. In an important development with significant consequences for the growth of literacy in Bhutan, at least one male child from every family was obligated to attend monastic school in the *Dzongs*, though education for the general population remained less accessible.

Formal secular education began in Bhutan in the 1960s. This was in accordance with Bhutan's ongoing effort to modernize the country and to forge closer international relationships, particularly with the neighboring Indian subcontinent. Given the proximity of the two countries, it is no surprise that India would play a particularly influential role in the educational and institutional development within the country. These influences

from the Indian subcontinent could be prominently seen in three major aspects of Bhutanese education: the schooling system, the borrowed curriculum, and the adoption of English language as the medium of instruction.

First, a nationwide network of formal secular education, based on Indian models, was established during the first five-year plan of 1961-1966 (Sherab, 2013; Thinley & Maxwell, 2013). By 1997, with this model, Bhutan would start a total of 300 English medium schools across the country as the mainstream mode of education (Education Division, 1997 as cited in Ueda, 2004). Second, Bhutan also relied heavily on India for its primary and secondary school curricula. Although regulated by a separate organization, until 2005, schools in Bhutan would deliver curriculum that have been established based on borrowed syllabi from India. In fact, the Council for the Indian School Certificate (CISCE) in Delhi would oversee the majority of the curricula for primary and secondary schools (Classes PP–XII). This included the curriculum for the majority of the subjects such as Geography, Mathematics, and other science subjects, and more importantly for the purpose of this article, English. This means that for years, Bhutanese students, in their literary studies, had to rely on a body of writings that were chosen for Indian students.

Often this had little, if anything, to offer students in Bhutan culturally. This is because the India's school curriculum is based on a colonial history closely aligned with India's long period under the British Raj up until the first half of the twentieth century. Indian scholar Gauri Viswanathan suggests that the study of English and English literature in India was designed to disbar the natives 'from cultivating a native literature held in pious veneration – a literature that was deeply interwoven with the habits and religion of the people and comprised valuable records of their culture' (2011, p.4). Additionally, Thomas Macaulay asserted the 'superiority of the Europeans' as 'absolutely immeasurable' declaring that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India' (1835, p.3). The aim of the British Raj was to make colonized Indians identify with and accept British values, cultures and literature as superior to the natives.

Consequently, the curriculum in place reflected these same ideological assumptions, and dealt with themes and issues about India that were a far cry from the problems Bhutan faced. This meant that the transfer of the Indian syllabi to Bhutan created problems for Bhutanese students. While India was under British colonial rule during her adoption of English, Bhutan has never been colonized.

Thus, Bhutanese students were being subjected to a curriculum deeply rooted in colonial history yet knew very little of that experience. The curriculum in place was culturally, ideologically and linguistically unsuited to the needs of Bhutanese students' situation and requirements. The curriculum failed to provide Bhutanese students with a literary study that emphasizes Bhutanese values and culture or that reflects the Bhutanese way of life. Yet, like India, Bhutan had no choice at first but to adopt a foreign curriculum.

Subsequently, the implementations of an Indian schools curriculum combined with borrowed syllabi would also mean the adoption of English as the medium of instruction in school in Bhutan. However, the reasons for adopting English as an instructional language are a bit more complex. English had long been studied in several private schools, but the rise of English as a communal language in Bhutan began with the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in schools. Bhutan officially recognized Dzongkha as the national language in 1960s, however, the lack of teaching and learning materials in Dzongkha made it imperative to choose a second language as the medium of formal instruction. English was, thus, adopted as the medium of instruction for majority of the curriculum, except for Dzongkha and to a certain extent History, at all levels of primary and secondary education.

Bhutan's predilection for English could no doubt be an influence of India's wide acceptance and use of the language. Howard Solverson in *The Jesuit and the Dragon: The Life of Father William Mackey in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan* reports that since English was already being taught as a subject in Bhutanese schools, 'adopting English would not involve any perceived threat of cultural influence from a neighboring country' and the choice to start the country's 'first quality school fit well with the adoption of the English language for schools' (1995, p.107). Besides, since the majority of the teachers and curriculum had to be brought from India, any other choice would have been unwise at the time.

This decision was also due to the lack of other feasible language, even the national language Dzongkha, as the instructional language. Dzongkha, up until its adoption as a national language, did not have a standard orthographic and grammatical structure, making it impossible to be recognized as the medium of instruction of a national wide education system⁴ (Phuntsho, 2013). Further, the fact that English language provided Bhutanese students with greater exposure to global economic and intellectual privileges was in line with the nation's ongoing modernization efforts, and certainly contributed to its choice as the medium of formal instruction.

However, the choice of language is 'central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe' (Thiong'o, 1986, p.4). Bhutanese government's decision to choose English as a medium of instruction meant that Bhutanese students were left to define themselves in a language that is not their own. More than 20 different languages are spoken throughout the country, and Dzongkha, while adopted as the national language, is mainly spoken in Western Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013). Since Dzongkha is not spoken by majority of Bhutanese people, learning Dzongkha is often perceived to be 'as hard as learning a foreign language' (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 53). Thus, choosing Dzongkha as the medium of educational instruction would feel like an outside imposition in many regions within Bhutan while, at the sometime, not offers the opportunities associated with learning English. Bhutanese students' language of education was no longer the language of their culture, and brought upon cultural alienation that is extensively discussed by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, Achebe and other post-colonial writers (Thiong'o, 1986; Crystal, 2000). Thus, Bhutan was not only left with an Indian school system but also depended on an Indian-based curriculum and a foreign language as the main medium of knowledge.

While Bhutan was never colonized, the

eventual consequences of borrowing an Indian-based education and curriculum, put Bhutan is a somewhat similar situation as those of colonized countries. Bhutanese students were increasingly exposed to a language and culture that was alien to her own, leaving the indigenous language and culture in danger of being surpassed by a foreign culture. Further, the history of the adoption of the English language in Bhutan is similar to that of counties that were formerly colonised. The only difference lies in the fact that English was never forced on the Bhutanese by a colonial power, but by the Bhutanese government itself necessitated by the implementation of a foreign curriculum. Many Bhutanese schools mandated the use of either only English or Dzongkha in schools, while the use of students' local language during school hours would invite severe punishments⁵. This is not surprising since the effects of 'intellectuals and cultural dependence are as serious as those of political subjection or economic dependence' (Brennan, 1989, p.22).

Thus, Bhutan's decision to adopt Indian syllabi left Bhutan in danger of being overwhelmed by a foreign culture. Relating to a foreign culture, Frantz Fanon claims: 'We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us' (1963, p.17). Bhutan has reached the same stage where she has to fashion a national culture that is

characteristically her own. After following India's lead for so long, Bhutan's only option was to decenter all conventions and themes relating to India and the West and concentrate on establishing a new national identity. Bhutan's situation resonated with Fanon's argument about national culture: 'this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intelligentsia to shrink away from that western culture in which they are in danger of being swamped' (1963, p.209). Significantly, Bhutan had to face the combination of both western and Indian influences that are in danger of overshadowing the country's indigenous culture. Bhutan chose to do this by consciously moving away from conventions and themes related to India and the West and concentrate on establishing a 'nationalized' curriculum for Bhutanese schools.

'Nationalizing' the curriculum

In its initial stage of development, Bhutan was more concerned with the expansion of the educational system than with the cultural impact of Indian or western curricula on students. It was only in December 2002 that a major shift was made in English education (Centre for educational and research and development [CERD], 2002). This revision of the English curriculum was to be implemented

in three phases: Classes XI and XII in 2006, Classes VIII – X in 2007 and Classes PP – VIII in 2008 (CERD, 2002). The new curriculum aimed to decenter Indian and western influences, and emphasized the need for students to cultivate principles that reflect the 'cultural values of Bhutan' (CAPSD, 2005, p.3). One of the ways this was done was by incorporating literary texts by Bhutanese authors from the local context.

However, the establishment of a national curriculum meant Bhutan first needed to produce a national literature that the country solely lacked. As discussed earlier Bhutanese literature as such has not been defined. And though Bhutan has a reasonable body of work in *chokey* and some in Dzongkha, these works remain largely inaccessible beyond the monastic population. The need to revise the English curriculum also meant that Bhutanese literary works needed to be in English. A search for Anglophone literature by Bhutanese authors in 2002 yields limited results. During the revision, Bhutan could boast no more than 30 books written in English by Bhutanese authors. The first work in English by a Bhutanese author was not published until 1993 with Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan*. With a handful of writers, including Karma Ura, Lily Wangchuk and Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, this lack of a substantial body of work by Bhutanese writers made it

apparent that Bhutan not only did not have sufficient secular works to be added in the syllabus, but also that Bhutanese literature in English itself was just beginning to develop.

Phuntsho (2014 as cited in Raina, 2014, para. 8) states that Bhutanese literature is ‘starkly divided into two mediums that comes with two different approaches and value systems’. Phuntsho, here, seems to be referring to the rich Bhutanese literature in *chokey* and Dzongkha that was prominent amongst elite educated circles, while secular works in English by Bhutanese writers only emerged in mid-1990s. Fanon posits that the late establishment of a country’s literature is because most of the ideas developed by colonized intelligentsia have already been wildly professed by specialists in the colonizer’s country (1963, p. 209). This is perhaps one of the reasons Bhutan has taken so long to act on creating a secular Anglophone literature. With an abundance of Indian and western literary texts readily available in the country and also through the national curriculum, perhaps Bhutanese writers did not feel the need to develop a literature of their own. Another discouraging factor could be the sentiment shared by many Bhutanese which is summarised by Phuntsho (2014 as cited in Raina, 2014, para. 23) in the following quote: Bhutanese people should ‘first learn to live as Bhutanese, then you

can learn another language and write in that. Many young Bhutanese don’t even speak Dzongkha; how can they jump to write in English?’. This notion not only discourages more Bhutanese to take up writing but also intimidates the handful of established Bhutanese writers.

Bhutanese Literature in English

Bhutan is still in the initial stages of creating a national literature. Fanon claims that while creating a national culture, writers often look to the past trying to ‘renew contact once more with the oldest and more pre-colonial springs of life of their people’ bears truth in Bhutan (1963, p.210). The same sentiments echo in Brennan’s work: ‘On the one hand, the developing world had to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revindication before the colonialist’s personality’ (1989, p. 4). The same phenomena occurred in Bhutan with a rise in the publication of a large number of non-fiction and translated works in the 1990s. As noted earlier, the publication of Kunzang Choden’s *Folktales of Bhutan* marked the beginning of the establishment of Anglophone literature in Bhutan. In *Folktales of Bhutan*, Choden collected a series of short stories that had been in circulation among Bhutanese for generations but had never been recorded. Similarly, Karma Ura’s *A Hero with Thousand Eyes*, published in 1995 gives a

detailed picture of life at the court of the second King Jigme Wangchuck. Moreover, through the biography of her father, in *Of Rainbows and Clouds* (1999), Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck provides an account of Bhutanese society in the early-mid-20th century. Both these works strive to provide readers with a glimpse into the history of the Bhutanese economy and administration at that time. *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* translated by Ura and *Gaylong Sumdar Tashi (Songs of sorrows)* translated by Sonam Kinga were also published during this time.

Although all these works are different in their own right, the prevalent theme is the nation in all her past glory. The works tell tales of traditional customs that were followed in the country in past decades and offered meticulous accounts of Bhutan's sacred customs and rituals, providing readers with a view of Bhutanese culture and traditions at their best. These works deal with the past, idealizing it and placing a high value on the customs and traditions of the country. Although quintessentially Bhutanese, the customs represented in these works are not the 'living' culture most people experience in contemporary Bhutan. Instead these traditions have long since ceased to exist or have been modified in the way they are observed in present day Bhutan. Ironically, the publication of these works strived to provide a nostalgic view of Bhutan that was trapped

in the 18th or 19th century. The result is a perfect picture of Bhutan as a happy and exotic country, rich and unique in her beauty, traditional custom, and rituals. Through these works, Bhutan embraces the idealized characteristics that outsiders have imposed on her, allowing writers to paint a picture of perfect Bhutan, 'The Last Shangri La'. And, with an educational system in place that was largely based on Indian and western ideological norms, Bhutanese culture becomes confined to a mythological representation of its own history.

Indeed, prior to 2006, the curriculum in place did nothing to change this view of the country as an exotic nation. Thinley (2007, p.78) posits that 'a country's literary tradition is a reflection of its culture'. A lack of the countries' indigenous texts in the national English-medium curriculum, thus, creates a void in the presentation of native culture and in its preservation and promotion. In reference to a 'lack of strong literary tradition' in Bhutan, an article in *Kuensel* editorial (June 4, 2005 as cited in Thinley, 2007, p.78) stated that 'The absence of a good literary tradition would not only mean the lack of academic credibility but also a superficial society'. This was perhaps one of the main concerns during the curriculum revision.

Thus, the revised curriculum endeavored to incorporate works by Bhutanese authors

including nine such works in the syllabus. A novella, *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* (2004) by Kunzang Choden in Class 9 was by far the most transformative inclusion in the new syllabus. Two autobiographical poem, *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* (1996) translated by Karma Ura and *Gaylong Sumdar Tashi* (1998), translated by Sonam Kinga were also included. Other essays such as Value and Development (GNH) by Jigme Y. Thinley, Gross National Happiness by T. S. Powdrel, and two accounts of Drukyl's Destiny by Tashi Pem and Dechen Dolkar were also incorporated in the new syllabus.

In the next section, this article closely analyzes two texts: Kunzang Choden's *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* and *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* translated by Karma Ura included in the revised English curriculum. I examine the implications these Bhutanese works had for students while highlighting how the shift in the country's ambition to focus on indigenous Anglophone writings contributed to the development of Bhutanese literature in English.

Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan

The novella, *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* (2004), the first work of fiction by Kunzang Choden, traces the adventures of a dog, Dawa Koto as he rises

from an ignominious stray in the streets of Paro to a ferocious leader in the dog world. Written as a first-person narrative, the plot is set against the background of present day Bhutan. Although written from a dog's perspective, Choden draws several analogies, often describing Dawa's experiences as akin to a human being. While the inclusion of Dawa in the national syllabus can perhaps simply be attributed to the fact that Choden is the most popular Bhutanese author and among the first female authors in the country, the reasons are a bit more complex.

Through the portrayal of Dawa's adventure in the book, Choden manages to highlight the country's unique culture and tradition as it is at present. Choden illustrates the various beliefs prevalent in the country today by drawing on several Bhutanese myths and traditions throughout the book. For instance, although the protagonist is mocked and called 'Koto or crooked' by others, Dawa decides to name himself, Dawa Koto after the moon referring to himself as the 'fusion' of the 'perfect' moon with the 'imperfection of his slightly misshaped body' (p.9). Choden is drawing on the translation of the word, 'Dawa' since the word when translated from Dzongkha literally means the 'moon'. Choden's deliberate choice of name for her protagonist is to highlight the meaning behind the name. Dawa is depicted as a linguist stating that Dawa's skills are a

result of his previous life as an ‘excellent and well-reputed translator’ (p.13). Here, the author is drawing on traditional Buddhist belief about the cycle of rebirth. The Buddhist belief that the dog is the last rebirth before being reborn as a human is held by many Bhutanese even today. Choden’s use of Bhutanese myths makes the book relatable to students through a similar Bhutanese belief system portrayed in the novella.

In the novella, Dawa travels extensively throughout the country from his time in the streets in Paro, to his rise to fame in Thimphu and finally his travels to the East for his health. Narrating Dawa’s travels around the country allows Choden to portray the nation’s different cultures and traditions. On one of his first journeys to Thimphu, Dawa is beaten by a police: ‘The policeman who was jotting down the number of a vehicle into the palm of his hand, gave him a hard kick for no reason, loudly shouting, ‘Shood, stray dog’ (p. 20). Despite the beating, Dawa considers this to be an auspicious sign. He hopes that the unsolicited kick would remove any other obstacles that he might encounter during his journey to Thimphu. Choden directly relates this incident to Bhutanese beliefs that untoward or inauspicious occurrences at the beginning of a journey signal a peaceful journey thereon. It is believed that the bad incident will eliminate any other hitches that one might have faced

at a later part of the journey. Thus, Choden deliberately draws on traditional Bhutanese ideas and values, making it easier for students to relate it to their own experiences.

The novella also touches on several issues confronting Bhutan in transition expressing the fears of a nation in danger of losing their traditions and values to outside cultures. At the beginning of the novel when Dawa searches for food near the streets, for example, Choden includes an incident between a shop owner and his son (p.12), which exemplifies the tension between Bhutanese and western values in the novel. While the shopkeeper is described as a ‘calculating businessman’ who beats dogs into submission, in a relatively conventional representation of rampant capitalism, the son is revealed as ‘a slightly overweight teenager with a bandana printed with the stars and stripes of the American flag around his head’ (p.12). Since the story is set in Bhutan, this reference to the American flag bandana around the son’s head is likely to attract reader’s attention. The son’s portrait positions him as someone easily mistaken for an individual who seeks to emulate American individualism rather than a Bhutanese boy. Furthermore, the boy is portrayed as willing to defy his father’s command by sitting in front of the television screen with his eyes glued to the screen. This picture of a young Bhutanese

succumbing to the lures of western culture and modern technology suggests a threat to Bhutan's culture in the global age.

Considering that television and internet were only introduced in Bhutan in 1999, their influence on the Bhutanese population has been significant. The son's easy acceptance of western culture and modern technology over and above the authority of his own father could be correlated to Thiong'o description of a 'cultural bomb' that aims to 'annihilate a people's belief in their name, in their languages, in their environment... and ultimately in themselves' and that which 'makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other people's languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life' (1986, p.3). Most Bhutanese youths today are more prone to identify with western and Indian cultures imitated from television than with their own identity as a Bhutanese which in comparison is dull and boring. Through this, Choden explores some of the issues that face Bhutan and the preservation of Bhutanese culture, now caught between a traditional past and a postmodern future.

The novella presents the son as being heavily influenced by Indian and western values. The father's scolding 'I put

everything into educating you, and all you do is sit in front of the TV' (p.13) is resonant of a reprimand used by almost every parent in Bhutan. Additionally, the father's mean demeanour highlights a mechanical society more interested in the profit and loss than being kind to others, a far cry from Bhutan's portrayal as a peaceful and exotic nation as presented in previous literature. This can also be seen in the choice of name for other characters in the novel. For instance, during one of his travels, Dawa comes across a dog named, Zorro (p. 92). When asked why he chose that particular name, Zorro states: 'Dawa is a common name and not exotic as Zorro or even as funny as Tommy, Tiger or Puppy' (93). The dog's desire for a fancy western name like Zorro, Tommy, or Puppy compared to a traditional Bhutanese name mirrors the sentiments shared by many Bhutanese who opt for a fancier or foreign way of life in an effort to appear modern. Furthermore, Dawa comments that the trend is popular everywhere, remarking that he can remember at least 'a dozen Tommys and a half dozen Puppys' (p.93). This reflects a common scene in Bhutan today whereby citizens adopt a western lifestyle as opposed to a Bhutanese one.

The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi

While Choden's *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* is a contemporary

work; this is not the case with the 18th century Dzongkha poem, *The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* translated by Karma Ura and included in Class 12's syllabus. Although a prime example of a traditional Bhutanese genre, *lozey*, this text has been inaccessible to most audiences within and outside Bhutan due to its use of Dzongkha, which many Bhutanese are unable to fluently read even today. Since the nuances and subtleties of 18th Century Dzongkha far surpasses the level of Dzongkha language used today, the readership within Bhutan for this text was also dwindling. Thus, its confinement to a scholarly elite had deprived Bhutanese students of a chance to read a more subtle representation of Bhutanese culture. One way Bhutanese students could be made familiar with such a literary work was by translating it in English, a language that has both local and international prevalence. Due to the English-medium schools, Bhutanese students are perhaps more comfortable with English.

The Lyrical Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi first recorded in the 18th Century and translated by Karma Ura in 1996, narrates the story of a chamberlain who is forced to flee after losing a battle, and eventually decides to jump off a cliff, named Thomangdrak in Trongsa. Following Pemi Tshewang Tashi's journey through central Bhutan, Ura highlights the perilous scenery of Bhutan and gives insight into Pemi's

thoughts which are deeply embedded in Buddhist and Bhutanese values. One of the most intriguing aspects of the poem is the picture it paints of Bhutan's landscape. The description of the journey provides students with a view of unfolding mountains ranges that are compared to 'reserves of gold' (p.33), hamlets described as 'gold scriptures' and 'sliver dish' (p.33) and the beautifully adorned fields of wheat (p.36). The picturesque scenes described in the poem give students a glimpse of the journey taken during olden days. While the exact route is not used at present, the places described in the poem are places that are familiar to students today, boosting their interest in learning about the country's different landscapes and its deeply intertwined history with regional politics. Like Choden's text, the setting of the poem makes the poem accessible and retable to Bhutanese students.

Ura describes a *marchang* (offering) scene as follows: 'had unfolded a golden bamboo mat/had planted a iron tripod/had placed on it a precious cauldron/had stuck upright ivory white yarden/that nectar of strong sumchang/'. This description of an offering of locally made wine is an inherently Bhutanese custom common across the country. Even today, the *marchang* ceremony is performed at the beginning of official ceremonies to signal the appeasement of local deities and ensure the smooth conduct of the

celebration. Reading the description of the ceremony helps drive home the idea that the *marchang* ritual we follow at present has a long rich history, allowing students to be personally connected to a longstanding custom. This would in turn boost students' interest in the different nuances of Bhutan's culture and traditions that are still practiced. Additionally, the poem's use of similes and metaphors that are quintessentially Bhutanese is another relatable aspect for students. For instance, the verse lines 'upper lip like a lotus petal,/ lower lip like a coral flower/ between, in what is like a temple/the boneless tongue can turn well/' (p.33) contain comparisons often made in Dzongkha and sayings with which many Bhutanese students would be familiar. This allows students to read in a foreign language well-known sayings from their upbringing, ironically making the English language feel closer to home.

However, despite familiarity with some of the language and rituals, the work presents a rather outdated view of the customs and traditions of Bhutan. For instance, the main premise of Pemi Tshewang Tashi's ballad relies on the royal decree from *dzongpon* (literally "lord of the fortress") Angdruk Nim, to the protagonist to lead the reinforcement troops to a battle. Pemi Tshewang Tashi is unable and unwilling to refuse such a direct order, despite his reluctance, saying of the command, 'to dismiss it, is as dear as gold,/to carry it out,

is as heavy as the hills/' (p.38). Although the verse gives students a glimpse of customs and ways of thinking from the 18th century, the civil wars between *dzongpons* is an account of the past. While students would be familiar with the history of these civil wars, the majority of them may not find it relatable. Thus, instead of a living culture, students are compelled to study about past traditions that have vanished over time. This complicates the texts ability to successfully deliver the revision's goal is making the new syllabus Bhutanese but also modern and up-to-date.

This effort to nationalize the curriculum is further complicated by Bhutanese authors' use of English language to express quintessential Bhutanese cultures and values. Like many postcolonial writers, Achebe laments the reality of English as a unifying language, stating 'there are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication' (1964, p. 344). Likewise, while most Bhutanese now use Dzongkha as the *lingua franca* within the country, Bhutan is in no position to forsake the English language and still maintain communication with the outside world. However, while English has been embraced by the Bhutanese as a language of opportunities, most Bhutanese writers cannot write like native-English speakers and should not strive to write like one. This

same problem is addressed by Achebe:

So my answer to the question. “Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?” is certainly “Yes.” If on the other hand you ask, “Can he ever learn use it like a native speaker?” I should say, “I hope not.” It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so (2011, p. 347).

This is the same sentiment reflected by Indian writer, Rao: ‘The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language’ (1938, p.1). Thus, Bhutanese authors have to coin phrases and idioms to accommodate words and experiences that cannot be adequately expressed by the English language.

In fact, in *Dawa – The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan*, Choden returns several times to Dzongkha phrases to express characteristically Bhutanese beliefs. She uses the word ‘*doma*’ which is a mixture of areca nut and betel leaf with lime (p. 42). This Bhutanese custom of chewing *doma pani* is an integral part of Bhutanese life style; however, this tradition is not shared by Western countries hence there are no equivalent terms in English leaving Choden to revert to Dzongkha. She also uses word

such as *Kuzuzanpo la* and *Kadrenche la* (p.45) meaning ‘Good Morning *la*’ and ‘Thank you *la*’ in her text. Within Bhutanese culture, it would be considered rude to address an esteemed senior figure with simply ‘Good Morning’, rendering the necessity of the term ‘*la*’. The term ‘*la*’ is a ubiquitous Bhutanese term used to signify respect; and this seamless addition of the suffix ‘*la*’ to English expressions is a common habit among many Bhutanese today. Other terms such as *Gelong* (p.58) meaning ‘monk’ and an expression of surprise ‘*Yalama*’ is also used in the text (p. 59). Similar phrases can also be seen in Ura’s text when he refers to ‘*dzongpon*’ (lord of the fortress), ‘*Dzong*’ (fortress), and ‘*chorten*’ (stupas). The use of these words shows perhaps, the Bhutanese way of searching for a ‘middle ground’, giving birth to a ‘queer Bhutanese hybrid English’ that Phuntsho terms ‘*Dzonglish*’ (2013, p. 61).

However, these problems cannot be solved by the mere addition of occasional Dzongkha terms in the text. Achebe, in reference to a new type of English, wrote: ‘I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings’ (2011, p. 349). Similarly, Rao posits that the ‘The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our

English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs' (1938, p.1). Any country that has adopted English as its medium of communication has faced the same problem in past decades. This is the main phenomenon that gave rise to African English during Achebe's time and the rise of Indian English that Rao illuminates.

A similar scenario is unfolding in Bhutan at present. It would be imprudent to assume that Bhutanese writers can authentically express traditions and values that are characteristically Bhutanese by using English like native speakers of the language. Likewise, one of the challenges now facing Bhutanese writers is to try to reconcile traditional Bhutanese beliefs with international styles of writing. Bhutanese writers will have to choose between emulating Western or Indian writers or modify the English language to suit Bhutan's unique expressions. Thus, the focus is now on how a Bhutanese writer composing in English can still maintain enough Bhutanese aspects in the language to create a new type of Bhutanese English.

Indeed as Thiongo'o reiterates: '...the only question which preoccupied us [African writers] was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them 'prey' on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech

and folklore (1986, p.7). This is the same sentiment reflected by Salman Rushdie (as cited in Crystal, 2003, p.184) when he states that 'those people who were once colonized by the language' are rapidly 'remaking' and 'domesticating' the English language. Similarly, Bhutanese writers now have the opportunity to fashion a new kind of English that will incorporate traditional Bhutanese expressions while retaining enough norms of the English language to make it comprehensible for the outside world.

However, considering Bhutan is neither as big as Africa, nor can she boast of a large population such as India, and with only a handful of writers at her disposal, this process of creating a new Bhutanese English will be a slow one. Although slow, this development of Bhutanese English means that Bhutanese will eventually have an English language of their own which will effectively express indigenous personal thoughts. As Rushdie points out, English is no longer just a language of the British and Anglo cultures, but 'now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out their own territories within the language for themselves' (as cited in Brennan, 1989, p. 6). Bhutan is undergoing the same process at present, fashioning a new kind of English for Bhutanese people to set their place in the world language.

Although the initial aim of the revised

curriculum was to create a nationalized, and perhaps even a nationalist syllabus, the inclusion of Bhutanese Anglophone works, in turn, is encouraging Bhutanese writers to develop an English language of their own. With the publication of a number of novels and other literary works in the country since the curriculum revision in 2006, Bhutan is now in a better place to create her own national identity. The inclusion of literary works in English by Bhutanese authors has coincided with the emergence of a body of writers composing in English who are contributing to change the way English language itself is being used in Bhutan. A search for Anglophone literature published by Bhutanese authors between 2006 to 2019 shows a burst of emergent new authors like Chardor Wangmo, Jurmi Chhowing and Pema Euden. This affirms the suggestion by Thinley and Maxwell (2013, p.6) that Bhutanese writers' choice of writing in English is a 'pragmatic choice to carve out a distinct territory for Bhutanese writing in English'.

Conclusion

Bhutan is relatively new to modern secular schooling system, thus, it is not surprising that most of the educational development in the country was influenced by the neighbor state of India. The adaptation of Indian-based syllabus meant Bhutanese students were faced with foreign concepts that were

irrelevant to their personal experiences within the country. Furthermore, the exclusion of Bhutanese Anglophone works in the national syllabus meant that Bhutanese students were increasingly alienated from their own literature and culture. Thus, the primary goal to create a Bhutan-focused curriculum that spoke of Bhutanese national culture and identity was achieved through the addition of Bhutanese Anglophone works in the study of literature in the 2006 revision of the English syllabus studied by Bhutanese students.

Bhutan's main aim during this revision was to establish a nationalist curriculum based on Bhutanese culture. However, due to the lack of a strong literary base, it has been nearly impossible for the country to create a national curriculum that reflects inherently Bhutanese values. Moreover, this revision has brought up questions about what constitutes Bhutanese literature. Thus, while with the inclusion of Bhutanese Anglophone works in the national curriculum, Bhutan manages to close the cultural alienation gap, new problems crop up in relation to the expression of an authentic Bhutanese experience in a foreign language. The inclusion of Bhutanese Anglophone works in the education system of the country has, nonetheless, offered Bhutan a platform to develop the country's own unique version of English. Consequently, with the increase

in the number of Anglophone publications in the country in the last few years, Bhutan is now in a better place to develop her own national literature in English. This development of a Bhutanese literature in English and a new Bhutanese English would be a huge step for the country, since it creates a place for Bhutan in the world language with the hope that it might one day gain the same importance as Indian or African English.

Endnotes

- 1 Achebe (1994) also highlights a definition of African literature, as defined in a literature conference held in Fourah Bay, as “Creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral”, while the *Encyclopaedia of African Literature* (2003) states African literature can be defined by ‘several dominant threads and accompanying paradoxes’ and goes on to discuss the diverse ethnic, national and regional traditions within Africa.
- 2 see Sonam Nyenda’s article in the same journal for more detailed discussion on early printing and development of Dzongkha literature
- 3 Information about the establishment of the first printing press in Bhutan is difficult to ascertain. But Kunzang Choden’s publication of *Folktales of Bhutan* through White Lotus Co. LTD, a printing press based in Thailand and Karma Ura’s self published *A Hero with Thousand Eyes*, which was the second book in English to be published in Bhutan, highlights a lack of a strong publishing industry in Bhutan at the time. Even today, many Bhutanese books are self published.
- 4 Phuntsho (2013) implies that the decision to adopt Dzongkha and subsequently develop a standard orthographic and grammatical structure for Dzongkha was ‘triggered by a cultural consciousness and a nationalistic sentiments aimed at establishing a unique linguistic identify for Bhutan’ (p.53).
- 5 Thiong’o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) offers an account of his childhood in school stating that ‘one of the most humiliating experience’ for being caught speaking Gikuyu in his school, was to carry a metal plate with the inscription I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY around his neck, which would be handed over to whoever is caught speaking in a local language, with the culprits punished the next day. While Thiong’o is narrating an incident that took place in Africa in 1940s, this process of ensuring English was spoken in school was followed in many schools in Bhutan in the mid 1990s.

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Karma and Female Agency in Novels by Bhutanese Women Writers

Holly Gayley

Abstract:

A new Bhutanese Anglophone literature is emerging with women at the fore as both writers and protagonists. In folk tales, short stories, children's books, and novels published in the last two decades, two Bhutanese writers in particular interweave Buddhist themes with challenges specific to women in Himalayan contexts. This article engages in a comparison of the novels, *Circle of Karma* (2005) by Kunzang Choden and *Kyetse* (2016) by Chador Wangmo. There are a number of parallel features in these works that make for a salient comparison. Both center on female protagonists who begin their lives with keenly-felt religious aspirations and, following a series of misfortunes that propel them from their homelands, eventually become nuns. Both are unflinching in confronting gender issues, including sexual abuse and human trafficking, through the lived experiences of an array of female characters. In addition, both use karma as a narrative device, though to different effect, at pivotal moments in the narrative as the protagonists attempt to make sense of their predicaments. In analyzing these novels, this article examines the gendered deployment of karma and its relationship to female agency. How do Buddhist understandings help the protagonists of these novels cope with and/or transcend the confines of gender roles assigned to them in traditional Bhutanese culture? What might these novels suggest about the challenges that Bhutanese women have faced in navigating the crossroads of traditional interpretive frameworks and rapidly changing conditions of contemporary Himalayan societies?

Keywords:

Bhutanese literature, female agency, Buddhism in Himalaya, karma, World Anglophone Studies

A new Bhutanese literature is emerging in English with a select number of Buddhist women at the fore as both writers and protagonists. There is Tsomo, betrayed in marriage, who sets out on a long and perilous journey to realize her religious aspirations in the classic, *Circle of Karma* (2005), by Kunzang Choden. Ordinary women's lives also take center stage in her collection of short stories, *Tales in Colour and Other Stories* (2009), which highlights (in its title) the metaphor of weaving, vital to Bhutanese women's traditional work, while some of her children's books take up explicitly Buddhist topics.¹ And there is Dema, the nun-superhero of *Dema: Mystery of the Missing Egg* (2017), the first in a series by Chador Wangmo. An author from the next generation, she likewise focuses on women as protagonists in her novels. Her debut *La Ama... a mother's call* (2015) depicts an urban woman Dechen's escape from an abusive husband, comforted by the memory of her mother, and *Kyetse... destiny's call* (2016), published just a year later, recounts the tale of a rural girl SomDema (Sonam Dema) who unwittingly grapples with local operators in the sex trade on her journey to becoming a nun. The folk tales, short stories, children's books, and novels by these authors interweave Buddhist themes with the challenges of contemporary Bhutanese women in a modernizing nation.²

Bhutanese Anglophone fiction emerged in the 1990s as part of a broad expansion of South Asian writers composing in English.³ Within the region, English serves as a *lingua franca* given the linguistic diversity within and among the countries of India, Nepal, and Bhutan, even as its dominance in the literary sphere has been subject to postcolonial critique.⁴ Regional collaboration in the literary and cultural spheres has been fostered since at least 1987 with the establishment of the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL, part of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and its annual South Asian Literature Festival. The Jaipur Literature Festival (founded 2006) and its Bhutan corollary Mountain Echoes (since 2010) are also important sites for cross-fertilization between South Asian intellectuals, writers, and artists.

English provides a common language not only across South Asia, but also within Bhutan. As elsewhere in the region, Bhutan is home to a range of vernaculars. Of its nineteen spoken languages, only three including Dzongkha, the national language, have literary corollaries (Thinley and Maxwell, 2013),⁵ but not the vernaculars of central and eastern Bhutan, which serve as mother tongues to women writers like Kunzang Choden and Chador Wangmo.⁶ In its written form, Dzongkha remains an elite language,

used in government documents, monastic education, and specialized language programs in colleges and universities. Perhaps for this reason, it has yet to be harnessed for colloquial-styled fiction to the same extent that English has, though Bhutanese newspapers and blogs are published in both Dzongkha and English. Moreover, since the early 1960s the Bhutanese education system has been predominantly English-medium in order to facilitate communication beyond its borders and enable students to study abroad for advanced degrees.⁷ The result has been a ready readership for Anglophone fiction within Bhutan, coupled with the potential for an international audience across South Asia and beyond.

In this article, I engage in a comparison of two Bhutanese novels, *Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden and *Kyetse* by Chador Wangmo. There are several parallel features in these works that make for a salient comparison. First and foremost, both center on female protagonists who begin their lives with keenly-felt and astrologically-driven religious orientations and, following a series of misfortunes that propel them from their homelands, eventually become nuns. As works grounded in social realism, both are unflinching in confronting gender issues, including domestic abuse, rape, and human trafficking, through the lived experiences of an array of female characters. In

addition, both use karma as a central theme though to different effect. In *Circle of Karma* Tsomo often seems helpless in confronting male violence and betrayal, yet proves resilient and ultimately discovers a sense of autonomy in a humble lifestyle in line with her spiritual aspirations. In this work, karma is used as a form of solace to retrospectively make sense of misfortune. By contrast SomDema, the narrator of *Kyetse*, is summoned to act by sometimes mysterious forces, yet survives treachery in childhood to regain a foothold in the world and discover her calling as a nun. Whether due to the propelling force of karma, signs in her astrological birth chart, or dreams of a black cat with green eyes, SomDema is continually beckoned to prospectively move beyond her present situation into an unknown future promise.

Through an analysis of these two novels, I track the gendered deployment of karma as a narrative device and its relationship to female agency. Here I use Laura Ahearn's definition of agency as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001, p. 112). Her definition suggests the importance of social and cultural factors in determining how situated actors articulate desires, make choices, and take action with respect to given constraints and resources.⁸ While gender norms delimit the choices and resources available to Tsomo and SomDema, karma plays an important role in how the protagonists

understand and respond to the limitations and challenges they face. As the novels progress, their sense of agency evolves as each awakens to the social dynamics in which she is ensnared. How is the scope of female agency portrayed alternatively by Kunzang Choden and Chador Wangmo? What might these novels suggest about the challenges that Bhutanese women have faced in navigating the crossroads of traditional interpretive frameworks and the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary Himalayan societies? How do Buddhist understandings, such as karma, help their protagonists cope with and/or transcend the confines of gender roles assigned to them in traditional Bhutanese culture?

In order to better understand karma and its deployment in contemporary Bhutanese literature, we need to be sensitive and attuned to the different ways that this term is deployed in classic Buddhist doctrine and narrative as well as the lived experience of Buddhists in Himalayan areas. Anthropologists of South Asia have emphasized that, in everyday life among Hindus and Buddhists, karma is invoked as the “explanation of last recourse” in the face of misfortune, when other explanations and remedies have failed, such as medical or ritual interventions (Keyes and Valentine, 1983). For example, in Himalayan contexts, if a child dies at birth, family and friends will typically

console the mother by saying that it was karma—the implication being that it was not her fault (Childs, 2004). Using karma in this way as a mechanism for consolation can be comforting but also lead to a kind of resignation, whereby women passively accept their situation and leave social norms unchallenged. Along similar lines, classic Buddhist narratives like the *jātakas* and *avadānas* focus retrospectively on the details of past-life deeds behind present-day circumstances, emphasizing the driving force of karma in determining the present.⁹

By contrast, in doctrinal terms, *karma* literally means ‘action’ and refers to an individual’s intentional deeds that bear results in the future, rather than the results themselves.¹⁰ In the Buddhist theory of causation, afflictive emotions (Skt. *kleśa*) impel action, and this action (*karma*) sows the seeds for results (*phala*) that ripen in the future in accord with conditions.¹¹ In this sense, although there may be strong karmic propensities that drive an individual toward a habitual course of action, the future is technically open. That said, colloquially there is often a slippage between karma as a causal factor and karma as a depiction of the process of cause and effect more generally. For this reason, it can easily be misunderstood fatalistically even though, as it appears in discussions of dependent arising (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*), karma is part of a

series of causal links that are identified in order to be broken and thereby free oneself from suffering in the cycle of *samsāra*. Rather than a passive acceptance of ‘fate,’ this theory of causation points prospectively to the possibility of freedom or, at least, shaping one’s own future in this life and the next.

While tracking karma as a narrative device in these works, I consider *Circle of Karma* and *Kyetse* to be works of Bhutanese literature containing Buddhist themes, rather than Buddhist literature per se—in line with the broader development of contemporary fiction in Tibetan and Himalayan areas.¹² Buddhist orientations are articulated as part of the aspirations and lived worlds of the protagonists rather than providing the overarching framework within which the story takes place as is the case with contemporary hagiographical works. The lives of Tsomo and SomDema unfold at a series of critical junctures—along transitions in a woman’s life cycle, across borders between Bhutan and its neighbors, and between competing epistemic frameworks associated with tradition and modernity.¹³ Like Indian fiction by women writers since the late nineteenth century, these novels question social roles prescribed for women and illuminate patriarchal discourses and practices.¹⁴ Like secular Tibetan fiction since the 1980s, they also contain implicit critiques of certain religious impulses like

‘blind faith’ (Tib. *rmongs dad*) by depicting unscrupulous monastics, wayward ritual specialists, and fake lamas,¹⁵ even as the overall representation of Buddhism in these two novels is positive. As Tshering Om Tamang suggests in her article for this journal issue, contemporary Bhutanese works of Anglophone fiction are part of an emerging national literature. In this context, Buddhism serves as a distinct marker of national identity among others.¹⁶ Buddhist conceptions, such as karma, exist alongside competing discourses as the protagonists attempt to make sense of their ever-changing circumstances and circuitous route to fulfillment. Even so, the religious aspirations of Tsomo and SomDema to become Buddhist nuns participate in a traditional form of female liberation from the social constraints of marriage, raising children, and their attendant hazards.

***Circle of Karma* (2005) by Kunzang Choden**

Let me start with *Circle of Karma*, which has become a contemporary classic. Its author Kunzang Choden was the first female Bhutanese writer to publish and garner international acclaim.¹⁷ A descendant of the prominent Dorje Lingpa lineage, she attended boarding school in Kalimpong and Darjeeling before going on to study at Delhi University and University of Nebraska.¹⁸ During an MA in

Sociology at Nebraska, she started writing stories and folktales for her children to offset their displacement between three cultures: American, Bhutanese, and Swiss-German (the heritage of her husband). Some of the earliest Bhutanese literature in English were compilations of oral folktales (Penjore, 2013), and along these lines Kunzang Choden's first book was the collection *Folktales of Bhutan* (1993), literary retellings that sought to preserve stories from a waning oral tradition, followed by *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* (1997), accounts of encounters with the elusive 'abominable snowman' or yeti (from the Sherpa, *migoi* in Bhutan). Both were published by White Lotus Press in Bangkok, a publisher of books on Asian art and culture, as the Bhutanese publishing scene was still early in its stages of development.¹⁹

Her novel, *Circle of Karma*, found its editor at the Women Writer's Festival that Kunzang Choden first attended in the early 2000s. It was published in 2005 by Zubaan, a feminist publishing house established two years earlier (as an imprint of Kali Press) in order to make available women's writings from across South Asia, including works of fiction, translation, memoir, and non-fiction. With its carefully wrought plot and prose, *Circle of Karma* stands on par with the best of South Asian fiction and was later reprinted in 2013 as one of Zubaan's ten 'classics' to celebrate

its tenth anniversary.²⁰ As the publisher's note suggests of these classics, "each sheds a different light on the world seen through women's eyes, and each holds its place in the world of contemporary women's writings." In addition, she has written numerous children's books; a collection of short stories, *Tales in Colour and Other Stories* (2009); the novel *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* (2004);²¹ and the cultural study, *Chili and Cheese: Food and Society in Bhutan* (2008). She has been a regular participant at the SAARC Literary Festival and Mountain Echoes, where she presented in its first year (2010) with Zubaan co-founder Urvashi Butalia on the lack of women writers in Bhutan.²² In addition, she established Riyang Press as a family publishing house in order to publish co-authored works like *Ogyen Choling: a Manor in Central Bhutan* (2012) about the family manor that she helped to turn into a museum and heritage guesthouse.²³

"Everything happened because we are women," says Dechen Choki to the protagonist Tsomo in *Circle of Karma* (Choden, 2005, p. 109). This statement encapsulates the helplessness and lack of control articulated by female characters in this landmark Bhutanese novel. Published in 2005, the narrative spans the previous half century and the topography of Himalaya, from Bhutan to northern Indian and Nepal. Author Kunzang Choden unflinchingly depicts the plight

of Himalayan women coming of age in the 1950s and 60s: working on road crews as bonded slaves; suffering from their husband's alcoholism, infidelity, and domestic abuse; and traumatized by rape, both in the family and on the job. Traditional gender norms and their internalization are highlighted through and set against the unconventional life that Tsomo leads after leaving her adulterous first husband.

Through the narrative deployment of karma, Kunzang Choden encapsulates society's tendency to blame women for their own misfortunes. While eventually Tsomo comes to the realization that "women internalize their problems and grief" (210), along the way *Circle of Karma* depicts how men act and women bear the consequences. A case in point is the teenage pregnancy of her childhood friend Chimme, when the monk who actively courted and seduced her failed to claim responsibility as the father and abandoned her before the public ritual for purifying the pregnancy. Humiliated in front of the whole village, Chimme accepts the situation, saying "This is my karma... I did not have enough merits to have the father of my baby for the public show tonight" (43). If that were not bad enough, her mother tacitly accuses her of causing the monk to lose his celibacy!

This scene finds a parallel in a short story

by Tibetan Sinophone author Geyang who likewise addresses the issue of male violence against women and exposes the ways that women get blamed. "An Old Nun Tells Her Story" recounts the rape of a young nun named Nechung, the narrator's companion in youth, while the two were herding cattle.²⁴ Not believing her testimony—and out of interest in the "convent's reputation for purity and upright conduct"—the abbess decides to expel her from the nunnery," a verdict which Geyang glosses as "punishment for someone else's misdeed" (2000, pp. 86–87). In the end, Nechung feels she has no other choice than to marry the young nomad who violated her, accepting it all as her 'fate.' This work of social realism, set sometime in the early twentieth century, reflects the scrutiny, derision, and gossip that Buddhist nuns in some Himalayan areas continue to face today (Makley, 2005),²⁵ even as their status is gradually improving with greater access to resources and education due to local and transnational initiatives. In terms of agency, the narrator of "An Old Nun Tells Her Story" moves in and out monastic life according to the decisions of others (her parents in youth) and dictates of circumstances (her husband's death), leaving her to adapt to circumstances rather than drive them.

In *Circle of Karma*, gender norms shape Tsomo's life as the eldest daughter in a property-owning and tax-paying family,

who is forced to take on her mother's role in managing the household after her premature death in childbirth. Tsomo grew up the daughter of a *gomchen*, or ritual specialist, but was not allowed to learn to read and write alongside the boys of the village, even though she aspired to lead a religious life. Her father refused her requests by affirming gender roles: "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, 2005, p. 21). Tsomo handles the disappointment with "resignation and acceptance" for being "only a woman" while lamenting that "being born a male already has the advantage of a better birth" and, through their religious training, men "are being helped to accumulate more merit for their next birth" (20–23). Regrettably, the rhetoric of a 'low birth' (Tib. *skye dman*) is a common feature of life stories by and about Tibetan and Himalayan women, even as their protagonists often transcend the limitations ascribed to them and become accomplished masters (Schaeffer 2004; Jacoby 2010).

Kunzang Choden masterfully conveys the sense of entrapment that Tsomo feels in her life, whereby the scope of her agency is restricted to whether to stay or go in any given situation—without the opportunity to chart a coherent course of action

according to her own wishes and aims. As predicted in her astrological birth chart, her misfortunes in life prompt a sense of restlessness and desire to travel. On the anniversary of her mother's death, Tsomo makes a pilgrimage to nearby Trongsa to light butter lamps on her mother's behalf. En route, she joins a group of travelers only to wake up one night to something rubbing against her body—the handsome Wangchen in the process of seducing her despite her whispered protests. Love, pregnancy, and marriage ensues. But when her first and only baby is stillborn and her stomach remains bloated from the retained placenta, Tsomo sinks into depression. In response, Wangchen grows abusive and his interest wanders to her younger sister Kesang. All this she attributes to karma, which she takes to be both a 'mystery of life' and the 'consequence of her actions' in recognition that Wangchen had left his first wife for her.²⁶ Until Tsomo is able to get surgery many years later, she refers to her bloated stomach as her 'karmic illness.'

After suffering abuse and humiliation at the hand of Wangchen, Tsomo leaves home to an uncertain future. She joins a road crew to earn money only to encounter other gendered challenges, in this case the rape of her friend, the young and vivacious Dechen Choki, by their boss, the *lajab*. At this, "Tsomo grew feverish with anger, could women not even have

control over their own bodies? she asked herself. Can women not decide anything for themselves?” (Choden, 2005, p. 121). Her sense of helplessness recurs as a theme and can be summarized in “her realization that she had absolutely no control over her own life. Her life was controlled by the events in other people’s lives” (259). The *lajab* makes Dechen his ‘favorite’ until Tsomo can no longer bear the situation and escapes with Dechen to Kalimpong on an improbable quest to seek out her elder brother, the gomchen Gyaltsen Phuentso.

With respect to domestic abuse and rape, we find some but not many precedents in Buddhist canonical sources, which are fascinating for the different ways that women are held responsible for their own (mis)fortunes. This literature was mainly composed by and for monks, so women’s issues receive far less attention than tales of temptation that index the struggle male monastics had in maintaining celibacy.²⁷ In the *Karmaśataka*, the great beauty Dhammadinnā underwent a harrowing set of trials in a past life, after being wrongly accused by her in-laws for infidelity and kicked out of her husband’s house with child.²⁸ Through these trials, she was made to bear responsibility for her husband’s lust and secret rendezvous with her while ostensibly far from home. Remarkably, she remains unharmed through her own ingenuity—posing as a fearsome demoness to preclude defilement by

bandits and others, and this is the rationale given when the Buddha is asked “how the nun Dharmadinnā, admired by many men, maintained her celibacy despite great adversity.” Likewise, the *Therīgāthā* depicts the nun Subha escaping sexual assault by her own wit and courage, when wandering alone in the forest.²⁹

The nun Uppalavaṇṇā was fearless but not so fortunate. A chapter in the *Samyutta Nikāya* dedicated to nuns depicts her as unafraid to stay alone in forest, even when challenged by Māra.³⁰ Yet in some accounts, after attaining *nirvāṇa* and while she resided at a forest hermitage, a lust-filled cousin snuck in and violated her. In the Pāli *Vinaya*, she is exonerated from the first root downfall (*pārājika*) of breaking the precept of celibacy, since she did not consent to or take pleasure in the act.³¹ In addition, the *Dhammapada* commentary places responsibility squarely on her assailant, who falls instantly down to Avīci hell, the earth cracking open at the horror of the incident.³² By contrast, in the *Vinayaḥṣudrakavastu*, Khemmo Gautamī became a nun only after a harrowing set of travails, including suffering beatings at the hands of a violent husband and witnessing his gruesome murder of their newborn.³³ When asked about the cause of her travails, the Buddha places responsibility on her and recounts her misdeeds in a previous lifetime in which she reportedly mistreated a co-wife out of jealousy, killed her rival’s

firstborn son, and swore a false oath to disavow her crime.³⁴ In this case, the victim gets blamed for her own misfortunes by recourse to karma.³⁵ Khemmo Gautamī's agency is displaced to a previous lifetime, when she was wicked and crafty. Whereas, in her present life, she is left to passively endure an onslaught of tragedy—helpless to the point of madness until encountering the Buddha.

In *Circle of Karma*, Dechen is likewise helpless to protect herself against the *lajab*'s abuse until Tsomo, out of frustration and anger, takes action. This is a turning point in the narrative, when the fortune of the two friends begins to shift. Remarkably, on arrival in Kalimpong, they find Tsomo's brother, Gyaltzen Phuentso, who gives them a place to stay before leaving for retreat. Interestingly enough, when good fortune occurs, they attribute it to 'luck' rather than karma.³⁶ Only after laying bare her story and in the supportive presence of her brother is Tsomo finally able to articulate what it is she wants in life—to devote her life to religion and to become a 'simple pilgrim.' Even as she comes to this realization, she also acknowledges the gendered challenges of such a vocation. Referring to her brother and herself, she states: "We are all pilgrims on earth, but the choices are not the same for all. He could seek out a teacher and travel as he liked. What about a women, especially a woman with a belly

swollen with a nameless illness? What choices does she have?" (Choden, 2005, p. 150). After retreat, her brother decided to return to Bhutan and invited Tsomo to join him, but she refused, having begun to enjoy "her new-found independence and freedom" while also not wanting to "return like a beggar."

Shortly thereafter, much to her surprise and delight, Tsomo's aspiration bears fruit when, by "lucky chance, perhaps... because of her karma" (179), she is invited to join a group of friends in Kalimpong to travel on pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya. From there, she meets other Bhutanese pilgrims with whom she travels to Kathmandu and later Tso Pema, receiving teachings and blessings from lamas long the way. Here we see her agency blossom by leaping at an opportunity to go on pilgrimage and having the resourcefulness to sell family heirlooms to pay her way. Yet soon after gaining a sense of independence, she becomes enmeshed again in married life without deliberately deciding to do so. At Tso Pema, through the match-making of a mutual friend, her second husband Lhatu showed up at her doorstep and moved in. From there, he 'took charge' of the situation, expecting her to cook and clean for him. Together they moved to Dehradun to live close to an unnamed Rinpoche who becomes the main religious figure in her life, a kindly presence who eventually encourages her to get surgery

for her mysterious illness at an American hospital in Mussoorie.³⁷ Although during this period Lhatu occasionally worked as a scribe, Tsomo supported them through weaving and selling arak, only to find out later that he had been gambling away her earnings. After fifteen years together, he eventually abandons her for a younger woman and once again Tsomo is left to her own devices.

In a gendered version of karma captured in this novel, *responsibility* is transferred to women for the *actions* performed by men. This is true, for example, when her younger sister Kesang—and later Tsomo herself in defense of Dechen—blames the wife for her husband’s infidelity, using the iconic phrase: “Why don’t you look after your husband better?” (91, 123) Tsomo also recalls the brutal attack of the village beauty Pem Doma by other women accusing her of ‘stealing their husbands’ even though it was the men who sought out her company. When Lhatu left Tsomo for a sixteen-year old whom he got pregnant, she initially felt ‘worthless’ and ‘caste aside,’ making sense of the situation by supposing “it was her karma that he should leave her” (262). Here again we see the same gendered twist, whereby women invoke karma for solace rather placing responsibility on the man for his misconduct.

In this way, *Circle of Karma* calls attention

to a double standard whereby men’s harmful actions tend to be unchallenged socially and thereby condoned, while women are left to console themselves by blaming it on other women or ascribing it to karma. Were it not for the intervention of a kindly monk, Tsomo had a knife in hand ready to enact her revenge on Lhatu’s mistress by cutting off a piece of her nose as was the custom. The monk Sherab questions her: “Why do women always blame each other when their husbands are unfaithful?” Coming to her senses, Tsomo realized that “she was trying to punish a child-woman for something that an adult man, who could have easily been her father, had done” (269). Indeed, over the course of her relationship with Lhatu, a younger gomchen, she began to recognize his immaturity and laziness despite the outer show of bravado. Meanwhile, despite remaining passive in her relationships with men, Tsomo demonstrates her resourcefulness throughout her life in her frugality, saving money while working on the road crew; in her competence in making a modest livelihood through gardening, weaving, and brewing arak; and in her humility to accept support that others generously offer once she adopts a religious life.

From here, Tsomo gradually gains a sense of confidence. After Lhatu left, her longtime friend and landlord in Kalimpong, Pema Buti, encouraged her: “Now without

a master to order you around you can do as you please. Be your own master” (281). Despite her years as a pilgrim, Tsomo had still not realized her aspiration to live a full-time religious life. Once again, it would take a man to launch the final phase of her life, this time her beloved Rinpoche. Tsomo visited Rinpoche whenever he stayed in Phuentsholing, and during his final stay, he suddenly said to her, “Come here, come closer. Come quickly before any doubts enter your mind.” With that he plucked out a few hairs from her head and ordained her as a novice nun saying, “Isn’t this what you always wanted but you kept forgetting, because you were too busy living your life?” (287) Although Tsomo was not sure how to be a nun, especially an illiterate one, Rinpoche encouraged her to continue with her daily devotions. Following this transformative yet uncertain moment, she offered her jewelry to him, proceeded to the barber to have her head shaved, and donned the maroon robes.

Coming full circle, when Rinpoche passed away, Tsomo returned to Thimphu to view his corpse and finally settled there. Though her family eventually found her and invited her back to live with them, she politely refused, preferring to live in a makeshift shack and maintain her autonomy:

It had taken her a lifetime to get away from all attachments. Now it would be

undoing all that she had worked so hard for if she re-established her ties and attachments and immersed herself in the activities of family life. If she had to constantly move around looking for a space to live in, it was surely because of her karma. She had so little, moving was not really a problem. She could lay out the butter lamps and ritual bowls anywhere (310).

Each day, Tsomo went to the *chorten* (reliquary) at the center of town to circumambulate, recite mantras, and light butter lamps, discovering a new community among the regular pilgrims there. Her homecoming was a humble reconciliation and reunion. While in youth, after leaving her family, she had hoped to prove her worth, now in old age her return signaled a spiritual maturation whereby she no longer cared what others thought. Karma finally takes on a positive valence as she welcomes gifts received to sustain her religious pursuits.

In some sense, her journey shifts from passivity, relying on others to shape her life, to taking a more active role, particularly in embracing simplicity and renunciation as a nun. Through her marriages, Tsomo was enmeshed in worldly life and the cycle of suffering known as *samsāra* (*‘khor ba*, passive construction). Eventually single again, as an old woman returned home to Bhutan but not to family life,

she embodied a religious life perpetually on pilgrimage by circumambulating the *chorten* in Thimphu daily (*skor ra*, active construction).³⁸ Though painful, her failed marriages and ‘karmic illness’ had propelled her forward into the religious life that she had always wanted but never knew how to make happen. If this work resembles in any way the Tibetan genre of *namthar* (Tib. *rnam thar*) by virtue of being a life story of a religious figure, though fictitious, Tsomo’s liberation may be her awakening of consciousness to gender dynamics and the autonomy she realizes late in life.³⁹ In this sense, she comes full circle. Yet even after settling in Thimphu, she decides to journey to Siliguri to attend the Kālacakra empowerment (1997) with His Holiness the Dalai Lama—never to return. In the end, as her friend Lham Yeshe searches for her at the *chorten*, Tsomo is everywhere and nowhere, her ongoing presence glimpsed in the faces of the elderly gathered for daily devotions.

***Kyetse* (2016) by Chador Wangmo**

A decade after the publication of *Circle of Karma*, another female novelist came onto the scene: Chador Wangmo, part of a new generation of Bhutanese writers.⁴⁰ From a young age, she was drawn to reading and writing stories, while attending boarding school in Tashigang (alt. Trashigang) in eastern Bhutan. As a school teacher early in her career, she began

composing children’s books as a way of “contributing and preserving our rich bounty of orally transmitted folktales” in a format accessible to children in primary school.⁴¹ Chador Wangmo became an avid proponent of rural education and youth literacy, involved in projects such as READ Global as well as the National Reading Year (2015). Although she eschews the label ‘feminist,’ at a certain point she decided to foreground female perspectives and address women’s issues in her writings, since they are too often overlooked in public discourse. In 2015 Chador Wangmo attained national acclaim after the publication of her first novel, *La Ama*,⁴² a tribute to her mother who died three years earlier, dealing with issues resonant for urban audiences like divorce and domestic violence. With a breezy, colloquial style and readily accessible prose,⁴³ Chador Wangmo has become a popular author and regular participant at literary conferences, such as the SAARC Literature Festival and Mountain Echoes.⁴⁴ She is now a full-time author and publishes her own works through the Thimphu imprint, Miza Books.⁴⁵

Kyetse (2016) is her second novel, published only a year later. It chronicles the chilling misadventures of a young Bhutanese girl, SomDema, who was given away by her father to an older nun, after the untimely death of her mother, along with four other girls from her village. The nun, known

only as Ani throughout the novel, turns out to be an imposter who first has the girls earn money by reciting prayers they barely understand and later selling them one by one into prostitution. Only SomDema escapes this fate by fortuitously running away with the help of a kindly ‘speckled man’ (i.e. wearing glasses). The other girls, including her best friend Pentang, were sold, and SomDema continues to have dreams of her calling out for help. Eventually the others are rescued and returned to their families after the trauma of several years of forced prostitution. While *Circle of Karma* raises awareness about domestic abuse and rape—as well as the way women blame each other for sexual predation by men—*Kyetse* takes up a more sinister problem in contemporary Himalaya: human trafficking. This is a harsh reality for Himalayan girls who are lured away from home with the promise of good jobs, marriage, or in this case a religious life in a nunnery.⁴⁶

The novel begins in an idealized village setting with SomDema born as the only child to a young couple who fell in love in the mid-1980s while fulfilling their compulsory government labor in the small town of Lungtenzampa. Chador Wangmo takes care to explain the local customs around marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth as part of inducting the reader into the world of rural Bhutan. Numerous folk beliefs are also invoked, which

generate a mysterious set of forces that SomDema must navigate. These include a multigenerational curse by an old family rival, invisible spirits who kidnap humans, taboos against eating walnuts at night, and dreams of a black cat with green eyes who appears at critical moments predicted by her *kyetse* or astrological birth chart.⁴⁷ All of these add an element of magical realism to the novel. Also invoked as propelling factors in her life are karma and the *kyetse* itself, which predicts an inclination toward religious pursuits and travel, as well as adverse circumstances at the ages of ten and eighteen. Among the bricolage of beliefs, old and new, is even the Christian language of sin, guilt, heaven, and God.

The novel begins with an ominous scene in the prologue: SomDema running away from the nunnery just as she turns eighteen, propelled by the wind and encouraged onward by the mysterious green-eyed cat.⁴⁸ After that, the setting shifts to rural Bhutan and the genealogy of the protagonist’s family is given. From there, the novel can be divided neatly into thirds: (1) SomDema’s idyllic childhood and later captivity at the age of ten under the ‘maroon-robed fraud’ who takes the unsuspecting girls from Bhutan to India, (2) her transition to puberty in the early 1990s in Tashigang, where she takes a job at a hotel after successfully escaping from the wicked Ani, and (3) her time at a legitimate nunnery, where she adapts to its rigorous

schedule only to get tempted at eighteen by falling in love with a handsome patron. Hovering over the plot in the first section of the book is the baffling naiveté of her relatives and others in the village who give their girls to an unknown and fraudulent nun. The girls suffer relentlessly under the dictates and malice of the imposter, whose sinister aims are only slowly revealed across several chapters. After two of the girls disappear, SomDema has a chance to escape, due to the kindness of the ‘speckled man,’ a hotel owner from Tashigang who helps her return home. In Chapter 13, the black cat appears in her dreams to mark this dramatic shift in the plot whereby SomDema must take action. Though it seems like a ‘big gamble’ to trust a stranger again, she approaches the man for help, and he proves to be honest.

As SomDema’s narrative voice matures across the novel, the ‘blind faith of the elders’ comes under critique. Their decision to give away the five girls to a unknown nun was bad enough, but upon returning home, the villagers doubted her story, unable to believe “a ten-year old girl’s testimony against an aged maroon-robed fraud” (Wangmo, 2016, p. 148). Worse still, they make no attempt to find out what happened to the girls, accepting their unknown circumstances as karma. Perhaps more devastating to the protagonist, when she falls ill, her sickness is attributed to the bad luck of

seeing a snake, who turns out to be (in her elders’ estimation) none other than her mother’s reincarnation. The idea that her loving mother would have such awful karma and return as a snake is too much for SomDema. The traditionalism and superstition of village life are contrasted with the kindly man who owns the hotel in Tashigang and is open to hiring her to work there. Needless to say, he functions as a marker of modernity and upward mobility, wearing glasses and acquiring the first telephone in town in 1993. Again ‘testing fate,’ she decides to return to Tashigang to work at the hotel rather than remain in the village.

In the second section of the novel, the Tashigang of author Chador Wangmo’s boarding school days comes to life as an ‘enchanted town.’ Unlike the “dusty village where life was a cycle of nothing new,” as she puts it, “the road was abuzz with the never-ending activities with all the screaming children” (172–179). Dance competitions, roadside games, cars and telephones, foreigners and schools, all abound. SomDema spends a happy three years in Tashigang until the onset of menstruation. Though her ‘aunty’ (the hotel owner’s wife) surely would have understood, the now thirteen-year-old SomDema is too embarrassed to tell anyone what happened in an awkward scene involving blood and cramps, worthy of a Judy Blume story.⁴⁹ The new

teenager suspects that this is either karmic retribution or the punishment of God for falsely posing as a nun earlier in her life, even though she had no choice in the matter.

Instead of serving as a retrospective explanatory device, as it did for her elders and in most of *Circle of Karma*, here karma summons her to action. SomDema's sense of guilt and sin inspires her to return home once again and ask her father to allow her to become a nun. Various 'telltale signs' occur along the journey home that assure her she has found the right path. Here karma is forward facing, like modernity itself, beckoning the teenage protagonist into a new phase of life, indeed her destiny as predicted by the *kyetse*. Unlike Tsomo, whose longing to practice religion surfaced at various turning points but only expressed itself late in life, here SomDema has more pluck in following her own impulses, however indiscriminate. This likely has to do with the generation difference in the time period being represented, i.e. the scope of female agency in the 1960s versus the 1990s. In addition, like 'new age' appropriations of Buddhism in the west, *Kyetse* creates a bricolage of Buddhist motifs, folk customs and beliefs, Christian language, and other numinous elements, as well as a more active take on karma, which may reflect a modernist emphasis of the doctrinal, 'rational' aspects of Buddhism. Whereas

Tsomo feels helpless through much of *Circle of Karma*, SomDema is only paralyzed to the extent that she does not understand the world of adults, but takes action when opportunities arise.

In the final section of the novel, SomDema becomes a nun, and this time her father takes no chances: he escorts her to a nunnery near one of his relatives. Although the only eastern Bhutanese girl among the ten other nuns, SomDema enthusiastically engages the rigors of her new life, feeling a sense of peace even as she endures teasing from others. Finally she befriends Kinley Om, who becomes a 'soul-sister' and teaches her Dzongkha. It turns out they have a terrible truth in common, both having encountered the imposter nun and narrowly escaped being sold into prostitution. The pressing obstacle of this last section turns out to be romantic: SomDema develops a crush on a handsome young patron who comes to the nunnery to offer prayers for his deceased mother. He ends up returning to make several contributions, and SomDema feels the tension between her "maroon robe of chastity" and the flutter in her heart as she succumbs to "love's magic formula" (226). Even as SomDema depicts her obsession with the young patron Kuenga, she resists the temptation to act on her feelings and drops them altogether once he marries. The dramatic dream in the prologue with her fleeing the nunnery at the green-eyed cat's command never comes to pass in

actuality.

Instead, the crescendo of the novel is a news broadcast about a robbery of sacred artifacts accompanied by photos of the imposter nun and her accomplice. SomDema and Kinley tell the Lama their stories and travel with him to Paro to provide a report of their experience to the police. The novel has a somewhat pat ending with the villains caught, the nuns rewarded (they donate the reward to the Lama who promises to use it to build a new shrine room), and most of the village girls rescued and returned home (with the exception of Pentang who committed suicide). The epilogue features a final visit from SomDema's father, who announces that the family rival who issued the old curse had finally died. In these ways, SomDema is liberated from her tragic past and feels a bright future ahead: "a spiritual life... transformed into a free highway" (304), a decidedly modern image.

Conclusion

To conclude, in these novels, Kunzang Choden and Chador Wangmo dare to foreground the challenges faced by Himalayan women in the last half century, and both narrate the customs of Bhutanese village life with care, situating their protagonists within a traditional setting and orienting the plot around their religious aspirations to become Buddhist nuns.

Nonetheless, across these novels, there are subtle differences in the deployment of karma and its impact for representing female agency, as well as disparities in how religious figures are depicted. In *Circle of Karma*, religious figures remain remote and benevolent with the exception of Tsomo's delinquent husband Lhatu. As a narrative device, karma is invoked to console women, and Kunzang Choden implicitly critiques the tendency to let men off the hook for how they treat women, either by blaming each other or attributing their misfortunes to karma. By contrast Chador Wangmo is more irreverent; she features a fraudulent nun at the heart of *Kyetse* and questions the blind faith of villagers in anyone wearing maroon robes.⁵⁰ At the same time, she situates SomDema within a bricolage of beliefs, superstitions, dreams, and portents, adding a touch of magical realism.⁵¹ Rather than karma or even destiny holding her back, the mysterious forces in SomDema's life are galvanizing, encouraging her to pursue her calling and creating an empowered female figure that extricates herself from the most harrowing of circumstances.

On the one hand, the differential in female agency can be explained with reference to the time periods in which their protagonists come of age, the 1960s and 1990s respectively. Yet alongside that may be a generational shift (among the protagonists certainly and perhaps the authors as well)

in how karma is deployed—moving from passive acceptance and consolation to active engagement in identifying and pursuing one’s calling or ‘destiny.’ If indeed the attitudes embodied in the protagonists reflect their times, there is a contrast between a modern emphasis on linear progress and a more traditional notion of *samsāra* as a perpetual cycle.⁵²

Even if this is the case, in *Circle of Karma*, we see the nature of the cycle changes. Tsomo is liberated as a woman not by a bold act of self-definition, as SomDema makes by entering the nunnery, but rather through a gradual shift in the nature of the ‘circle of karma’ itself—from passive entrapment in *samsāra* (*‘khor ba*) to active engagement in pilgrimage (*skor ra*), circumambulating sacred sites and earning merit in the process. While *Kyetse* offers the resolution that comes with wrongdoers punished, *Circle of Karma* provides a more mature and open-ended vision of resilience and reconciliation.

Endnotes

1 *Membar Tsho: The Flaming Lake* (2012) narrates and illustrates the famous revelation of the fifteenth-century Buddhist master Pema Lingpa at Membartso, a pilgrimage site in Bumthang, and *Guru Rinpoche is Coming* (2015) brings to life a family’s preparations for the annual Buddhist celebration of Guru Rinpoche (the eighth-century Indian tantric master who is an important founding figure for Buddhism in Tibetan and Himalayan areas). Both books are written by Kunzang Choden

and illustrated by Pema Tshering.

2 My focus will be on these two female novelists who take up Buddhist themes in their writings, though there are younger women writers emerging on the scene and other successful female writers of non-fiction, such as Lily Wanggchuk, whose *Facts about Bhutan: The Land of the Thunder Dragon* (2008) has sold over 25,000 copies and is in its third edition.

3 Dorje Penjore (2013) dates the beginning of Bhutanese Anglophone literature to the publication of Kunzang Choden’s compilation, *Folktales of Bhutan* (1993), and Karma Ura’s historical novella, *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* (1995).

4 For recent perspectives on the politics of Anglophone literature in South Asia, see Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2018) and a special issue on “From Postcolonial to World Anglophone: South Asia,” edited by Ragini Thoor Srinivasan in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20/3 (2018).

5 The other two are Nepali and Lepcha with historical roots in neighboring Nepal and Sikkim. Literary Dzongkha derives from *chos skad*, the religious language of Buddhist texts (literally ‘dharma language’), closely linked to classical Tibetan as a *lingua franca* for Buddhists across Himalaya and Central Asia.

6 In other words, English is the medium of choice for Bhutanese writers who are not native Dzongkha speakers, who speak a mother tongue that do not have a written corollary, and who have grown up attending English-medium schools.

- 7 See the Ministry of Education website: <http://www.education.gov.bt/about-us>.
- 8 My use of constraints and resources is an adaptation Anthony Giddens's formulation of "rules and resources" that circumscribe agency in his study, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979).
- 9 While for ordinary beings the past-life causes of their current situation is indeterminate, the Buddha's reputed omniscience provided the pretext for colorful morality tales across lifetimes. This literature includes *jātakas* and *avadānas* that detail the past lives of the Buddha and his disciples; associated works such as the *Karmaśataka*; as well as commentaries to aphoristic verses from the *Dhammapada*, to the songs of the early male and female elders in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, and to the rules in the monastic code or *Vinaya*.
- 10 Doctrinal descriptions are found in *sūtras* like the *Mahānidāna Sūtra*, in Abhidharma literature, and in authoritative commentaries like Buddhaghosa's *Vishudhimagga* or Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*.
- 11 This causal sequence is available to the laity through artistic depictions of the Wheel of Existence (Tib. *srid pa'i 'khor lo*), commonly found in murals at the entry to Buddhist monasteries and temples in Tibetan and Himalayan areas. The three inner circles represent afflictive emotion (*kleśa*) at the hub, virtuous or non-virtuous action (*karma*) circling that, and the six realms of existence arranged around those, which are deemed the result (*phala*) of the causal factors of *kleśa* and *karma*. The outermost ring depicts the twelve *nidāna*, a series of links that depict the chain of causation across lifetimes.
- 12 Thanks to Sara Shneiderman for raising this issue in a panel on "Contemporary Bhutanese Literature" at the Association of Asian Studies conference in Denver, March 19–22, 2019. By way of comparison, contemporary Tibetan authors are writing secular short stories and novels in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, depending on their location and education. For discussions of contemporary Tibetan literature, see Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani (eds.), *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (2008). In Nepal, Manjushree Thapa bemoans that despite 123 recognized languages, its literature is still dominated by Nepali, the official language and mother tongue of approximately 45% of Nepal's population. See her introduction to volume 8 (May 2017) of *La.Lit: A Literary Magazine* (<https://lalitmag.com/guest-editorial-translation-issue>). As a writer of fiction and non-fiction based in Canada, she herself and other Nepali diaspora writers produce Anglophone works.
- 13 Note that the protagonists of *Circle of Karma* and *Kyetse* are not the cosmopolitan, educated, middle-class characters of much of Indian diaspora literature, straddling continents and struggling with hybrid contexts and identities. The border crossings of these rural Bhutanese women invoke the nausea of first-time travelers who ride in the back of a truck or take buses to neighboring areas of India and Nepal. Bridging this divide, Manjushree Thapa's intimate and episodic novel, *All of Us in Our Own Lives* (2016), brings together the transnational émigré story with the lives of village women in a poignant mosaic of intersecting lives.
- 14 See *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, edited by Ulka Anjaria (2015), especially chapters 3, 8, 14, and 21 which discuss fiction by Indian women writers from the late

nineteenth century to the present.

- 15 A famous work of this kind is Dondrup Gyal's short story, "Tulku" (*Sprul sku*), published in 1981, which critiques the blind faith of villagers in a charlatan lama. Françoise Robin has discussed several other works in this vein in her article, "'Oracles and Demons' in Tibetan Literature Today: Representations of Religion in Tibetan-Medium Fiction" (2008). Such critiques are indirect but palpable, made possible through the predicaments that characters find themselves in and the lessons they learn as a result. Focusing more narrowly on sexual transgressions by fake lamas, Somtsobum and I have authored a chapter, titled "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories," for an anthology on *Tibetan Feminisms*, edited by Nicola schneider and Hamsa Rajan (forthcoming).
- 16 Buddhism is the dominant (but not exclusive) religious tradition in Bhutan and is central to its national identity through the founding role of the Buddhist hierarch in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651). Village life is another marker of identity in these novels as indexed by the meticulous depictions of Bhutanese customs in the villages of the protagonists' youth.
- 17 Sonam Nyenda and I spoke with Kunzang Choden on February 17, 2018 while visiting Ogyen Choling, the family manor that she transformed into a museum and heritage guesthouse. Unless otherwise noted, the information for this paragraph and the next comes from that conversation.
- 18 For more details of her fascinating life, see the Bhutanese Broadcasting Service series, "Down Memory Lane with Writer Kunzang Choden," July 12, 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoYG3DUBMLk>).
- 19 In our conversation, Kunzang Choden emphasized the difficulty of publishing within Bhutan, so it should come as no surprise that both the authors treated in this article have created their own imprints.
- 20 Signaling its prominence internationally, *Circle of Karma* has been translated into thirteen different languages. Within Bhutan, the novel is paired with Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* in one of the English literature modules for the undergraduate program in Language and Literature at the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS), the Takse campus of the Royal University of Bhutan. Personal communication from Tshering Om Tamang.
- 21 This work has become part of the national curriculum for ninth grade (Class 9); see Tshering Om Tamang's article, "Exploring National Identity through Literature in Bhutanese English Curriculum" in this journal issue.
- 22 For more about their conversation, see a CNN report on the first Mountain Echoes: <http://travel.cnn.com/mumbai/mountain-echoes-bhutans-literary-festival-109845>.
- 23 See entry on Ogyen Choling Museum in the online Bhutan Cultural Atlas: <https://www.bhutanulturalatlas.org/2154/culture/cultural-facilities/ogyen-choling-museum>.
- 24 This short story originally appeared in *Lingting Xizang (Listening to Tibet)* in 1999. It was translated by Herbert Batt and published in a special issue of *Manoa* 12.2 (2000), *Song of the Snow Lion*, featuring translations of Tibetan

short stories from Tibetan and Chinese. See *Old Demons, New Deities* (2017), edited by Tenzin Dickie, for a more recent collection of contemporary Tibetan short stories, some translated and others composed in English. For a discussion of Tibetan Sinophone literature, see Tsering Shakya 2007.

- 25 In her discussion of nuns as the subject of gossip in the vicinity of Labrang Monastery in eastern Tibet, Charlene Makley describes a “sexual-karmic polarity” (2005, p. 270) replicating early Buddhist associations of women with *samsāra* (chronicled in Wilson 1996) and creating a hierarchy that aligns women with the body, the profane, and the household, and men with the mind, the sacred, and the monastery. Here and elsewhere, women are forced to play the ‘other’ to male monastic purity.
- 26 This is a notable exception to other ascriptions of karma in the novel. When Tsomo grapples with her own loss of her husband Wangchen to her sister Kesang, she realizes that she had unwittingly benefited from his straying tendencies when he left his first wife to live with her.
- 27 Within early Buddhist literature, Alan Sponberg (1992) has identified a progression of several enduring attitudes toward women: (1) “soteriological inclusiveness” which establishes the spiritual potential of women to attain *nirvāṇa* on par with men, (2) “institutional androcentrism” which structurally subordinates nuns to monks in the *Vinaya* code, and (3) “ascetic misogyny” which expresses monastic contempt for women as lustful by nature. In the emergence of this third attitude, Sponberg emphasizes that male sexual desire is projected onto women as a category, depicting them as temptresses and an inherent threat to male celibacy. This transition marks one way that women get blamed in Buddhist narratives, constructing the female body (and character) as problematic in nature rather than monks taking responsibility for and grappling with male sexual desire.
- 28 Thanks to Adam Krug for bringing this episode to my attention and to Kaira Fischer for sharing her draft translation with Dr. Lozang Jamspal, prepared for publication as part of 84,000—a massive translation project of the Buddhist canon under the auspices of the Khyentse Foundation. The false accusation comes about due to the insatiable sexual desire of Dhammadinnā’s husband in her past life. Due to constant preoccupation with his beautiful wife, the husband’s parents send him away. But he somehow manages to obtain access to a magical *garuḍa* that flies him home at night to make love to his wife. When she gets pregnant, the parents blame her for infidelity, even though her husband was the one responsible.
- 29 When a libertine approaches Subha, first she asserts her own purity to counter the seduction and finally resorts to disfiguring herself in order to defuse his lust once and for all. See *Therīgāthā* 14.1), translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu in 1995 (<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.14.01.than.html>).
- 30 When Māra taunts her, “Aren’t you afraid of rape?” she replies, “If even a hundred-thousand rapists came across me like this, I wouldn’t stir a hair. I’d feel no terror, and I’m not afraid of you, Mara, even alone like this.” See the *Uppalavaṇṇā Sutta*, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu in 1998 from the fifth chapter of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn05/sn05.005.than.html>).
- 31 See passage quoted in Bhikkhu Sujato’s

Bhikkuni Vinaya Studies (2012), p. 130. Damcho Diane Finnegan analyzes a different account of this nun (Skt. Utpalavarṇā) from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* in which she escapes rape (2009, pp. 290–295). In either case, her story provides a rationale for restricting nun’s mobility, dictating that henceforth they should reside together in *vihāras* rather than wander alone in forest hermitages. For different versions of her story and past lives, see Alice Collett’s chapter on Uppalavaṇṇā in *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns: Biography as History* (2016). Note that Amy Langenberg has critiqued the premise of pleasure as consent on a panel about “Buddhist and Christian Resources for Addressing Sexual Violence” at the American Academy of Religion conference in Denver, November 23–26. See also Cabezón, 2017, p. 192.

- 32 This shows the serious weight of the crime of raping a nun according to canonical literature—at the same level as the five inexpressible sins. See *Buddhist Legends* V.10, translated by Eugene Burlingame (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), retrieved from <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Buddhist-Legends/05-10.htm>. For other examples, see José Cabezón’s discussion of how classic sources such as the *Smṛtyupasthāna* focus on male sexual impropriety and the torments experienced in hell as the result of serious offenses, especially incest and the rape of nuns (2017, pp. 45–73).
- 33 Thanks to Kaira Fischer for sharing her draft translation with Dr. Lozang Jamspal of this episode in the *Vinayakṣudrakavastu*. Their translation work is being done under the auspices of the 84,000 project.
- 34 The theme of rivalry between co-wives in

the *jātakas* and the violence that can ensue, sometimes across lifetimes, is found in other tales such as “Not Hatred for Hatred” in *Buddhist Legends* I.4, retrieved from <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Buddhist-Legends/01-04.htm>. See Reiko Ohnuma (2012, pp. 22–27) for a discussion of this and other examples.

- 35 According to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the nun Kapilabhadrā is similarly helpless to defend herself when she gets kidnapped and trapped by ministers of King Ajātaśatru for his pleasure, and her predicament is likewise attributed to her own previous karma. She is only able to free herself after another nun (ironically Utpalavarṇā) miraculously appears and teaches her supernatural powers. When Kapilabhadrā flies out of the palace, the king witnesses the miracle and repents. For an analysis of this story as found in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, see Finnegan 2009, pp. 244–247.
- 36 Example are finding a jeep to Kalimpong from the bus station in Phuentsholing, recognizing her brother from afar on the road soon after they arrive, and discovering their luggage was safe after leaving it with a stranger to watch (Choden, 2005, pp. 137–140).
- 37 At this she feels that her “negative karma is over” (Choden, 2005, p. 223).
- 38 The verbs, *‘khor ba* and *skor ba* (alt. *skorra*), in Tibetan both mean ‘to circle.’ The first is passive and the second active. The passive spelling is used to translate the Sanskrit *samsāra*, suggesting that beings are involuntarily caught in its cycle of suffering. Circumambulation, on the other hand, is an active process and virtuous act, involving

- venerating sacred object or place. As a result, it is understood to accrue merit.
- 39 A parallel can be found in *Himalayan Hermitess* (Schaeffer, 2004), the autobiography of the seventeenth-century nun Orgyan Chokyi, whose liberation is as much her autonomy later in life—after her difficult childhood and years spent in the kitchen when first ordained—as it is the realization credited to her.
- 40 Together with Sonam Nyenda and Tshering Om Tamang, I interviewed Chador Wangmo over tea in downtown Thimphu on February 21, 2018.
- 41 For more details about how she became a writer, see Bhutan Broadcasting System interview with Chador Wangmo on August 21, 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoYG3DUBMLk>).
- 42 Her first novel quickly sold out its first printing of 2000, and Chador Wangmo sighed when mentioning that it has been pirated ever since. To a lesser extent, it evokes karma as a guiding force alongside others.
- 43 Despite this, Chador Wangmo deliberately peppers her prose with Sharchokpa, her mother tongue, without always giving the translation, thereby marking difference.
- 44 In August 2018, she was featured in a New York Times article, “A New Flourishing Literary Scene in the Real Shangri-La” by Geoffrey Gettleman (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/19/books/bhutan-literary-festival-himalayas-shangri-la.html>).
- 45 In our interview, Chador Wangmo quipped that being a professional writers is so unrecognized in Bhutan that she ends up telling people, “I am a housewife, and I do nothing.”
- 46 For some general statistics, see: <https://www.himalayan-foundation.org/what-we-do/stop-girl-trafficking>.
- 47 Tib. *skyes rtsis*, alt. *skyes skar brtag pa* and *tshes rabs las rtsis*.
- 48 In the contemporary Tibetan short story, “Entrusted to the Wind” by Lhashamgyal, the wind also plays a compelling force, symbolizing alternatively karma and changing historical circumstances. See translation and analysis in Robin 2016 and Lhashamgyal 2016.
- 49 Judy Blume is an American writer of children’s books and young adult novels known for the way she captures the awkward moments and confusions of coming of age with poignant humor.
- 50 Fake monks (and to a lesser degree nuns) are also a problem in contemporary Tibet. See note 15 above for literary treatments of this phenomenon.
- 51 When I asked Chador Wangmo who ‘God’ referred to in the story, she replied ‘Guru Rinpoche.’ This epithet refers to Padmasambhava, the eighth-century Indian tantric master deemed a second Buddha by Buddhists in Tibetan and Himalayan areas. Her synthesis of these reflects a ‘new age’ approach to spirituality in which elements from different traditions are fashioned into a bricolage.
- 52 Chador Wangmo discusses how *Kyetse* reflects on what it means to be Bhutanese and Buddhist in modern times in a *Kuensel* article, “Bhutanese Writers Look to Make a Mark” on August 28, 2016 (<http://www.kuenselonline>).

com/contemporary-bhutanese-writers-look-to-make-a-mark).

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Perspectives on Contemporary Bhutanese Literature

Chador Wangmo, Rinzin Rinzin and Namgyal Tshering

Introduction

The limitations of rich literary resources may be attributed to limited written folklore, myths and histories which are otherwise the crux of tradition and culture imbued in the rich oral storytelling traditions. Bhutan's traditions and culture have been passed down through the generations of oral storytelling and has not been written until about two decades ago. While epic tales and short stories written in Dzongkha were part of Bhutanese curriculum since the institution of schooling system in the early 1960s, literature in English included literature from the outside world.

Bhutanese contemporary story writing gained newer opportunities for writing with Bhutanese individuals beginning to contribute towards the growing repository of printed literary works. The early printed literature included books on the history of Bhutan by Hasratjit chronicling the lives of Bhutanese monarchy. The growth in Bhutanese Literature in English is a recent trend. Until a few years ago, reading culture was not an active culture across Bhutanese citizenry, and contemporary writers were few. Writing was mostly inspired by Kunzang Choden, one of the first Bhutanese women to contribute to

Bhutanese literature.

The Royal Government of Bhutan declared Year 2015 as the National Reading Year as envisioned by our leaders. Reading culture was infused into the school system, and its practice provided priority by celebrating Annual Reading Week in September across the nation. In the last three years, children and adults have begun to pick up reading, which recorded hundreds of thousands of books read annually.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of Bhutanese writers contributing towards enriching Bhutanese literature by publishing indigenous research books, journals, history, novels, poetries, and essays.

Kunzang Choden's books *Folktales of Bhutan*, *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti*, *Chilli and Cheese - Food and Society in Bhutan* and *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan* dominate the pile. Then there is Kinley Dorji's *Within the Realm of Happiness*, Ugyen Gyeltshen's *Dear Seday* and Doji Dhratyul's *Escapades*. Rinzin Rinzin and Chador Wangmo are among the most prolific writers today contributing in writing children's books, novels as well as poetry.

Today, the ideas of literature people have embraced over time have undergone a sea of change. This paper presents a synopsis on perspectives related to the current literary culture in Bhutan.

A Bird's Eye View of Bhutanese Literature

Traditional Bhutanese literature

The education system of Bhutan began as early as the advent of Buddhism in 747AD with the arrival of the Indian saint popularly known as Padmasambhava alias Guru Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche is associated with the foundation of community of Lamas (Buddhist teachers) who further propagated Buddhism through a traditional monastic teaching akin to the present day schooling system.

Monastic education was the earliest traditional school of education in Bhutan where monks learnt to read and write through Buddhist literature. It was the only form of literacy in Bhutan until the 1960s. Although informal religious discourses were held since Buddhism reached Bhutan, formal monastic education started only in 1622 with the establishment of the formal monk body at Chari in Thimphu. Western education system infiltrated into Bhutan only in the mid-1950s after Bhutan relaxed its policy of isolation from the outside world. The prominent difference in the two systems was that while monastic

education gave more importance to rote learning, modern education was expected to enhance development of skills and knowledge to produce doctors, engineers, administrators, and other professionals, which would be useful for the development of the country. The Royal government of Bhutan invited expatriate teachers from India to overlook the early phase of education in the Bhutanese schools. This led to the adoption of curriculum and instructional materials based on the Indian syllabuses except the national language texts, which were taught in the national language, Dzongkha. The medium of instruction for the other general subjects were then English and Hindi. English became the medium of instruction in Bhutan not because it was expedient to learn, but because it was already the *lingua franca* of the world.

Bhutanese traditional literature that grew out of the monastic system of learning was classified into ten broad categories, while in the modern context the categories are varied and specific to institutions.

1. *Choejung*: Meaning Dharma Histories and religious literature, which consisted of *kanjur* and *tenjur* containing Buddha's teaching and its translation;
2. *Namthar*: Religious biographies, which tell stories of great

- religious figures;
3. *Gyalrab*: Historical chronicles;
 4. *Logyu*: Records of history of chronicles. The widely read *Logyu, the Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* and *Gaylong Sumdar Tashi*, which are both translated into English, are fine examples of this genre;
 5. *Terma*: These are treasure texts believed to have been hidden by Guru Rinpoche in *beyuls*, Hidden lands. In Bhutan, Tertön Pema Lingpa, the great treasure discoverer, has mystically discovered many of these sacred texts;
 6. *Srung*: Epics. The epic of *King Gesar of Ling* is the most appropriate example of this classification;
 7. *Glu*: Folk songs normally sung in the form of *Gurma*, which is a form of religious realizations. Lam Drukpa Kuenley and Jetsun Milarepa, the two Buddhist saints are best-known composers of *Gurma*;
 8. *Nyan ngag*: Ornate poetry that follows a complex and

metaphorical compositions;

9. *Karchag*: Catalogues of temples, *chortens* and *Dzongs*; and,

10. *Tshig mdzod*: Dictionary.

These literatures of traditional and monastic nature were not readily accessible to common people, except to recruits in the monastery. Common people, therefore, did not gain interest to associate with these forms of literature as a part of their daily lives. The scriptures were, however, taught through discourse by accomplished monks (*Lama*) to common people as part of religious initiations.

This lack of reading culture for available traditional literature, except by monks and teachers who were trained through the Dzongkha language can be attributed to two prominent reasons:

1. All the above-mentioned forms of literature have existed in *Chokey* ('the language of the Dharma'), a form of early Dzongkha script. *Chokey* was not easy to comprehend by common people without training in its grammar.
2. These texts were revered as sacred and were not accessible for reading without explicit initiations by a teacher.

Modern Bhutanese English literature

There is no conclusive research to validate the emergence of Bhutanese traditional literature except as part of monastic learning institutions. English literature began discreetly alongside the growth and development of modern education system in the country. In the mid-1960s about 59 schools were established in different locations across the country. Modern education accelerated in the country after pioneer students of these schools were selected and sent to schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling in India on government scholarships for higher studies.

Until recently almost all the books that Bhutanese people read were imported from India and other countries. Earliest Bhutanese mass publications in English were largely school textbooks, grammar, history, and other stories used as supplementary books based on the school curriculum. Records with the National Library and the Centre for Bhutan Studies show that the variety of publications has changed over the years. From the era of printing Buddhist scriptures on wooden blocks to recounting of history, a new era is taking concrete shape in the field of writing with improvements parallel to international standards.

The first ever English books written by and about Bhutan were basically unfolding of

the glorious roles of various leaders in shaping our country to the position it is in now, myths and the history of our country. Apart from these, many research journals and annual statistical data from various Ministries have been compiled into books. Interestingly, since the early twenty first century, Guide Books for various subjects and Solved Question Papers for Board examinations, which were academically driven, have flooded the Bhutanese book market. This may be due to the importance set on the Examination system in the schools.

A glance at other genres of Bhutanese literature

Talking about iconoclast in the field of literature in English, Kunzang Choden ushered in the change in the voice of literature in our country. Her first book, *Folktales of Bhutan*, was published in 1994. This was one of the first books on Bhutanese oral stories to be published in English. Today, if you visit any bookstores in Bhutan, you will find that many folktales that have been penned down by many other writers in Bhutan is in between 2000 to 2015.

Then, in 2002, *The Talisman of Good Fortune and Other Stories from Rural Bhutan* written by Rinzin Rinzin came into the hands of the readers. The readers unabashedly classified it as another

compiled book of folktales, although the book was a collection of nine creative stories. Creative short story writing thus began to peek into existence with this book.

We cannot be wrong in our assumption that the genre of longer prose in the form of novel gained momentum with Kunzang Choden's book *Circle of Karma*, which has been translated into thirteen different languages, and is still widely read and loved by readers around the world. In the same year, Karma Tenzin's *The Restless Relic* hit the book market. These books set the trend of fiction writing in Bhutanese literary landscape.

Since the early nineties, slowly but steadily, Bhutanese writers have followed the zest for literature in the footsteps of the likes of Kunzang Choden. While we are on a listing spree, we must not forget that we have had the book *Homecoming*, written by a twelve-year-old girl Pema Yuden. She published her second novel, *Lomba*, in 2016 adding yet another creatively crafted fiction in the list of books written by Bhutanese writers. But 2016 saw two more young writers join the bandwagon of writers, bagging the title of the "Youngest writer." Yeshey Tseyang Zam, an eleven year old came into limelight with her illustrated book for children *Khakey*, and a month later a ten year old Tserim Damchen Jamyang Lhamo became the youngest

writer with her book *My Life* which is an illustrated journal of a ten year old.

Gopilal Acharya's *Bhutanese folktales from East and South* and *Dancing to Death* (anthology of poems) is a huge inspiration to many aspiring Bhutanese writers. His debut novel *Stone in my heart* was long listed for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize. Adding to the list, some of the popular books published in the recent years are:

1. Dorji Dhrytul's *Escapades*. This book explores very sensitive theme of exploitation of women in rural areas and of the sheer power of woman.
2. Karma Tenzin, who is a retired law enforcement officer, has authored four books till now, and the crime fiction he has produced is an unduplicated genre in our country till date. His books, *The Restless Relic*, *Barnyard Murder and other stories*, *The Darkest June*, and his recent publication *Switched off* has been well received by readers of all ages.
3. Ugyen Gyeltshen's *Dear Seday*, which flooded the book market in 2012, swept the masses with the first of its kind love story. In the various dot com sites,

people were rebuked and mocked for writing romantic stories, and some critical readers even claimed that all that the Bhutanese can think of is “Romance” when it comes to writing stories. But this book proved that Romance is a genre embraced with love by many.

4. Chador Wangmo’s maiden novel, *La Ama*, which was published in 2015 voices issue of domestic violence and gender inequalities. In August 2016, her second novel *Kyetse* hit the market along with Rinzin Rinzin’s book *Depa Bondeypa* and Maj. Lingi Jamtsho’s *Gyalo*. *Kyetse* is a tale woven around many superstitious beliefs that existed in the early 1980’s in Bhutan, while *Depa Bondeypa* traces the historical path and the bond that existed between Kurtoe in the East and Bumthang in Central Bhutan. *Gyalo* opens the reader’s eyes to military life.
5. Realistic fiction gained popularity in 2015. *Kadrinche beyond words* by Kinley Wangchuk, and Monu Tamang’s *Chronicles of Love foretold* and *The Morning Sun* became a sensation in the book world. It can be attributed

to the fact that these books were published in a different fashion. These as well as *Gyalo*, were the first ever crowd sponsored published books.

After Rinzin Rinzin’s collection of short stories, writers like Nawang Phuntsho and Lingi Jamtsho have tried to spread the love for contemporary short stories, which is a genre different from the list above.

Poetry and poets bring out the sublime beauty of life. Celebrating the splendor of this genre of literature, Riyang Books brought together a group of Bhutanese poets in the book *Folded into a paper boat*. In the past few years, many Bhutanese poets have participated in various literary festivals across India. Mr. Namgyel Tshering who published his maiden collection of poems, *Dragon Delights - A rosary of poems* in 2017 was recognized for his poetic talents at the Pentasi B World poetry festival held at Hyderabad. Accompanying him was a young yet to be published poet, Shiv Nepal who is an equally enthusiastic poet. Rinzin Rinzin and Chador Wangmo were nominated for the prestigious Premchand Fellowship in 2015 and 2016 respectively and in 2017, they were both awarded Vidhyavachaspati as well as Tathagath Srijan Samaan 2017 at Sidharth Nagar in UP, India. Some of the duo’s poems have been published abroad in renowned poetry anthologies

like the Amaravati Poetic Prism 2017, The Poetry of South Asia, Complexion Based Discrimination and so on. Back home, Jurmi Chhowing published his collection of poetry *Ballad of a Minor Man in a Major Chord*, which struck the right chord of poetry in the hearts of poetry lovers. In August 2018, Rinzin Rinzin published his first poetry anthology *Dewdrops in the Sun – A Treasury of Poem* taking Bhutanese poetry to newer heights. The love of poetry is on the rise as we see many Bhutanese taking to Instagram and Facebook to post their poems online.

Children's books are also beginning to get better attention with the Bhutan Children's Book Initiative (BCBI) project, which is a joint venture between Save the Children office and the Ministry of Education. This project started with the aim to provide leverage to Bhutanese writers and illustrators interested in producing Children's books written in Bhutanese context for Bhutanese Children. This genre too began its journey with illustrated folktales. Kunzang Choden's *Aunty Mouse, Room In your Heart* and *Tshegho-the garment of life* added to the collection of *Lamche* series written and published by Pema Gyaltshen. Chador Wangmo added ten books to the list, bringing in the variety of creative writing in this genre with her books *Monster in my Room, Weaving a Rainbow* and *Tikpa-the drop of Water*. Chador Wangmo also ventured

into another genre by publishing the first ever super hero chapter book for children with her *Dema- the mystery of the missing egg* in 2016. Rinzin Rinzin also published a few illustrated books for children. *The Story of the Yak and the Buffalo, The Pheasant takes the Snake to Court, Eggs to the Rescue* and *The Story of the Raven and the Owl* are few of his works in this genre.

In the decade since the influx of mass media, Bhutan has seen a rapid increase in the number of enthusiasts pursuing writing as a passion. What started from social forums like Nopkin.com, WAB and Kuzuzangpo.com has hatched many writers who discovered their flair for writing and many continue to post their write-ups on popular social media such as Facebook. Blogging too has caught up well with Bhutanese masses. In 2015, Community of Bhutanese Bloggers (CBB) was formed, sensing the need to bring together bloggers. CBB now has more than 600 plus members. One of the popular bloggers, Passang Tshering successfully published his blog posts into a book titled 'Passu Diary' in 2017.

Conclusion

Going by the listings, we are positive that English literature in Bhutan did start late, but it is definitely on the rise and in a positive way. While the world is grappling with the

anxiety of techno-gadgets superseding the presence of books, Bhutan's growing number of aspiring writers confirmed by the increasing number of books churned out every year is unquestionably a new quest in undertaking.

“There are stories everywhere and in every heart”, many Bhutanese are feeling this nudge and we are certainly seeing upheaval in the literary culture. Today, with many of us bestowed with the privilege of bringing ourselves out to attend forums like the SAARC Literary Festival initiated by the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) and Mountain Echoes, which is the biggest literary festival that happens in Bhutan, we Bhutanese are unquestionably making headway in the writing journey. Our mountains have begun to rumble for quite a long time, and today it is beginning to make louder calls to the world of literature hidden deep in the valleys.

Chador Wangmo is a popular Bhutanese writer, who has authored four novels, including *La Ama* and *Kyetse*, and ten illustrated books for children, including books from the superhero series, *Dema*.

Rinzin Rinzin is a prominent Bhutanese writer, poet, scholar and a former parliamentarian. His debut book was *The Talisman of Good Fortune and Other Stories from Rural Bhutan*. He has also authored a novella and four children's illustrated books.

Namgyal Tshering is the author of *Dragon Delights: A Rosary of Poems*. He has won The Enchanting Muse Award during 2017 India world Poetry Festival in Hyderabad.

Contemporary Children's Literature in Bhutan

Ugyen Tshomo and Pema Wangdi

Abstract

This perspective piece explores what contemporary literature is: defining children's contemporary literature and discussing its characteristics through commonly accepted standards (Kasten, Kristo, McClure, & Garthwait, 2005; Cooper, 2001). The authors studied children's books in stores and stalls within Bhutan and eventually concluded with recommendations for how to improve the writing of children's books in Bhutan. We include a literature review to indicate a criterion for what contemporary children's books should include in order to qualify as contemporary children's books.

Keywords: children's literature, contemporary literature, Bhutanese literature, Children's themes

Background

Bhutanese have inherited rich folklores, legends, and myths but only through oral tradition. Outside of the rich array of religious works, premodern secular writings are mainly history or administrative texts, focused on facts. It was only in 1984 that the first few authors began to set folktales down in writing with the work of Sherab Thaye in Dzongkha (Sharma, 2007) followed by Kunzang Choden in English (1993). Choden, later, started writing novels as well and several other authors followed suit. Still, it has only been within the last decade that children's books written by Bhutanese authors started appearing in

Bhutanese markets. Thus, we can say the literary project of writing children's book is still in its infancy. Consequently, there seems to be a gap between the publication of traditional folk tales and contemporary literature intended for children (Raina, 2014).

Despite the truism that the literature we read impacts our lives, reading took longer to take root as a common practice in Bhutan than elsewhere in the world. Reading and storytelling have numerous benefits including early childhood development of sounds, words and language, and development of literacy skills. It can stimulate imagination and build social and communication skills. By providing an

emotional journey for the reader, stories provide experiences about reality and make-believe worlds. In this way, reading shapes and molds our character (Niklas, Cohrssen, & Tayler, 2016; Kalb & Ours, 2013; Reading and storytelling, 2018). Thus the books we choose during the developmental stages of our lives are very important because they model for children how to behave and speak (Swingley, 2008). Having quality children's books in the market and library is important for the overall growth of a child.

Aim and Methods

The aim of this paper is to review children's literature and contemporary literature available in the local market and examine if they meet commonly accepted standards of children's literature. From this comparison, the authors provide recommendations for the development of Bhutanese contemporary children's literature. In conducting this study, the authors gathered data on the types of literature available in Bhutan. Libraries and book stalls were visited. We also reviewed supplementary readers available in Bhutanese schools. The authors as member of English Committee in Royal Education Council also had access to all the Readers that sat on the table for the selection. It was during that time the author realized there is a dearth of quality children's literature. The keywords used

for online educational websites were: contemporary literature, children's literature, characteristic of children's literature, reading and early childhood. A total of twenty nine articles were included in the review. A total of thirty children's books written by Bhutanese authors were reviewed. Overall the book by Cooper (2001) and Kasten et al. (2005) guided the authors in gauging the quality of children's book.

Categories of Literature

The word contemporary means anything that is current. Trends what are ongoing, that is happening now and which reflects the live environment. There are only few children's literature that reflects Bhutanese contemporary culture. Most definitions point to contemporary literature as post-World War II writing, but for Bhutan the term usually designates literature in Dzongkha or English published from the 1990s forward. But the word contemporary according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary also means "characteristics of the present period" (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Thus any literature which is written for the present era must have contemporary characteristic. It should reflect a society's social and/or political viewpoints, shown through realistic characters, connections to current events and socioeconomic messages. Contemporary literature can also offer depictions of traditional customs

and values, as well as historical events that remain relevant and salient to contemporary populations. Even children’s literature according to this definition must include content that children will encounter in their lived environments, including traditional customs as well as modern technology and media references. Folklores has its place and is a valuable way to educate children whether in oral or written form. But does it fit in what we define as “contemporary literature?”

Children’s literature is best described as collection of books written for children, read by children, and/or written about children (Schneider, 2016). The authors in this review will only discuss English category of children’s literature. Find below few local literature the authors reviewed along with the Readers of Pre Primary till Class III published by Royal Education Council.

Book

Fish for Dinner

Spikey

Tikpa the drop of water

Gangchung, The Baby Snow Leopard

The Heavenly Birds

The Brothers

A Chest of Stones

The Pheasant takes the snake to court

Aku Duba

Kado goes to the Tsechu

Deyzhang

A little Thing Called Love

The Eggs to the Rescue

Akash’s Day

Kabray

My Ama is my best playmate

The Flea and the Louse

Pem and Tashi

A Skipping Rope

Writer/Editor/Publisher

Students Plus Bhutan

Students Plus Bhutan

Chador Wangmo

Students Plus Bhutan

Pema Gyeltshen

Students Plus Bhutan

Students Plus Bhutan

Rinzin Rinzin

Students Plus Bhutan

Karma Tshering

Indra K. Vishwa

Indra K. Vishwa

Rinzin Rinzin

Royal Education Council

Royal Education Council

Royal Education Council

Chador Wangmo

Royal Education Council

Royal University of Bhutan

Characteristic of Contemporary Children's Literature Text Type

Children can only learn a certain number of vocabulary words according to their age group. In order to pique children's desire to learn, certain text types are recommended (Cooper, 2001). There are six distinctly different types of texts that can be used for reading instruction: wordless books, predictable texts, controlled high-frequency vocabulary texts, decodable texts, authentic literature created, easy-

to-read texts. Apart from textbooks used in the school curriculum, our survey revealed that Bhutanese children's books mainly fall into the category of authentic literature. Nonetheless, attention to some of the issues highlighted in the typology below, such as repetition and rhythm or accessible language remain important. Presented in Table 1 is a brief description with major uses for each type of text. All texts can be used at all grade levels, but some are more appropriate for beginning reading instruction. See chart below based on Cooper (2001, p 2).

Type	Description	Major use	Example
Wordless Books	Text composed only of illustrations or photographs. No print is given.	It helps children develop a concept of themselves as readers, develop oral language, and self-expression.	<i>A Ball for Daisy</i> By: Chris Raschka <i>A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog</i> By: Mercer Mayer
Predictable Texts	Texts that utilize a repeated pattern of some type. May be authentic literature or created text.	Used as a way to introduce children to reading through shared reading and to provide practice through repeated readings.	<i>Home</i> by Carson Ellis
Controlled High Frequency Vocabulary Texts	Text written specifically for beginning reading instruction using a core of high frequency words that have been carefully introduced.	Provide practice in reading high frequency words.	<i>Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?</i> by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle <i>Where is the Green Sheep?</i> By Judy Horacek
Decodable Texts	Text written using words that utilize decoding skills students have been taught.	Provide practice and application of phonics and structural skills that have been taught.	<i>Pumkin and the Kitten</i> by All about Learning <i>The Bad Rat</i>

Type	Description	Major use	Example
Authentic Literature	Stories and informational texts where no attempts have been made to control the words, patterns, or decoding elements used in the text. The text is in the original form written by the author.	Used for practice and application of reading once students have developed beginning decoding skills. Also used for shared reading and read aloud.	<i>Yo! Yes?</i> By Raschka <i>Silly Billy</i> By Browne <i>The True Son</i> , Class III (Royal Education Council)
Created, Easy to Read Texts	Stories and informational texts that have been written to control the level of difficulty and some aspect of skill application.	Used for practice and application of reading skills for students who may be experiencing difficulty in certain aspects of learning to read or need practice in applying a targeted skill or strategy.	<i>Ball</i> by Mary Sullivan <i>Hug</i> by Jez Alborough

Repetition and Rhythm

Repetition and rhythm is important in children’s books. We learn multiplication tables by repeating them over and over. Similarly, any new words repeated will form meaning and frame value in a child’s mind. It is a powerful tool to generate meaning (Gannon, 1987). With more repetition, there are more chances for a child to remember the particular vocabulary word. A book which contains good rhyme, rhythm and repetition is enjoyed by most children (Reading and storytelling, 2018.). For example *Where is Dechen?* (Royal Education Council, 2017) has repetition “Dechen,Dechen where are you?”. Robert Munsch’s *Love you Forever* has the refrain “I’ll love you forever/I’ll like you for always/As long as I ‘m living /My baby you’ll be.”

Pictures/Illustration

Children love pictures as Grozdanic described in her report on child reading preferences, where she references this comment made by Nevaeh, 7, Landers, CA “I love to read because the pictures and stories help me to imagine that I am somewhere else!” (2013, para 6). It also stimulates their imagination and sustains their attention. The art must enhance and extent the story (Kasten, p.162). Before a child can read, they follow the pictures in order to understand the story. That is why there are picture books for little children. According to Katherine Paterson who was named by Librarian of Congress as, the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature from 2010 -2011 “picture books are like lettuce in the grocery store, they disappear so fast.” (as cited in Zipp, 2012, para .4).

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1897) was popular in part due to its numerous illustrations that brought the text to life. Most of Dr. Seuss books are popular not just for the rhyming language and sense of magical realism apparent in the book, but also because of his illustrations. Closer to home, a high standard for illustrations in Bhutanese children's books has been set by Kunzang Choden and Pema Tshering in *Membar Tsho – The Flaming Lake* (2012), which recounts in simple yet vivid terms, with respect to both the language and illustrations, the life of the Bhutanese saint Pema Lingpa with special focus on his miraculous revelation at Membar Tsho.

While illustrating, the picture should be clear and appealing to young mind's imagination. The color must be prominent as children are too young to appreciate abstraction. Most of all, it should be culturally specific in its settings. Teachers of primary schools are encouraged to use three-dimensional art or pictures, so children can understand what is being said or discussed from a visual point of view. Well-composed illustrations can set the mood, provide setting, define characters, provide different point of view, demonstrate a concept, provide textual coherence, reinforce the text, provide mental scaffolds for the child reader, and thus assist their comprehension of the written text (Fang, 1996).

Language

A child develops its language through its surrounding. Language should be "smooth, fluid, and readable" by young children (Kasten, p. 162). According to Skinner (1938), Skinner (1948) as cited by McLeod (2018), the major influence on human behavior is learning from one's environment. Other behaviorist Ivan Pavlov (1890s) and John Watson (1990s) also agreed with the theory that language learning depends on one's environment. Even Mehawesh (2014) and Harris (1996) stated that the social and linguistic environments of the child plays a vital role in acquiring language comprehension. For Bhutan, this extends well beyond literary texts, given that most of the dialects spoken in various regions of the country do not have written languages. The types and standard of books that are available in our environment is crucial for early language development. The social aspects of language acquisition are even more important when a person learns a second language as they go through stages of language acquisition. In Bhutan, this may be Dzongkha and/or English, depending on the region. We should note that English is the medium of instruction in the Bhutanese school system, and Dzongkha is studied in special language classes. In learning a second language, the stages are Preproduction, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency

(Linguanaut, 2013). It is important to consider these stages as Bhutanese authors continue to write children's books in English.

In 2015, the Ministry of Education initiated National Reading Year commemorating the 60th Birth Anniversary of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and to make reading a healthy habit amongst Bhutanese. It sought the support of families, teachers, and the media to build a vibrant reading culture in Bhutan, and planned several activities throughout the year geared towards this end. According to the report posted in Facebook (March 7, 2016) about 2.5 million books were read by teachers, students and staff by the end of the National Reading Year.

Themes

For children to associate themselves with their immediate surroundings, books written for them must reflect their immediate environment in terms of Bhutanese culture, geography and values.. This is especially true in Bhutan given that its children's literature is still so young. Stories for children should reflect and illustrate Bhutanese culture, geography, and values. Rinzin Rinzin's retelling of a folktale in *The Story of the Yak and the Buffalo* (2014), illustrated by Tempa Rabgay, is a good example with its setting in the Himalayan highlands and yak and

buffalo characters, representing nomadism and farming respectively. Even more educational in terms of Bhutanese culture is Kunzang Choden's *Guru Rinpoche is Coming*, illustrated once again by Pema Tshering. It presents customs and beliefs around an annual Buddhist holiday celebrating Guru Rinpoche, another name for the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava who visited Bhutan in the eighth century and helped establish Buddhism in the region by burying treasures for saints such as Pema Lingpa.

In addition to traditional themes related to Bhutanese culture and values, it is also important to depict modern themes, related to urban life and technology. The way writers write could adapt and balance their themes accordingly (Alterman, 2018). Writers can also address twenty-first century crises through children's book they write (Crawford, Roberts, & Zygouris-Coe, 2019). This includes the loss of culture to global forces but could also take creative avenues, such as stories with ghosts popping out of computer screens. This would be one way to portray the dangers of virtual world gently, so children are prepared of what is behind the addictive screen. Stories around the computer games can be another suggestion (Kersten, Apol, & Pataray-Ching, 2007). Children's books usually ends with happily ever after. Despite all the struggles and adventures characters go through, the

story most often ends happily, especially in books intended for children who are too young to understand the complexities of life. For example *The Frog Prince Hops to It* by Tony Bradman, *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Andersen, *Beauty and the Beast* by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. Perhaps also writers feel a little child should not be burdened with all the worries of the world. That is why children's books only have basic emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, and happiness, which are portrayed mostly through adventure.

Innocence is a key theme in many children's books, such as the fairytale, *Little Red Riding Hood*. The red-hooded girl is innocent throughout the book despite the danger posed by the wolf, albeit portrayed with a gentle touch. Protagonists in children's book are children themselves because readers love to see themselves in the text. And it is also agreed that little readers find it engaging since the characters, themes, and action mirror their concerns and their perspective on the world. Whether short stories or books, the use of young characters ensures that the themes will be relatable to children. That is one of the reasons for the popularity of Enid Blyton's stories, *The Enchanted Wood*, *The Famous Five*, *The Magic Faraway Tree*.

Gender Role Stereotyping in Children's books

Gender stereotyping and sexism in illustrated books affect the development of gender identity in young children according to Narahara (1998) and Knorr (2017). In most of books reviewed by these authors, males were more typically portrayed as possessing power, being adventitious, and potentially represented by dangerous beasts such as dragons, bears and tigers. Females tended to have smaller roles, represented by more vulnerable creatures such as birds, cats and insects (Ferguson, 2018). Keira Knightley, the British female actor, bans her daughter from watching Disney films like Cinderella or The Little Mermaid. This is because, according to Knightley, Cinderella "waits around for a rich guy to rescue her," and Little Mermaid gives up her voice for a man (Keira Knightley bans daughter from watching some Disney films, 2018, para. 2). The reality of gender bias and the importance of gender equality have become widely recognized, so modern children need to embrace these values. Children's books could encourage this by adding modern twists, like featuring a woman as the hero rather than a man. Among children's stories in Bhutan, Chador Wangmo's series featuring the nun superhero *Dema: Mystery of the missing egg* (2017) is an excellent example of this.

Writers such as Kortenhuis and Demarest (1993) observe that frequency of male and female heroic roles are becoming more evenly distributed in the global media in recent times as gender roles in society shift. In Bhutan, there is still a need to see that change. For the most part, in media and literary representations, women are still portrayed as passive characters. For example, the reader from Class I, *Occupation* depicts women as forester, nurse and police while the Pilot, farmer, electrician, doctor and teacher are all male. We should showcase woman role model as early as Class I (age 6- 7 years). The book should have pictures of both male and female simultaneously. Another example is *Blessed Rainy Day*, Class II reader, the mother carries the baby all through the story, including while she is serving food with the baby on her lap. She is also illustrated cooking food. Even the book *Akash's Day* only has the main protagonist's sisters and mother dress him while the father is absent.

Recommendation

After exploring several aspects of children's literature, the authors here recommends that the vocabulary in the book be age appropriate. Language used by Bhutanese author can improve on lexical creativity and grammar accuracy. Gender roles and stereotyping in children's literature can be reduced. Given the importance of

illustration on child reader, extra attention should be paid to illustration in Bhutanese literature, including the accuracy of local clothing, buildings, and landscapes. As is the case for much of Bhutanese children's literature, the themes and characters should be drawn from immediate surroundings. The pictures in *Lion and the Hare* Class III has pictures from Google which are not clear. Finally, we recommend that authors of children's book check criteria for children's book by Kiefer (2010); Kasten, Kristo, McClure, & Garthwait (2005) and Cooper (2001) to get some views about the categorization of books, format and setting .

Conclusion

We have discussed the contemporary nature of Bhutanese children's literature while asking question such as: Does the book reflect contemporary environment? Through our literature review of essays and books about children's literature in English, we have recommended numerous possibilities for Bhutanese authors to consider in order to follow or adapt the trends in contemporary children's books while blending in cultural aspects within the book as well. As mentioned at the outset of this article, Bhutanese children's literature is still at its infancy, thus the authors look forward to tracking its development as more is published. In future, we wish to see more children's

literature to strengthen reading culture, which in turn might stimulate more people to take up writing children's books.

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Conference Report of International Society for Bhutan Studies

Anden Drolet

The inaugural conference for the International Society for Bhutan Studies (ISBS) was held in Magdalen College of Oxford University in Oxford, England from January Eighth through January Tenth of 2019. With scholars and speakers from around the world, the conference's design and focus was to provide a ground for discourse between disparate scholars unified in their interest in the country of Bhutan. From the opening call to action by Sabina Alkire, the current head of the organization, the intention felt throughout the conference was one of continued generative work, and that this conference

was not something to exist in a vacuum but to be a springboard for future engagement. Unified by topic rather than discipline, the goal was to enable multiple ways of seeing and speaking about Bhutan to rise in the space of interchange. To that end, the conference was officially opened by the Honorable Former Prime Minister of Bhutan Dasho Tshering Tobgay. In his opening remarks, Tobgay implored all participants to view this time together as one of both auspiciousness as well as interdependence. Several examples of this auspiciousness could be seen in the date and location of the conference. The

start of the conference marked the 109th anniversary of the Treaty of Punakha between Great Britain and Bhutan and the location of Magdalen College was the university where his excellency, the Druk Gyalpo of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck studied.

Once initiated, the conference broke out into sessions held in the Grove Auditorium and the Summer Common Room, and two of the key themes of the keynote by the former Prime Minister were evident from the outset: the study of Bhutan is one of deep respect for the history of the country and the active analysis of the great changes occurring in the country. The conference's close attention to Bhutan allowed for analysis of specific intra-country migratory patterns and burial rituals while linguists traced the transformation and adaptation of regional languages, and geographers marked the resiliency of the country's response to earthquakes. The plenary session of the afternoon brought three venerable lamas of esteemed note, Dralop Rinpoche Sangay Dorji Lopen Gembo Dorji, and Lama Lotay Singay to describe in erudite clarity and skill three aspects of Bhutanese Buddhist practice: mandala as a form of construction, masked dances and religious chants. Each highlighted how deeply embedded practices of Vajrayana Buddhism serve to inform upon social and cultural outlooks. In an exchange of religious prayer, those

attending the conference were invited to the Evensong session of the Magdalen College Choir in the college chapel. This set the tone of the evening when the guests and notable members of the university joined for dinner in the great hall. President of the College Sir David Clary opened the dinner with a prayer and brief history of the college's notable royal affiliates, many of whom looked on from the oil paintings surrounding the hall. This history culminated in the first crowned monarch of the college, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, student of the college whose painting was positioned next to the president of Magdalen College at the time. The former Prime Minister ended the night by remarking about the warmth and hospitality of the host in "this crystalline palace" of knowledge and the space of convivial exchange.

The second day of the conference saw further investigation into rituals, development, governance, and Gross National Happiness (GNH). The highlight of the day was the evening lectures held in the Sheldonian Theatre. A site of great importance for Oxford University, the lectures began with opening remarks from Dr. Ralph Walker, former Chairman and Emeritus Fellow of Magdalen College, who introduced the Former Prime Minister for his talk titled, "Does Bhutan Matter? Stories from a Young Democracy." This talk served to orient those in attendance

to the unique history and aspects of the country. Spoken with pride and deep affection, the former prime minister elaborated on the history of the monarchy, the development of GNH, and the move towards a democracy brought about by the monarchy itself. Emphasizing the unique context of Bhutan, he spoke of how central the monarchs are as figures of moral identity as the nation moves forward in the 21st century. Following his talk, the former Prime Minister took some questions from the audience including a more detailed discussion of the nature of Bhutanese political parties that run not on ideological divisions but on the grounds of policy practice.

The second half of the session, the keynote lecture, started with an introduction from Professor Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, who welcomed Dasho Karma Ura to the stage. An alumnus of Oxford, Dasho Karma Ura is the President of the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. His lecture, “Development with Integrity: Bhutan’s Development and its Gross National Happiness Index”, built on the history provided by the former Prime Minister and delved into far greater detail on the creation of GNH survey, the nature of indicators, and how the categories are explained. Central to the argument was that measures like Gross Domestic Product fail to capture the experiences of

life to serve as a useful measure of success for the country. As such, the aggregation methods of GNH work to calculate both individual experiences and shared national success, and these serve to better align with the complexity of life. Concluding with a comparison of some of the changes seen in the country, Dasho Karma Ura noted how certain scores have risen and fallen, and where some of the causes might stem from. To provide further background, Dr. James Foster, instrumental in creating the algorithms to quantify GNH results, gave a short talk on the algorithmic structure of the multivariable index. Finally, Martine Durand, Chief Statistician of OECD came to provide a cross-cultural comparison with the European Union’s model of the Better Life Index. Following the closing discussion, the assembled conference attendees and discussants gathered in the Divinity School Main Hall for evening drinks and appetizers provided by the university.

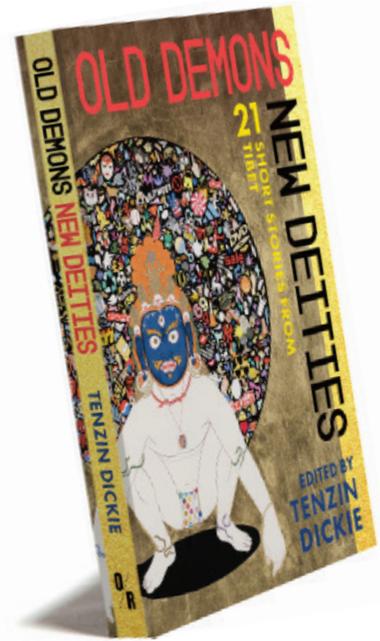
The third and final day of the conference brought more sessions on the social sciences and was a chance to gather the members of the conference to discuss the future of ISBS. The roundtable panel included Sabina Alkire, Dasho Karma Ura, Kuenga Wangmo, Françoise Pommaret, Venerable Lopen Gembo Dorji, and Seiji Kumagai. David Gellner and Roger Goodman started the session by comparing possible routes forward for the

organization based on their experiences with the Nepali and Japanese studies organizations respectively. Questions of focus, impact, and inclusion were the central themes of the roundtable. While the next conference date was debated in the roundtable, there was an agreement that more scholars from Bhutan need to be supported by the society. It was noted that the majority of scholarship on Bhutan is being published within journals of the natural sciences, yet there were almost no papers at the conference from the natural sciences, and outreach to other disciplines was a priority for future conferences. Along with conventional scholarship, the roundtable also proposed that further support of monastic scholarship and translation was needed. Following an afternoon session, the conference was formally closed by Sabina Alkire, who along with managing and troubleshooting this inaugural conference, is a key contributor to the country's GNH studies. In her concluding remarks, Alkire called upon all scholars to continue to strive for inclusion and collaboration and encouraged all to maintain these discussions until the next conference of the International Society for Bhutan Studies is convened.

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Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet. Tenzin Dickie (ed.)
New York & London: OR Books, 2017. 286
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Review by Eben Yonnetti



“You know how vampires have no reflections in the mirror? If you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves.” Quoting Junot Díaz’ provocative words, editor Tenzin Dickie introduces readers of *Old Demons, New Deities* to the precariously meagre state of Tibetan self-representation in modern literature. Like many Tibetans, both inside the People’s Republic of China and in exile, Dickie recalls a childhood when the available films and literature were largely devoid of relatable images of people like herself. Although emic religious texts and foreign works *about* Tibetans were numerous, who could a young Tibetan identify with in *Tintin in Tibet* or *The East is Red* (东方红)? Responding to this lacuna, the twenty-one short stories published in *Old Demons, New Deities*

mark an important step toward creating a body of modern Tibetan literature and a source for Tibetans searching for their own reflections.

Although Tibetan literary traditions have existed for over 1,400 years, modern literature in Tibet has only emerged in fits and starts. In the mid twentieth century, Dorjé Tharchin (1890-1976) published the first Tibetan language newspaper, *The Tibet Mirror* (*yul phyogs so so’i gсар ‘gyur me long*), which served as a literary vehicle for world news, modern science, and eventually Tibetan nationalist sentiments. Although disrupted by the People’s Liberation Army’s invasion of Tibet, the exodus of many prominent Tibetans, and the Cultural Revolution, modern Tibetan literary production was revived in the early 1980s largely through the work

of the Dhondup Gyal (1953-1985). His literary journals, *Tibetan Literature (Bod kyi rtsom rig rgyu rtsal)* and *Light Rain (sbang char)* and collection of poetry, *The Dawn of Clear and Simple Writing (bol rtsom zhogs pa'i skya rengs)*, paved the way for modern Tibetan language publications. It was Dhondup Gyal's poem "Waterfall of Youth" (*lang tsho'i rbab chu*), however, that ignited a flurry of Tibetan compositions in the post-Cultural Revolution period and inspired many of the authors featured in *Old Demons, New Deities*.

Today, Tibetan authors compose novels, poetry, and short stories in various Tibetan vernaculars, Chinese, English and other languages via numerous print and online outlets. Nevertheless, until recently there has not been much translated into English or published outside of South Asia. With the publication of *Old Demons, New Deities* a significant step has been made toward expanding the modern Tibetan literary world, and it is for this reason that it serves on a global scale as what editor Tenzin Dickie describes as "the coming out story of the Tibetan short story" (p. 7).

Some of the short stories contained within *Old Demons, New Deities* were composed in English, while others were translated from Tibetan and Chinese, mainly by the volume's editor and a few others. The sixteen contributors are some of today's

most prominent Tibetan authors: Pema Bhum, Woesser, Pema Tsenden, Jamyang Norbu, Tsering Dondrup, Bhuchung D. Sonam, Kyabchen Dedrol, Tsering Wangmo Dhomba, Tenzin Dorjee, Takbum Gyal, Tenzin Dickie, Dhondup Tashi Rekjong, Tsering Namgyal Khortsa, Pema Tsewang Shastri, Tenzin Tsundue, and Tsering Lama. The topics of their short stories are wide ranging, and they are set in widely disparate geographies. Indeed, if there is one strand that connects these stories, it is the phenomenal complexity of Tibetans' lives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Several of the stories deal with traditional Tibetan motifs, such as the interrelation of love, music, and dreams described in Pema Tsenden's "The Dream of a Wandering Minstrel" or nomadic life and the power of local deities Jamyang Norbu touches upon in "The Silence." Others depict Tibetan narratives from the recent past, such as Pema Bhum's satirical take on Communist officialdom around the time of Chairman Mao's death in "Wink" or a grizzled freedom fighter's impossible last stand in Jamyang Norbu's "Hunter's Moon." Nevertheless, the vast majority of the stories in *Old Demons, New Deities* reflect contemporary Tibetans' struggles, joys, and sorrows. Woesser's "Nyima Tsering's Tears," for example, highlights the uncertainty and sadness of a monk from Lhasa who is faced with an

exiled Tibetan's anguished protests while serving as a Party emissary to Norway. In Tsering Dondrup's "Valley of the Black Foxes," Sangye and Ludron's faith in the Communist government and hope in material 'progress' are reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's *Jurgis*, with the exception that their story concludes with a sober reckoning with the contemporary environmental destruction in Tibet.

Just as the book's cover art by contemporary Tibetan artist Tsherin Sherpa pushes boundaries in its transformation of traditional religious imagery, several of the short stories in *Old Demons, New Deities* push boundaries through exploring female sexuality, psychological trauma, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and other difficult topics. Kyabchen Dedrol's "Snow Pilgrimage" discloses the manifold emotions and sexuality of a young Tibetan sex worker swept up in the caterpillar fungus economy. Crossing south of the Himalayas, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's "Letter for Love" depicts the complex calculations around happiness, money, love, and family by Tibetan women in exile. All of these stories provide important glimpses into moments that are simultaneously the unique stories of individuals as well as a collective story of Tibetan identity in the early twenty-first century.

The short stories in *Old Demons, New Deities* give readers an honest and raw reflection of Tibetans as they navigate "the spaces between tradition and modernity, occupation and exile, the national and the personal" (p. 7). For Tibetan readers, Dickie hopes, the stories "examine and explain our heartbreak—the heartbreak of our occupation, our exile, our diaspora—and in doing so, they give us comfort, clarity, and a measure of belonging" (p. 7). Bringing together in English short stories from a diverse group of today's most influential Tibetan authors, *Old Demons, New Deities* truly stands out as a unique contribution to the burgeoning field of contemporary Tibetan literature. More than that, this volume generates vivid and complicated images of Tibetans in the twenty-first century and in doing so, contributes to the literary reflections of themselves available to Tibetans around the world today.

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