



Exploring Eco-consciousness in Bhutanese Folktales: A Study of Ecotherapy in Selected Tales from Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan*

Priyanka Kalita^{1*} and Rupam Kr. Das²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English
Tangla College
Tangla, Assam, India

priyanka.kalita91@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication
Assam Don Bosco University
Guwahati, Assam, India
nibirrup@gmail.com

Abstract

Folktales usually serve as a vital bridge between societies and their cultural histories, as they embody the rich cultural heritage and values of a particular region. Many folktales encompass ecological and therapeutic dimensions to generate awareness of the inevitability of environmental preservation. In Bhutan, folkloric traditions try to situate the cultural memory and play an instructional role in order to guide the upcoming generations towards a harmonious existence with nature. Bhutanese folktales imbibe the country's unique environmental values and underline the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Most of the tales uplift the importance of nature and attribute spiritual vitality to the natural world. In these folktales, nature is perceived as a spiritual force that offers discipline for distorted existence.

Kunzang Choden, the prominent Bhutanese author, strives to collect and retell the fragmented folktales in circulation in Bhutan in her collection, *Folktales of Bhutan (1994)*. These tales lend access to the Bhutanese lifestyle and ecological ethics and try to foster respect for and preservation of nature by sustaining environmental consciousness within Bhutanese society. This paper examines selected tales from Choden's masterpiece, *Folktales of Bhutan (1994)*, to explore how ecological awareness is transmitted through folklore with special attention to ecotherapeutic dimensions present in these narratives. By analysing the depiction of the human-nature relationship, this study offers a fresh perspective on Bhutanese folktales and highlights their role in promoting both eco-consciousness and psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Folktales, Nature, Eco-consciousness, Ecotherapy, Bhutan*

1. Introduction

Folktales are integral to any culture, as they reflect the behaviour and way of life of the people of the region. They are intrinsically connected to the sentiments of the region to which they belong. Since time immemorial, through the medium of oral literature, folktales have served to communicate and pass down the

collective wisdom of the community. As a result of this oral transmission, several traditions, values and knowledge got disseminated and recorded. It becomes a means of education as folktales entail moral lessons which help readers to take home values like goodness and integrity. Folktales have at their disposal a reservoir of knowledge which shapes cultural and ecological views and perceptions. Practices and habits integral to a particular culture get reflected through the stories, which give access to the traditional ways of living. Folktales transmit a society's perception of nature and its preservation. It also shapes cultural identities by reflecting the collective habits and practices unique to its region, thereby ensuring the continuation of cultural legacies. Eminent critic Alan Dundes (1980) defines, "...folklore is only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs, of the folk, of the people..." (p. 72).[1] It enhances the transgenerational bond by establishing a cordial connection between the present and the cultural past. It serves to warn the new generation about the dangers and fears that might pose a threat. Although in the modern world, literary ventures and various archives strive to preserve folktales, in early times, wandering minstrels, *sadhus*, and *fakirs* were the primary sources of disseminating folktales. Several folktales are also transmitted from generation to generation in the form of word of mouth. Elders or grandparents use the folklore to imbibe lessons of cultural history and inculcate moral values in their grandchildren. They serve as repositories of folktales.

Bhutan is endowed with a plethora of forms of oral literature. Though it is primarily the religious texts which define Bhutanese literature, the oral literature of Bhutan holds immense significance. The oral traditions and folktales of Bhutan become a source of knowledge as well as a set of instructions for its residents. It serves as a means of communication for people of different generations. "The oral tradition is a powerful living medium of communication between one generation and the next." (Choden, 1994, p. iii)[2] Folktales are like mirrors of a society, as they reflect the way of living of people of different ages. Most children extract knowledge and learning from the folktales narrated to them by elders. As such, the preaching embodied in these folktales serves as aid for the people of Bhutan to lead a pragmatic and happy life. The importance of nature is one such domain which is manifested in Bhutanese folktales. The significance of preserving nature is religiously maintained in Bhutanese society. Such lessons are prescribed in their folk literature for readers to implement and follow. A sense of eco-consciousness is generated in the stories from the way the tales attempt to raise awareness among the people of Bhutan on how one's actions can affect and impact the environment. The affinity of humans towards nature is an essential reality that has been rightfully established in these tales.

Surrounded by rugged terrains and paradisiacal landscapes, Bhutan is broadly divided into three ecological zones. Over 90% of the population, who are involved in farming and closely connected to the ecology, reside there. Bhutanese are ardent followers of Buddhist values who wholeheartedly uphold traditional and ancestral virtues. Bhutanese society mediates between tradition and a modernist outlook by achieving a proper balance between the two. This is evident not only in their lifestyles but also in the government policies. The concern towards environmental preservation is evident from the fact that Bhutan's tourism was only recently promoted to protect the natural and cultural heritage from external forces. "Bhutan was opened to tourism in 1974. Although tourism brings in much-needed currency, it is restricted. The lack of infrastructure and tourist facilities as well as Bhutan's efforts to preserve her natural and cultural heritage is the main reasons for the restrictions." (Choden, 1994, p. vii)[2]

Kunzang Choden, the flag bearer of Bhutanese literature, aspires to collect the fragmented folktales in circulation and preserve Bhutan's rich folktales by sharing the nation's cultural values with a global audience through storytelling. Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* (1994) is a rich collection of unique and versatile stories revolving around Bhutanese beliefs. The essence of her folktales restores the unique blend of folk

conventions and oral stylistic traditions. She gives expression to the oral stories of her childhood and tries to preserve them for eternity in the form of words. Most of her folktales carry ethical values that would serve as prescriptions for later generations. Choden's folktales not only possess entertainment value but also set instructions for humans to co-exist with nature.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To explore how ecological awareness is transmitted through folklore.
2. To analyse how Bhutanese folktales reflect and anticipate core concepts of modern ecotherapy.
3. To read nature as an agent of healing and restoration in the selected folktales.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative analysis to examine the folktales in Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* as evidence of ecotherapeutic themes and principles. It also employed textual analysis to examine how environmental consciousness is generated through her tales. The primary text for analysis is *Folktales of Bhutan* by Kunzang Choden. Secondary materials include scholarly works on Bhutanese folklore, ecological studies, and eco-therapeutic strategies.

4. Discussion

Before the advent of Western education in Bhutan, the informal mode of education through folktales was of enormous significance. Although monastic education was included in the Bhutanese education system, it served only a specific audience and had several limitations. Unlike the monastic education system and the modern education that preferred the privileged few, folk narratives were accessible to all sections of society, irrespective of their class, caste and gender. The folktales had a wider reach and popularity among the Bhutanese people. It enables the citizens to imbibe moral values and be responsible citizens. "Modern education may succeed in creating an efficient machine out of man for the market, but in creating value-based, socially responsible and civil individuals, oral tradition plays an important role." (Penjore, 2005, p.262)[3]

Popular Bhutanese folktales such as "Meme Haylay Haylay and his Turquoise", "The Legends of Migoi", "The Story of Wangdue Phodrang's Bridge" etc. are some of the prominent folktales which aim to instil these values and principles in the ways of life of Bhutanese people. These narratives are endowed with Buddhist values and wisdom, which have shaped the cultural ethos of the region. Even though modernity has somewhat diminished the prominence of folktales, the Bhutanese lifestyle still clearly recognizes their relevance. These Bhutanese folktales are profoundly ingrained with Bhutanese philosophies and virtues of goodness. The stories are filled with instances that generate a sense of eco-consciousness among the audience. Eco-consciousness is a state of awareness of the importance of nature and its preservation. It is the psychological state of being mindful of the fact that human action can impact nature. "...ecological consciousness is understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which

mediate its behaviour in the "natural world", and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world." (Panov, 2013, p. 380) [4]

Bhutanese folktales inform readers about the various aspects of nature and how it significantly shapes human life. Awareness of eco-consciousness is generated from the crux of the tales in order to inform the readers about the inevitable role of the environment. It shows how the interaction with nature endorses psychological healing and well-being. The stories examine specific paradigms closely related to the concept of ecotherapy. The prevalence of an eco-therapeutic dimension in the folktales is evident from the way personal plights are healed through human-animal relationships, or maybe the way nature is depicted as a spiritual force and protector. The amiable correlation between human and animal leads to amelioration of distress and suffering. Stories such as "The Man Who Was Saved by a Dragon" and "The Ani and the Migoi" show the various manifestations of nature as an embodiment of spiritual force or protector. Similarly, stories such as "Tsongpon Dawa Zangpo", "The Hoopoe", and "The Shepherd" show how compassion towards nature can restore harmony and peace in one's life.

Ecotherapy is a new field of study that is widely considered an integral component of ecopsychology. It explores the bond between human and animal, nature, place, wild ocean, moon, planets, snakes etc. The term "ecotherapy" was coined by Clinebell (1996) to define it as a form of healing which is attained by immersion in nature. It has been defined as "experiences in the natural environment that have been therapeutic" (p. 31) [5]. The process of healing while being embraced by nature encourages individuals to conserve the Earth. This intense ability of interaction with nature would lead to healing, growth and an understanding of nature's significance. Ecotherapy is also grounded in the Buddhist principles in which the relationship between person and environment is focused. The Buddhist understanding of mental conditioning becomes the base of ecotherapy, where nature offers a therapeutic healing. Choden's folktales of Bhutan mostly plunge into the correlation of human and environment within a spiritual milieu. This relationship between humans and nature is often established as spiritually and culturally rejuvenating. Her collection is a testimony to the way the tales present an understanding of ecological interdependence that remarkably aligns with contemporary ecotherapeutic principles. For instance, the protagonist of the tale "The Shepherd" transforms as a result of his connection with a lake. He rescues the son of the Lu king and is rewarded with a magical dog that transforms into a beautiful woman. The lake's restorative qualities denote nature's intervention in endowing his life with value. He "loved to sit and gaze at the lake to see the fish swishing about in the water, the animals that came to drink from it, or simply to watch the waves and the ripples that danced and played in an endless game" (Choden, 1994, p. 22) [2].

Kunzang Choden's folktales are from a diverse range, consisting of beast fables, legends of spirits, heroic adventures, and ghost stories. Her stories instil passion and concern for nature. Stories like "Acho La La" use nature to generate emotions. In hours of distress, the seeds were transformed into huge trees to protect and safeguard the young girl from the *sinpo*, the huge field of bamboo sprang up to help the girl. Even the moon saved and protected her from whispers of danger. Nature itself serves as a character that imparts wisdom and reminds the readers about the humble ways of living. She lends voice to the various objects of nature, such as trees, stones, leaves, and the moon, thereby allowing them to be empathetic. Her stories mostly evoke an emotional paradigm to assess the co-existence of humans and nature. Human's reliance on natural elements for survival and guidance finds expression in this story. The girl found comfort and protection by engaging with these objects of nature. Eco-therapeutic expression is evident from the way this connection between the girl and nature fosters mental balance and emotional healing for her. Noorlila Ahmad and his fellow thinkers of ecotherapy comment, "Nature has created a rehabilitation process within itself that has the innate power to heal people from emotional disturbances." (Ahmad et al., 2014, p. 560) [6]

In these folktales, nature serves as a functional and restorative force, which offers therapeutic healing through engagement with the outdoors. In Choden's delineations, nature does not play a mere passive role; instead, it appears as a mechanism of healing ailing hearts. Nature instilled goodness and a humble mindset in the characters. This has been observed in the story "Tsongpon Dawa Zangpo", where the protagonist saved a dog, a monkey and rescued a fish. Before saving the fish, he was engrossed by the mesmerising view of the lake, which instilled beauty in his mind and filled him with benevolence (Choden, 1994, p. 22) [2]. Nature provided him a pensive reflection which uplifted him from his present state of mind. Magical bliss is shown to have been attained through ecological inclination. It is his kindness to animals which made him receive help in return. This story serves as a reminder that compassion towards other beings can restore balance and harmony in life. Similarly, in the tale "The Hoopoe", nature serves to be a hope for resilience, as it is nature which consoles the ailing heart of the hoopoe bird who mourns his wife's death. "The mountains are the home of the gods, They are sacred and clean" (Choden, 1994, p. 196) [2]. The feeling of woe, remorse and disgust is pacified in the arms of nature. The bird mourns his wife's death and carries her dead body across rivers, forests, and mountains. The reliance on nature during emotional crises evokes its therapeutic influence. Nature serves to be his best companion to share his grief. Nature's incredible impact on human life can be brilliantly derived from these stories. In the process, urgency appears to have been raised to uphold environmental integrity and protect the planet.

Most of the stories take the form of beast fables, as the animals act as companions who facilitate healing and personal transformation. Animals in many of these tales are considered companions who help in healing and attaining personal growth. Such benevolent aspirations of the animals towards humans are embedded in the tales. The story "The Adventure of the Poor Boy" testifies how animals can serve as healing agents for a poor boy. The monkey, dog and cat help the boy in recovering his stolen magical objects. These animals were once rescued by the boy and therefore, the animals engineered a plan to restore his fortune in order to repay the favour. This story upholds animal-assisted therapy as the animals are seen providing emotional solace and therapeutic support at the hour of distress. Such animal-assisted healing has been the subject of expression in the stories of Choden, such as "The Boys Who Went to Buy Cows". Here, animals are shown as not mere commodities but also ecological agents central to survival and prosperity. It serves as a reminder that humans must use the resources wisely and not exploit them. After rescuing the eyes of the blind couple, he was rewarded with the golden horn, which would attract all the cattle. The young milking *jetsam* restored his life by licking the ashes and sneezing them out, allowing him to be reborn. The animal rewarded him with a new life for his benevolence.

Again, the story of "The Ani and the Migoi" entails the transformative power that nature encompasses. The nun who abandoned the worldly pleasures to meditate in nature's company gains spiritual awakening. "After the first nine months of sheer loneliness, she suddenly began to experience blissful tranquility. She then no longer felt the pangs of hunger... Her mind was at peace and she radiated peace and tranquillity" (Choden, 1994, p. 197) [2]. The remote natural setting facilitates the comfort and healing which contemporary ecotherapy seeks to achieve. She abandons every external intruder to be in nature's lap. This story manifests the assertion that nature should attain the supreme space.

Similarly, "The Cuckoo and the Frog" portrays the breakdown of a relationship between species due to the frog's failure to appreciate the cuckoo's essential nature. After the frog publicly ridicules and humiliates the cuckoo, she declares, "The water has been defiled with your lowly presence. I shall not drink it even if I have to die of thirst" (Choden, 1994, p.33) [2]. This permanent separation reflects how disrespect for natural relationships can lead to ecological and psychological fragmentation. Self-respect is important to retain even

ecological balance and a failure of which might lead to psychological fragmentation and ecological degradation.

The folktales reveal the motivational role that nature embodies. Nature can also act as a driving force to initiate purpose, action and meaning in one's life. In the story "Lame Monkey", the lazy and indolent boy spends time in fields, nature and crops. He gradually learns farming and was ecstatic to see fruits bearing in his cultivated field. "...he was happy when the maize field was full of tall plants with rich big cobs, full of the promise of a rich harvest." (Choden, 1994, p. 119)[2] He was immensely motivated by the fruits of nature, which led him to find purpose in life. It was his hard work in nature's supervision that added meaning to life.

The sense of ecological awareness is also raised in other texts of Choden apart from the *Folktales of Bhutan*. In the *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* [7], she underscores the perception of the yeti from a different perspective. The image of the yeti in Western conception embodies negativity and pessimism. However, Choden, in her selected tales of Yeti, sees them as protectors of the forest. Yetis can also be seen as keepers of moral order. Some are regarded as allies of humans, who are the friendly ally, a spiritual friend, and protector of the realm. The story "The Unintentional Trap" portrays the *migo* as the protector of the forest but a harmless creature. Though Tikchung encountered the *migo* at close proximity while it was cutting trees, the creature displayed restraint and warned him of the consequence of exploiting nature. Since Tikchung helped the *migo* by freeing its trapped paws from the crack in the log, the *migo* showed gratitude by trying to bond with him. However, initially he appeared to remind humans to conserve nature and protect it. The folktales also depict the yeti as the realm's guardian, punishing anyone who dares to intrude. They can be perceived as supporters of ecological preservation. Perhaps the ancestors projected the myth of the *migo*'s existence in order to restrict the intruders from entering and ruining the forest.

The inclination of the people of Bhutan towards eco-consciousness is also evident from the belief system which is prevalent in the Bhutanese society. Those who defy nature are thought to bring doom to themselves and their families. The documentary named "Mountain Man," which is the first-ever movie from Bhutan to be nominated for an Oscar in 2025, registers the journey of the glaciologist, Phuntsho Tshering, to the sacred mountains. Except for him, no one is allowed to touch the sacred mountains or rivers. It is believed that the Snow Lion, a mythical animal, resides in the mountains that protect the mountains. These sacred mountains and rivers are made for deities and not humans. Therefore, anyone touching the mountain will anger the Snow Lion and call for a flood and a bad harvest. Bhutanese people's close proximity with nature exhibits their deep urge to safeguard and protect nature from exploitation and depletion.

5. Conclusion

Thus, Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* can be considered as a comprehensive set of prescriptive stories which celebrate the therapeutic camaraderie between nature and human world. It is this relationship which anticipates ecotherapy principles which is evoked in these compiled tales. These traditional narratives demonstrate the harmony and co-existence that prevail in the Bhutanese society. Bhutanese folktales are unique because they accept the existence of other beings and the realisation of sharing the world with them. The environment is shared by all other species who must reside in harmony for peace and sanctity to prevail, and this has been maintained in Bhutanese folktales. It shows how stories can hold valuable knowledge about nature and healing by providing ways to understand recovery that come from respectful and mutual connections with the environment.

The analysis reveals that Bhutanese folktales consistently portray nature as an active therapeutic agent which is capable of facilitating psychological transformation, spiritual growth, and practical problem-solving. The tales also raise awakening on the dreadful impact of psychological detachment from nature. Urgency is aroused in these tales to highlight the importance of retaining ecological consciousness to lead a psychologically healthy life.

Thus, these stories strive to transmit therapeutic wisdom across various generations to uphold the healing properties which nature can cultivate in human mind. In an era of increasing environmental crisis and mental health challenges, returning to these traditional sources of ecological and therapeutic knowledge may be essential for developing sustainable approaches to individual and collective well-being. Choden's stories serve as a means to raise awareness of the importance of nature and its preservation. It further attempts to promote eco-consciousness among the readers to protect and safeguard the environment. Eco-consciousness is generated by the way the tales advocate for and endorse nature as a tool of healing and therapy. Readers are hence enabled to access the therapeutic wisdom the folktales contain by keeping stories alive. These collections or repositories of traditional folktales will definitely ensure that future generations can benefit from the ecological and psychological insights embedded in traditional narratives.

References

- [1] Dundes, A. (1980). *Interpreting Folklore*. Indiana University Press.
- [2] Choden, Kunzang (1994). *Folktales of Bhutan*. White Lotus Co.
- [3] Penjore, D. (2005). Folktales and education: The role of Bhutanese folktales in value transmission. In *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness* (pp. 258–277). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- [4] Panov, V. I. (2013). Ecological thinking, consciousness, responsibility. In *V Congress of Russian Psychological Society* (Vol. 86, pp. 379–383). *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.583>
- [5] Clinebell H. J. (1996). *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- [6] Ahmad, N., Rahman, M. A., & Yusuf, S. (2024). Nature connectedness: An investigation into alleviating emotional disturbances among university students. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(3), 559–575. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2024.803041>
- [7] Choden, Kunzang (2013). *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti*. Progen Trading Co.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

