



# Cultural Identity in Kunzang Choden's *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the theme of migration as depicted in Kunzang Choden's novelette, *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan*. The protagonist, Dawa, a stray dog, goes on a journey to the search for true knowledge and enlightenment from the epitomes of wisdom, a monk. What he finds is disturbing to him because the monks he admires not only do not speak Dzongkha, the native language of Bhutan, but instead speak Esperanto, an invented international language. This discovery thwarts Dawa's expectations and, through the story, provides poignant commentary on cultural identity in the eternal race for authenticity in a rapidly changing world. Migration to neighbouring countries such as India, Thailand, and Australia for studies means that students come back home with new insights and new cultures. When these people shift back into their native country, they bring with themselves an assimilated culture and identity. Sometimes such cultural fusion imposes and causes a disturbance to the conventional values and beliefs in Bhutan, thus making the cultural terrain very dynamic yet lopsided in this landlocked country. Such cultural change and tendency toward Westernization may have a devastating effect on the environment. Urbanization and globalization have opened the doors to pollution that destabilizes the pristine beauty of the Himalayan valley. Newer lifestyles and consumption patterns add to environmental degradation and disturb the ecological balance in the region. This forms the basis of the narrative through which contemporary readers may seek knowledge about, and understand better, the multifarious challenges Bhutan faces.

**Keywords:** Cultural transition, migration, spirituality, westernization

## Introduction

Kunzang Choden is among the most prominent Bhutanese writers and the first female English novelist to capture her country's oral traditions in English ever. Born in 1952 in central Bhutan, in the Bumthang province, she passed her childhood at a time of great transition, with Bhutan moving from self-imposed isolation to the path of modernization and socio-economic development. It is this interest in folklore, coupled with a concern that much of Bhutan's rich cultural heritage could be lost in this very transition, which motivated her to compile the folk tales of this remote Himalayan kingdom. In the novelette *Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan*, Choden poignantly captures an enlightening journey through the life of Dawa, a stray dog. Much like Dawa's journey, Bhutan itself has trodden from isolation to inclusion and integration with global cultures. It is through the experiences of Dawa that Choden reflects on changes happening within Bhutanese society and thereby brings out the resilience and adaptability needed to negotiate these transformations. The journey of Dawa runs parallel with that of Bhutan itself, evolving from a traditional, highly isolated society to a more and more Western- and modernity-influenced one. Resistance challenged the changeable conditions in his environment, and thus the transformation of Dawa to a spiritual being portrays resilience, adaptation, and the timeless need for spirituality amidst change in society. This parallel between personal and cultural development gives depth to the novel in conveying a sophisticated setting of Bhutan's altering landscape from the unlikely but extremely perceptive protagonist.

The representation of worlds-the canine and the human-are intertwined in the novelette. Most importantly, it starts with Dawa, who at first seems like a regular stray dog wandering around the capital city of Bhutan: Thimphu. As the film evolves, so does Dawa-in fact, dramatically-to become the leader of strays prowling in the city. He had been able to, through sweating and strategic manoeuvring, rise to that position that represents not only his struggles and aspirations but also those embedded in human society. The ascendancy of Dawa to power can be interpreted as a placeholder for most seemingly empty positions of power that reflect not the need for material worth but the aspirations that many contemporary beings have concerning worth and authority. Seen through Dawa's eyes, human society takes on a totally different view of things; grossly associated is the canine experience with most important power dynamics and structure of human society. His odyssey is that of power coupled with unavoidable morality associated with the quest, hence giving depth to the story as a socio-human commentary.

### **Cultural identity of Bhutan**

The very process of wandering of the hero through all the key Bhutanese cities, such as Paro, Thimphu, and later Bumthang, is typical of any picaresque narrative structured around episodes. Each new place exposes him to a different set of adversities, escapades, and social relationships that shape his character and shape his view toward life. This reveals a quest for spiritual enlightenment, which signals the inner and physical meandering that occurs in most picaresque novels. Other towns in which Dawa spent years portray social and cultural changes in Bhutan. The story vividly captures the tension between tradition and the invasion of modernity through its effects on the young generation. With the character of Phuntsho, Dawa turns to satire in his critique of fallen genuine monastic values; hence, he points out broader concerns in society about erosion of spiritual and ethical standards in the face of modernization. Environmental concerns regarding the condition of stray animals in cities are also foregrounded through the novel. In effect, Dawa's experiences drive home the point that "animals should be treated with empathy" and reflect the larger environmental concern of degeneration. His journey comments at great length on cultural shifts, contemporary environmental problems, and spiritual challenges that modern-day Bhutan faces. In that sense, the novel is relevant because it takes up contemporary dilemmas of society through the timeless medium of the picaresque tradition.

The story contrasts cultural exposure between Paro and Thimphu. Paro depicts a rather conservative lifestyle, while Thimphu is projected as a noisy, modern city. It uniquely fuses the monastic lives and religious rites of monks with a modern lifestyle, influenced by the West, which tries to meet the demands of the people in Bhutan and those from Western lands. This contrasts the dynamism of Bhutan's capital, depicting it as a centre of cultural fusion and development. Dampa's experience deeply enlightens Dampa, his friend in Thimphu about his background in Bhutanese culture. On his quest for wisdom, Dawa joins several groups of monks but falls out with them because of a language problem. The first group does not speak pure Dzongkha and so Dawa leaves them. The second group speaks a-version of English, Tibetan and Hindi. The third group includes young Bhutanese monks who have been brought up in Indian monasteries, speaking a mix of Dzongkha and Indian languages. For Dawa, this is "Esperanto," a mixture of the different languages that sounds like a single tongue. It has not been an experience of just the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of the monastic community but Dawa's journey toward enlightenment as well. As Choden recounts:

Dawa was disappointed again as the next group of monks he followed spoke a mixed language using Dzongkha, English, Tibetan, and Hindi. Suddenly, it clicked in his brain that perhaps this was what is called Esperanto, the combined language of all the languages in the world. (Choden 33)

Dawa has mentioned the language that modern monks use as "Esperanto," probably, he intends to say that they have deviated from the traditional use of Dzongkha. Esperanto, being an artificial language that aims at functioning as a universal second language, lends symbolization to globalization and cultural homogenization. Thus, linguistically, there is a suggestion of the loss of authenticity and a shift towards homogenized global culture. The adoption of a "universal" language for conversation by the monks is illustrative of adjusting to modern influences at the cost of their very cultural roots. Hybrid languages, like Esperanto, 'Dzonglish,' and 'Hindlish,' embody the juncture where globalization, cultural identity, and language dynamics meet. Dzonglish is a mixture of English and Dzongkha, symbolizing the invasion of modernization and globalization into cultural and linguistic traditionalism. Morley (2005) observes that the globalization of media has led to the dominance of English or hybridized English dialects like Hinglish and Singlish. He states that, dispersal of English into many regional forms might be "the inevitable price it pays for global hegemony." (Morley 30)

The initiative of the Ministry of Information and Communication of Bhutan to promote Dzonglish in 2008 may be mainly for enhancing communication in media, education, and administration, but subtly it also brings up the question of possible erosion of the rich cultural and linguistic identity preserved in Dzongkha. Hybrid languages ease communication and integration into a globalizing world but pose severe challenges to the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage at the same time.

The way Dawa engages with the language and cultural identity brings forth deeper problems of 'orientalism' and cultural dynamics. His search to learn what authentic Dzongkha is, to find a monk that really speaks the language, mostly emphasizes cultural preservation of Bhutanese culture. It symbolizes an effort toward protection from erosion of globalization and moving back to one's roots. It is thus about the need to retain cultural authenticity in the face of modernization and other threats, and in a word, it expresses a longing for the pristine character of traditional practices and values usually put into jeopardy by globalization. With the

increasing globalization, new languages, ideas, and practices converse into Bhutan. As Bhutan opens more to the rest of the world, there is naturally an inclination toward languages that can effectively communicate with all sorts of people, such as English. The impact of the internet, television, and other globally linked media could make the young favour modern languages over Dzongkha, which may have erosion of skills in traditional language.

Evaluating Origin and Edward Said's notion of Orientalism had serious implications on the perception of the East in most of Europe. Adopting a development approach as another way of imposing Western values and traditions has been seen with massive changes that have been happening within Bhutan lately due to the interference of the "Occident." Though British invasion or colonialism didn't reach Bhutan, the influence of the West or "Occident" has already been visible through internal and external changes brought by modernity, technology, trade, education, and governmental reforms. Since the intrusion of the internet and television into Bhutan, it has been exposed to world cultures, values, and ideas. However, connectivity to the internet has brought Western-style entertainment, news, and social media right into every Bhutanese home, and most certainly, this shall replace the old way of life and cultural orientations. The economic ties between Bhutan and India are very strong; most Western consumer goods, ideas, and practices find their way into Bhutan through Indian intermediaries. Most notably, Western business culture and ways are gradually making inroads into Bhutanese society. Dampa told Dawa that this is the current situation in Bhutan: although monks still use the dialect of Dzongkha, it is not in its pure form anymore. Their language has changed, as influenced by Western cultures and the waves of television. Reflecting bigger cultural tectonics of change, this mirrors a mixing of ancient and modern influences in the Bhutanese lifestyle. Dampa added that:

But there are monks everywhere. Oh yes, I forget to tell you, the monks used to speak the best Dzongkha, but not anymore. These days they are too exposed to and influenced by other cultures and languages. It's the impact of the TV, they say, and the monks do enjoy watching good deal of TV. (Choden 35)

The passage exemplifies cultural change within Bhutan's monastic community. Traditionally, the monks had been the custodians of the pure Dzongkha, but now they had been widely influenced by other cultures and languages. That happened very strongly because of television. The shift underlines the broader theme of cultural change and the blending of traditional and modern influences in Bhutanese society. The dominance of the English language over the native Dzongkha in Bhutan mirrors a global linguistic trend where English as an international lingua franca overshadows local languages. This could be since the institutionalization of English in major sectors such as education and the government has contributed to the decline of native Dzongkha, the national language.

### **Westernisation and environmental issues in Bhutan**

A great influence of foreign cultures and modernization on Bhutan's traditional societies can have a large effect on the monk's lifestyles and practices. A country obviously undergoes rapid changes socially and economically, and traditional practices may be tackled or adjusted to external influences within monastic communities. The encounter at the mountain temple, wherein old monk Phuntsho was present, took attention to a disquieting change in dynamics, which now obtains in Bhutanese monastic communities. His behaviour toward Dawa, an elderly and ailing dog, demonstrates a crude lack of compassion and kindness-principles so important in the core Buddhist teachings and the monastic way of life. "Phuntsho who was always eager for a chance to break the solemnity of his disciplined monastic life, immediately adjusted his shawl over his shoulders and picked up a stick twice his own height. Brand shining it in the air and shouting threatening at Dawa. "(104)

This representation, however, of the change of attitude toward animals among the monks is symptomatic of changes in the general society and culture of Bhutan, which have come through modernization, urbanization, and influences from outside. It underlines the importance of never losing sight of the foundation in upholding the integrity and moral authority of religious institutions as they change with time and circumstances, never losing core values central to Bhutanese identity. Kindness and compassion are core valued virtues deeply rooted within Bhutanese culture toward all living beings, including animals. However, suggesting differently in actions, the demeanour of the monk reflects changes that may be taking place in certain minds of the monastic community, making them possibly unyielding, critical, or self-centred. Introduction of this character into the book raises questions in the mind of the reader about the representation of the expected serious and controlled monastic life. Phuntsho's ability to break away from what is expected is because, within him, he has yearned for some sense of freedom, fun, or an experience from without that he has never had within the monastery. In a country where discipline and devotion are held in the highest regard, Phuntsho has an overall aura of light-heartedness and mischief in general. As such, his quest for thrills or a way to release pent-up urges may be either due to curiosity about the world on the other side of the monastery's walls or a quest to push the limits of his monastic expectations. Phuntsho, the only relation of Tashi, represents the duality of human nature and the never-ending conflict between spiritual enlightenment and earthly temptations.

Westernization and globalization bring new ideas, technologies, and lifestyles that sometimes oppose or alter traditional practices. This can be illustrated in monastic communities by changes in dress, behaviour, and perhaps even in the very interpretation devoid of spiritual teachings themselves. Sometimes the effect disturbs the steady flow of the environment immensely. A place like Bhutan, deeply bonded with nature disturbs the aura of the natural world. The Tang Valley appears to be a tranquil, heritage-bound, and richly interwoven area in everyday life where daily life moves closer to nature and tradition. The ways in which the rural farmers

interact with the land and show respect toward the natural elements manifest today in a deep affinity for the land and a sense of reverence for the natural elements, hence reflecting Bhutan's long-standing agrarian past. Even without telephones and electricity, villagers have shown a great deal of a capacity for communication and interpersonal relationships. It goes on proving the greatness in such rural communities where face-to-face interaction and personal touch are given more prominence to avail their necessities and maintain social relationships. Use of traditional kerosene lamps instead of any modern lighting options underlines the commitment of this valley towards sustainability and protection of the environment. In using smoke-reducing and environment-friendly methods, Tang River Valley residents display a deep reverence for their surroundings and firm commitment to ensuring that the natural beauty of their homeland is preserved in its purest form. The Tang River valley is symbolic both for tradition and harmony with nature; now, by contrast to modernization and technological progress, it draws attention to the preservation of cultural heritage and the necessity for ecological harmony in the contemporary age.

The road to Tang was rough, and the sharp, uneven stones hurt his paws so much that he had to take the old trail through the forest. There was no electricity, no elephants. But the people were resourceful; even without telephones they could communicate very effectively. And so far, electricity, the people thought it was a great step forward to be able to have light candles and kerosene lamps. The candles and kerosene lamps were less smoky. (Choden 95)

A poignant scene was where Dawa realizes the absence of the old dog, Molay, and tries to see his reflection in the now-polluted river water—it's a strong metaphor for Bhutan's changing landscape and her environmental fate. Its attractive beauty, defined by crystal clear rivers, green forests, and gigantic mountains, has been one of the reasons to invoke awe and reverence to people living and visiting Bhutan. The reverse, however, is the case as rapid urbanization, industrialization, and human activities have resulted in pollution, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss. Dawa reached the place only to find the once blue, crystal water pond pervaded with plastic bags of different sizes and colours hanged over the plants and bushes along the bank. Old shoes, empty plastic containers, and a lot of plastic bags floated up to the surface of the water, blocking his reflection in it. He carefully collected the wastes: empty bags of Maggi, Wai Wai, empty Dalda, a half shoe, two empty mountain spring water bottles, and a packet of Amul Taaza milk. The fact that Amul Taaza milk, a popular Indian brand of milk, is over here reflects what kind of Indian cultural influence and commerce comes to Bhutanese society. The case is the same with the major dairy cooperative in India, Amul. Included here are the establishments or operations that involve the influence of Indian culture and lifestyle on Bhutan. As two neighbouring countries with the same cultural origin and strong diplomatic relations between each other, India and Bhutan have long communicated with and influenced each other. While this inflow of Indian products and brands, like Amul Taaza milk, would certainly offer more choices to consumers and be positive for economic growth, it also definitely raises some questions in many minds about globalization and its impact on local industries and cultural identity. The polluted river, with our rejected items like old shoes, plastic containers, or garbage bags, serves as a grave reminder to conserve the environment and ardently work for sustainable development in Bhutan. It mirrors civilization's destructive impact on the country's natural resources and the need to protect its ecological integrity for subsequent generations.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud speaks of his two-faced civilization, the one face that bestows benefits due to security, proper order, and cultural achievements, and the other that engenders frustration and plain unhappiness due to the same, because of the restraint of instinctual drives. (Freud 1929) Dawa's inability to see himself in the polluted water is a symbol of a loss of touch with nature and abjection from the former cleanliness and beauty of Bhutan. The image is a stark warm reminder of the consequences of unchecked development and the urgent need for environmental stewardship and protection. The description of Paro village, under huge development when it is gazed upon, reflects a common trend in most places undergoing modernization and urbanization. As traditional villages shift to bustling towns, they envision changes to infrastructure, transportation facilities, and population dynamics. "In his absence, Paro had developed and grown. Dawa saw that there were many more cars on the road, a big mechanical workshop just across the road, and houses everywhere he looked." (Choden 127)

### **Conclusion**

The Dzongkha language takes a hybrid form along with others like Esperanto, which combines different languages together. One such example would be 'Dzonglish,' a combination of Dzongkha and English, evidencing the hues of changing globalization and cultural exchange in modern pragmatic linguistic trends in the landlocked kingdom of Bhutan. The example of Paro in its peak development stage illustrates the extent to which the phenomenon of urbanization and modernization itself is intricate in Bhutan, as in any other nation going through such a change. These changes improve living standards and economic opportunities yet create challenges for the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring environmental sustainability, and social cohesion in rapidly changing communities. It has been badly affected by rapid environmental changes. The bluish-green waters of the rivers have also become polluted. Deforestation and urbanization are major hazards at present faced by the community. Another important feature is the changing identity of the indigenous monks, which in turn reshapes the portrayal of community cultural heritage and uniqueness of the country. The cultural identity of the nation is changing rapidly day by day. Most of the people's mindsets have also been changed by



the mix of Western and other foreign influences. Technology and internet use, extended much during the COVID-19 pandemic, have transformed the country into a modern society. Thus, the novelette embodies the cultural identity change of Bhutan with the help of a stray dog as the central protagonist, Dawa. The story of his journey from the far rural area of Paro to the capital city, Thimphu, relates to the cultural transition underway in Bhutan.

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