

Original Research Article

## Representation of Gender from Invisibility to Center: A Comparative Study of Karma Ura's *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* and Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma*

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**Abstract:** This study explores the evolution of gender representation in Bhutanese literature through a comparative analysis of Karma Ura's *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* (1995) and Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* (2005). Employing qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the paper uses feminist literary theory, particularly Butler's gender performativity, Hooks' critique of patriarchy, Spivak's subaltern theory, and Crenshaw's intersectionality, to interrogate the narratives. The findings reveal that Ura's male-centered text reflects entrenched patriarchal structures, rendering women largely invisible, while Choden's novel reclaims female agency and foregrounds women's voices. This research contributes to emerging scholarship on Bhutanese literature and gender, offering insights into the shifting sociocultural perceptions of gender roles in contemporary Bhutan and the role of literature in challenging entrenched norms.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender Representation, Feminist Literary Theory, Intersectionality, Bhutanese Literature, Female Agency.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a compelling medium that embodies and critiques social realities, effectively mirroring the intricacies of culture, societal structures, and gender roles. In Bhutan, while the foundational tenets of Buddhist philosophy advocate gender equality (Dewan, 2021), deep-rooted patriarchal norms persistently shape societal expectations and the portrayal of characters in literary works (Phuntsho, 2021). This inherent contradiction provides a rich backdrop for analyzing the evolution of gender representation in Bhutanese literature, a field that has only recently started to prioritize and explore female perspectives in meaningful ways.

This study undertakes a thorough comparative analysis of two significant works from Bhutanese literature: "The Hero with a Thousand Eyes," authored by Karma Ura in 1995, and "The Circle of Karma," written by Kunzang Choden in 2005. By examining these texts, the study aims to illustrate the marked transition in the depiction of women, who have historically occupied marginal roles within literature, evolving into central protagonists with agency and depth. This shift reflects changing societal attitudes and showcases the profound transformative power of literature as a tool for challenging entrenched norms and fostering social change. The representations found within these narratives inspire hope for a future that embraces greater gender equality, suggesting that literature can play a pivotal role in reshaping cultural perceptions and championing the voices of women in Bhutan.

The analysis emphasizes the significance of context in understanding literary pieces. As Bhutan undergoes transformation amid globalization and modernization, literature serves as both a reflection and a response to these shifts. The integration of traditional values with contemporary influences establishes a platform for writers to engage with gender

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issues and confront the prevailing status quo. Analyzing gender representation in Bhutanese literature reveals evolving depictions of women and contributes to broader discussions of identity, power, and autonomy in an evolving society. By prioritizing female voices and experiences, these narratives advocate for an inclusive literary canon that recognizes the diverse realities of Bhutanese women and encourages a re-evaluation of their roles in literature and society.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative textual analysis through the lens of feminist literary criticism. Through close reading and deconstruction, it examines narrative structures, character portrayals, and thematic elements to uncover gendered meanings. The analysis is grounded in feminist theoretical frameworks, specifically Butler's (1990/2021) theory of gender performativity, Hooks' (2000/2020) critique of patriarchal culture, Spivak's (1988/2022) concept of subaltern voices, and Crenshaw's (1991/2021) intersectionality framework. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects and challenges gender ideologies in Bhutanese society.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, introduced in her seminal posits that gender is not a fixed trait or an innate quality but a construct created through ongoing, repeated social performances. According to Butler, these performances encompass a range of behaviors, expressions, and societal expectations that individuals enact in accordance with perceived gender norms (Butler, 1990/2021). This perspective challenges traditional notions of gender as binary and encourages a broader understanding of identity as fluid and context-dependent.

Bell Hooks emphasizes the pervasive influence of patriarchy as a systemic force that shapes women's experiences and contributes to their subjugation across various cultures and communities. She argues for the critical need to reclaim female agency by empowering women to define their identities and experiences (Hooks, 2000/2020). Hooks advocates for a feminist movement that not only addresses gender inequity but also emphasizes the interconnectedness of race, class, and economy in the fight against oppression.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay, brings attention to the voices of subaltern groups, those marginalized by colonialism, globalization, and oppressive power structures (Spivak, 1988/2022). Spivak critiques dominant narratives that often silence these voices and stresses the importance of representation, emphasizing that without deliberate amplification of their experiences and perspectives, true social transformation remains unattainable.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how various social identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, do not operate independently. Instead, Crenshaw illustrates that the intersections of these identities can compound and intensify individuals' experiences of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991/2021). This idea has become a crucial analytical tool in social justice movements, highlighting the necessity of an inclusive approach considering the complexities of individuals' lived realities.

## 4. Contextual Background

Bhutanese society presents an interesting juxtaposition of legal progressiveness and deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. Legally, gender equality is recognized, with various laws enacted to ensure women's equal rights (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2020). However, despite these legal frameworks, traditional practices continue to significantly influence women's lives. Although Bhutan stands out in South Asia for relatively higher rates of female land ownership, this positive aspect does not translate into equitable opportunities across other critical domains, such as education, leadership, and public representation (Dema, 2021). For instance, women currently hold a mere 8.5% of parliamentary seats, indicating a substantial underrepresentation in political decision-making, and they occupy only a small fraction of senior positions within the civil service (Wangmo & Hutton, 2022).

The impact of modernization and globalization has often sparked shifts in gender roles and societal expectations, yet traditional norms continue to persist, especially within family structures and public life (Phuntsho, 2021). In many rural communities, for example, established patriarchal cultural practices such as "night hunting," a tradition involving men hunting at night, often with the expectation that it serves as a test of manhood, and rigid gender divisions in labor remain prominently entrenched (Dewan, 2021). These practices highlight the complex interplay between modern influences and long-standing traditions, creating a landscape where progress toward genuine gender equality is uneven and challenging.

Regarding cultural expression, Bhutanese literature in English is a relatively new development, gaining visibility and prominence since the 1990s (Penjore, 2019). Historically, this literary genre has been heavily dominated by male voices, thereby limiting the representation of women's experiences and perspectives. However, there has been a significant shift in recent decades, with female writers increasingly stepping into the spotlight and challenging the traditional narratives that have long prevailed. One notable figure in this movement is Kunzang Choden, whose pioneering literary work has been instrumental in centering women's experiences and stories in Bhutanese literature. This evolution in literature mirrors

broader societal debates in Bhutan about gender equality, cultural identity, and the complexities of modernity. As female voices continue to gain prominence, they contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the challenges and triumphs women face in contemporary Bhutanese society.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1. *Ura's Male-Centric Narrative*

"The Hero with a Thousand Eyes" intricately explores the life of Shingkar Lam, a male protagonist whose experiences mirror the profound socio-political transformations occurring in Bhutan. Throughout the narrative, women are positioned on the periphery, with their voices and lived experiences largely invisible. The characterization of female figures adheres closely to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, as articulated in her seminal work (1990/2021), which emphasizes how societal expectations inherently constrain and shape gender roles under the weight of patriarchal norms (Butler, 2021). Female characters in the novel are predominantly depicted as occupying domestic spheres or as objects of male desire. This is illustrated effectively through the protagonist's romantic relationships, which highlight the dynamics of love and affection and reinforce themes of male privilege and control (Ura, 1995, p. 214).

Ura's narrative weaves a tapestry that reflects the entrenched feudal values prevalent in mid-20th-century Bhutan, a time when male dominance was pervasive and largely unchallenged in both public arenas and private households. The story's conspicuous absence of female perspectives underscores a critical aspect of Bhutanese society during this period: the broader societal invisibility of women's experiences. This phenomenon aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of 'subaltern voices,' in which she defines them as the perspectives of marginalized groups frequently overlooked or suppressed within prevailing narratives (Spivak, 1988/2022). Consequently, "The Hero with a Thousand Eyes" serves as a poignant illustration of literature of omission; in this narrative, women remain confined to the shadows of male historical agency, their stories unwritten and their struggles unacknowledged, thus revealing the more profound implications of gender and power in Bhutan's history.

### 5.2. *Choden's Centering of Female Agency*

The Circle of Karma intricately explores the protagonist Tshomo's journey of self-discovery and her courageous resistance against the patriarchal constraints that confine her. Choden skillfully employs various narrative strategies that align with Bell Hooks' advocacy for female empowerment, as articulated in her influential works. Through flashbacks and personal reflections, Tshomo vividly articulates her struggles and aspirations, ultimately challenging the oppressive societal expectations placed upon her. She poignantly recalls, "When I was younger, my greatest wish was to be able to read and write... but my parents made me believe that as a woman, I did not qualify for such privileges" (Choden, 2005, p. 190). This statement encapsulates the gendered limitations that many women face, emphasizing the societal narrative that devalues women's educational pursuits.

Choden also critiques damaging androcentric cultural practices, exemplified by the deeply troubling custom of "night hunting," which not only objectifies women but also perpetuates cycles of violence and control. Male characters in the narrative rationalize this practice with the phrase, "This is a custom of our country" (Choden, 2005, p. 86), highlighting how tradition can often cloak exploitative behaviors in the guise of cultural norms. This rationalization underscores a broader commentary on how societal structures can normalize violence.

Through her portrayal of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and the dire lack of educational opportunities available to women, Choden exposes the pervasive inequalities that are prevalent in many societies, resonating with the findings of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which reported on such disparities (ADB, 2020). Tshomo's resilience and determined pursuit of education exemplify emerging forms of female agency.

The narrative resonates profoundly with Gayatri Spivak's concept of subaltern agency (Spivak, 1998/2022), particularly as articulated in her seminal essay. Tshomo's evolving voice disrupts the traditional patriarchal discourse, asserting a compelling counter-narrative that centers on female experiences and the complexities of womanhood.

Moreover, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991/2021) provides valuable insight into how Tshomo's experiences are compounded by multiple layers of marginalization, particularly as a rural, uneducated woman in a patriarchal society. Choden's work not only highlights the individual struggle of one woman but also aligns itself with contemporary feminist movements that aim to reclaim and amplify the voices of those who have been historically silenced or overlooked. Through this rich narrative tapestry, Choden invites readers to recognize the significance of diverse female experiences in the ongoing fight for gender equality.

## 6. FINDINGS

### 6.1 Transition in Gender Representation

The comparative analysis highlights a significant and transformative shift in Bhutanese literature, moving from a historical tendency to render women's experiences invisible to one that actively centers them in contemporary narratives. While the works of authors like Ura often reflect deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies that marginalize women's voices, Choden's writings represent a burgeoning feminist awareness that is taking hold within Bhutanese literary circles. This evolution in literary representation is not an isolated phenomenon; it parallels broader sociocultural transformations as Bhutan grapples with the complexities of modernization and the influences of globalization.

Choden's narrative intricately weaves together the stories of women across generations, shedding light on the evolving dynamics and the enduring challenges they face in a changing society. Her portrayal vividly illustrates the conflict between traditional values and modern realities, encapsulated in her poignant remark: "We are all pilgrims on earth, but the choices are not the same for all... what about a woman?" (Choden, 2005, p. 150). This statement invites readers to critically examine the persistent inequalities that continue to shape the lives of women, provoking a dialogue about the disparities in opportunities and societal expectations based on gender. Through her work, Choden illuminates women's struggles and encourages re-evaluating the narratives that have historically constrained and defined their societal roles.

### 6.2 Narrative Architecture and the Politics of Voice

The contrast in narrative voice significantly influences the depiction of women's agency in these novels. Karma Ura's first-person, male-centered narration inherently restricts female voices to marginal, often stereotypical roles, in which women exist primarily in relation to male desire or social obligation, with limited access to self-definition. In contrast, Kunzang Choden's third-person narrative, through Tshomo, empowers the protagonist to articulate her inner life, challenge societal norms, and assert her agency. This transformation in narrative voice from male-centered to female-centered mirrors a broader evolution in Bhutanese literature, wherein women's perspectives are no longer relegated to the periphery of patriarchal discourse. Instead, it drives the narrative forward.

### 6.3 Motifs: Gendered Space, Power, and Resistance

Thematically, the two novels engage with gender in sharply divergent manners. Ura's work centers on male-dominated spheres of statecraft, lineage, and elite court life, substantially omitting women's experiences. This exclusion symbolically reinforces the silencing of patriarchal voices. Conversely, Choden employs motifs such as the journey and flashbacks to illuminate female resilience and the quest for identity in the face of oppressive norms. The recurring references to "night hunting," domestic violence, and lack of education serve not only as thematic components but also as symbolic critiques of gender injustice. Consequently, the two texts embody contrasting thematic visions: one sustains androcentric privilege, while the other challenges it through narrative strategies that foreground women's struggles.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study explores a notable evolution in Bhutanese literature, particularly in the representation of gender. Traditionally, narratives have centered on male experiences and perspectives, but there is a discernible shift toward stories highlighting female agency and empowerment. This transformation reflects a broader cultural movement toward achieving gender equality in Bhutanese society. Nevertheless, the challenges that women in Bhutan continue to encounter, such as sociocultural barriers, economic disparities, and limited access to education, suggest that substantial progress remains to be made (ADB, 2020; Dema, 2021; Wangmo & Hutton, 2022).

By employing feminist literary theory as a lens for analysis, this paper contributes to the burgeoning discourse surrounding gender in literature within the Bhutanese context. It emphasizes the importance of ongoing academic inquiry and societal dialogue concerning these pressing issues, aiming to raise awareness and promote action.

Moreover, the temporal and cultural settings of these narratives illuminate shifting perceptions of gender across Bhutan's historical trajectory. While Ura's novel captures the persistence of patriarchal dominance in a transitional but insulated Bhutan, Choden's narrative reflects an emerging female consciousness shaped by modernizing forces and cross-cultural encounters, signaling new possibilities for gender discourse in Bhutanese literature. Amplifying these perspectives enriches the gender discourse in literature and pursues a fairer society.

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