

SHORT STORY

P a t e n t M e d i c i n e

FAKIRMOHAN SENAPATI, (translated and adapted from Oriya by J. M.)

I was the strict order of the mistress that the master should not step outside the house even during the day -- never mind the night. 'Whatever you have to do, do it inside the house. Absolutely no setting foot outside the door!' However, the pathetic entreaties of the master made her issue a new order -- that only for a quarter of an hour could he take a short morning walk in front of the house. He was warned to keep close to it, so an eye could be kept on him through the chinks in the door.

Early at seven, Babu Chandramani Patnaik was taking his stroll when he noticed a man standing some distance away, beckoning to him with his hand. The master looked at him intently, 'Ah! the same youth from Bhadrak! Casting surreptitious glances all the while at his door, he walked towards him. When he reached the youth, he turned to face the door and at the same time extended his left hand behind him. The youth shoved a letter into the master's outstretched palm, then strode away. The master walked back to the house and looked closely at the door. Reassured, he scanned the letter hurriedly, then tore it to pieces and scattered them.

He walked inside and called out in his most artful voice, 'My dear! Just a moment!' In answer, a strident voice was heard, 'Oho! Why this ardor all of a sudden? What's the matter?' He replied, 'Do you know that for the last four days I have been having terrible pains in my stomach? My whole body feels faint!'

The mistress was curious. She asked, 'Here now, what new trick is this? It must be the liquor and opium! Every known disease in the world has taken root in your body! Your job's gone, the money squandered! Four months under my constant care has made you somewhat healthier, when I put an end to your drinking. And now you're up to your old tricks once again!'

Chandramani babu put in, 'No, dear, it's not what you think. This morning I met the astrologer Madhabacharya. He said that the stars are definitely against me. But if I were to perform some sort of penance my bad luck would disappear.'

'What penance did he suggest?'

'For three full days,' Chandramani babu went on, 'I should visit every shrine of Lord Shiva at Bhubaneswar, Khandagiri and Udayagiri. I should give money to the Brahmin priests. They could offer a hundred pitchers to the Lord--oh no, a thousand perhaps! And then never again would I be addicted to this intoxicating stuff!'

The mistress looked doubtful. She said, 'If the astrologer came this morning, how is it I didn't know?'

The master hastily answered, 'Actually, it was his son who came.'

'Son! Since when did he have a son?'

'No! it wasn't his son. He sent word through his servant.'

The mistress knew in her heart that he was lying. For three days he would only leave the house to be drunk somewhere or visit some shoddy whorehouse in Telenga Bazaar. 'And with what trouble I had brought him a little to his senses!' Aloud, she said, 'No! You are not going to Bhubaneswar or anywhere!'

Somewhat subdued, Chandramani babu answered meekly, 'You're right, what would I do for three long days? But, look, allow me to worship the Lord Shiva at Dhabaleswar so I can return by sunset.'

'No! you're not going there either!'

'Well, then, give me a few rupees. I'll perform puja at every temple of the Lord's here in town.'

'In that case,' the mistress said, 'ask Makra to call for a horse carriage. The two of us can go to the temples together.'

Chandramani babu thought a while. Suddenly a brilliant idea struck him. 'My dear,' he exclaimed, 'you know I feel weak, and perhaps I shouldn't go roaming around town. The astrologer also advised me to meditate on the Lord Shiva.'

'What sort of meditation?'

'He said that from morning till about ten in the night, I should cover myself in a blanket and lie stretched out on the floor. With only the

gods in my mind; nothing else.'

'Then will the ill fortune vanish?'

Chandramani babu sensed that his words were beginning to have some effect. He added, 'Certainly, that's what the astrologer said. He said that I should keep ten rupees under my pillow for offerings and the Brahmin priests later.'

'Won't you eat anything today, then?'

'Ram! Ram! Who touches food when he meditates?'

The mistress sighed and said, 'Then you better begin your penance!'

'One other thing,' he went on, 'this penance has to be performed in some holy place. It is impure here. The house smells of cooked fish. The small room adjoining the outer guesthouse seems right. But beware! If even the shadow of a woman falls inside this room, my penance will be ruined.'

The mistress, distressed as she thought of what he had to



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undergo, went inside. At that moment the Brahmin cook enquired, 'Mistress, what do I cook for the midday meal?'

'The master is on a fast for the whole day; how can I take any food? No cooking at all for us.'

The cook smiled knowingly and left. He thought, 'Our mistress is a strange woman. When the master is ill, she nurses him all day without touching a morsel of food herself. But when she's angry with him, she doesn't hesitate to strike him with anything she can lay her hands on! But she's a good soul. Just a little bad-tempered, that's all.'

The master called the servant boy aside and whispered, 'Makra, cover yourself in this blanket and lie quietly in the small guestroom. I'll be back at midnight. Remember! You're not to stir out from there.'

'Master, mistress will be furious. She'll give me a severe whipping! Chandramani babu lost his temper and shouted, 'Rogue! Scoundrel! You dare disobey me! I'll thrash the wits out of you!'

Makra didn't protest any more. He covered himself in the blanket and lay down in the room.

But there was no joy in the mistress's heart. She spread a small rug on the floor of her bedroom and sat down, and started praying to all the gods to ward off the evil stars that had befallen the master. 'O Goddess Cuttack Chandi! O Goddess Mother of Kali Gali!' she wailed. 'I promise you both two black saris, and two goats for sacrifice, as soon as the master gets well.' She restlessly paced her room. Suddenly the thought struck her -- what would he have after he ended the fast? Fruits, of course. She kept bananas, slivers of fresh coconut, cheese and milk ready for him. When darkness began to fall, she warily approached the guestroom. She remembered the master's warning -- that a woman's shadow should not fall anywhere near the room. She looked around: the sun had gone down, there was no shadow! She pushed the door open a little. It was dark; and there inside, the master lay on the floor, deep in penance. 'Oh Mother Kali the Great! How he must be suffering!' she said to herself, touching her forehead on the floor.

Then, as stepped inside, her foot landed right on the master's head. She jumped back, folded her hands in remorse and silently begged forgiveness of him. She peered into the dark and cautiously took another step. And as she bowed low to touch both the master's feet with her head again, it seemed to her as though the entire shape beneath the blanket was trembling. She touched the feet, which were very sweaty. She dabbed it dry with her own sari and proceeded to his face, 'But what in heavens was this! Where was the master's moustache?' She groped around again, but the skin was absolutely smooth. Her suspicions aroused, she opened the door wide and flung the blanket away. She raged, 'You wretch! Scoundrel! What are you doing here?' What could Makra say? He stood shaking in fright as the mistress thundered on and on. Then she thought, 'No, it's no use creating a scene. I must get to the truth.' So she cajoled him, saying, 'Makra, don't you breathe a word of this to anyone. Go sit in a corner of the kitchen.'

Makra had been apprehending a brisk thrashing from the mistress. But now he hid himself as he was told, in the kitchen. The mistress concealed herself in the guest room, covered with Makra's blanket.

About midnight, Chandramani babu came in noiselessly. But he was drunk out of his senses, and his steps were unsteady as he opened the door. Makra appeared to lie there, quietly. Chandramani babu uttered a whoop of joy and began singing:

Ah what fun!

Only that man knows

Who has had the kick from opium and rum!

He continued, 'Wake up, Makru, my brother. Well done, my friend! Ah, Makra, do you think I care for that wife of mine? Or for her words? That maid-servant of a mistress had held me back for two long months. My throat had gone dry. I've had two months of pleasure, all in a single day! But was this the affair of one day? From the time she came to dance at Gopal babu's house, we have been

friends. And that was three years ago! The moment she set foot in Cuttack yesterday, she sent for me. Her name is Usmantara. What a name! And when I met her I felt as if I had gotten back my old treasure! I had taken ten rupees with me. But that is not enough. I gave her my word I'll give her a hundred rupees tomorrow. Do you know where I'll get the money from? Your mistress has stacks of money in that chest where she keeps the revenue receipts so carefully. Thrice I've pried it open and taken money. What can your mistress know of the fire in English rum? Even her father wouldn't have seen such stuff in all his life!'

The mistress tossed the blanket aside and was up in one leap. She roared in rage, 'What did you say, you drunkard! Slander my father, will you? Where were you all day? Who was that you went to? A broom was lying nearby. She grabbed it and hit out left and right, striking his body, wherever she could! Chandramani babu tried to escape. But drunk as he was, he slumped to the floor while the flogging continued.

When she became exhausted, she went into her room and begged forgiveness of the gods. She moaned, 'Ah, what have I done! I have struck my husband, my God! And with a broom! Tears streaming down her cheeks, she went to him after a while and found him asleep. Welts were showing at the places where the broom had struck. Overcome with remorse, she brought sesame oil and rubbed it gently over the bruised flesh. And begged the gods to pardon her sin.

At noon the master awoke. His first glance fell on the mistress seated by his side. Maybe she would lash out at him again! He shut his eyes and feigned sleep. After a few moments he looked at her face. But there was no trace of her former anger. Her eyes were moist with tears. She realized that he was awake and sent for pitchers of water, then poured the cool water over him. All the while he sat still, like an idol. The water cooled his burning skin. She helped him to dress. The cook brought him a meal of rice. She forced him to eat a little and then put him to bed. The whole house was quiet. Husband and wife -- they never spoke a word to each other. Nor did they even look into one another's eyes, out of shame. He blamed only himself; she herself. Chandramani babu promised himself that he would not touch any intoxicating drink from that day on.

Six months passed by. Neighbours and friends noticed that the house was quiet. The daily bickerings at Chandramani babu's had stopped. He himself never even stepped out of the house. Only on some evenings were the two of them seen moving around town in a horse-carriage together.

Acquaintances were astonished at this turn of events. Chandramani babu's father, the zamindar, had engaged a tutor for him. But where did all the studying lead him? He fell into evil ways and became a regular drunkard. The zamindar got his son married to a virtuous, charming girl, hoping he would change his ways. But nothing happened. He slowly started squandering away the whole property. The zamindar therefore willed the entire property to his daughter-in-law.

And now what had happened in the course of a single night?

Gopi babu, a man of zest, exclaimed, 'This is the result of the flogging the mistress gave him. Alcohol and antics, such gnawing diseases, vanish with the cure known as broom-flogging.'

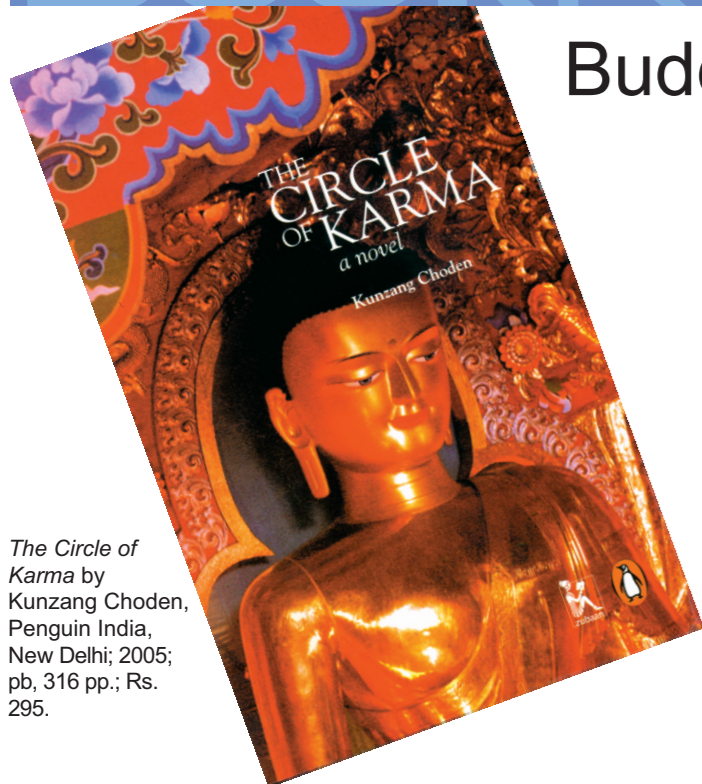
Shyam babu chuckled, 'But there is no mention of such a cure in Ayurvedic texts or in medical science!'

'You don't get the point. This is the mistress's own finding--patent medicine!'

Fakirmohan Senapati's (1843-1918) fame as an Oriya writer rests primarily on four novels and 20 short stories. J. M. is an poet/translator.

BookReviews

Buddha, karma and *tangkas*



The Circle of Karma by Kunzang Choden, Penguin India, New Delhi; 2005; pb, 316 pp.; Rs. 295.

intricately layered, rustling with wondrous connections forged and strange losses endured.

The blurb on the book states that the narrative is about 'a woman facing the world alone'. A fifteen-year-old embarks on 'what becomes a life journey, in which she begins to find herself, and to grow as a person and a woman'. Pema Tsomo can cook, tend, hoe, plant, weave and attend to rituals of life around the birthing, sickness or deathbeds, but she is aggressively denied an education and the right to a monastic career that her brothers could choose if they wished to. After brief domestic bliss and a nightmare of a miscarriage, Tsomo finds herself betrayed by her husband and her younger sister. Trapped with a mysterious illness, Tsomo with a distended pregnant-looking stomach, takes to the road making a quivering but nonetheless stoic attempt to break the circle of karma and the claustrophobia of a male-dominated social system. Tsomo's strange fortunes make her move on from Bhutan to Kalimpong and Bodhgaya, from Kathmandu and Dehradun to Mussorie, all the way to Delhi and finally back to Thimpu.

Through the travels of Tsomo, Choden beckons new vistas of experiences. She shows a new and exciting way to 'map' identities and narratives withheld or denied to women like Tsomo. Her protruded belly or distorted 'body' is meant to represent 'Woman' as an essentialized sign in feminist terms but only up to a point. Choden's feminist parable recedes ultimately with Tsomo's longing for spiritual solace or because she admits feeling tenderness for the men that karma delivers at her doorstep. There is chagrin at a woman's limited choices --but only to have Tsomo's disappointments become diffused with

longing for the intimacy of a marital bed or quests for spiritual fulfillment. Choden does not blanche at Tsomo's heart torn between disparate longings. Hemmed with domestic responsibilities Tsomo ached for the outdoors. Once on her own, she never quite reconciles to how unnervingly 'quiet' being on her own can be. The tug of spirit and the pull of flesh equally fluster her sense of 'arriving' anywhere. Tsomo has much to learn in order to evolve into the person she has been longing to be for as long as she has known anything.

However, *The Circle of Karma's* charm lies not in the 'theories' of literature Choden evidently is exposed to but in the writer's delightful prose. She is a supremely confident story-teller. Selling off family heirlooms (lovingly preserved ancient robes handed from mother to daughter down the line) the young heroine takes vomit-stained bus rides and unpleasant train journeys to sacred temples and sites. *The Circle of Karma* portrays Tsomo's world as a vivid semi-medieval theatrical stage at the throes of change and modernity. Shots of temples, chortens, circumambulations, prayers, mantras and pilgrimages blend happily with popular culture, viz, modern buses, radios, make-up and beaded shoes, Dev Anand, and 'Joy Bangla' (old knitwear) arriving from rich donor countries via Bangladesh. Choden conjures an epically proportioned world of unconditional friendships and feckless whimsy. An alcohol-loving high lama's kind benediction, a low-caste Hindu hospital sweeper with white magic powers and an American missionary doctor try their respective skills in treating Tsomo's condition, each showing equal compassion.

It was impossible to put the

book down! One followed Tsomo's journeys, forgetting to ask how she managed customs and immigration, tax and language barriers. It was useless to ask how she settled in a succession of makeshift homes, how she left, or facetiously picked up her thread when she got back. Unsuccessful in love, Tsomo has an astonishing following of friends among unknown people across a vast sprawl of terrain. They sit her down with a cup of tea and share her sorrows, they goad her to move on and live, they lovingly teach her what they know, and learn readily from what she has to offer. Men, women, old and young, lucky and unfortunate, pious or sinning, Choden brings them together so that Tsomo may learn what cannot be taught in any other way. It may or may not be meaningful to know that Tsomo becomes a nun and comes home only to leave once more. Following her lama Rinpoche's teaching, Tsomo strives for restoring inner harmony, focusing on the moments she has cherished, willing herself to forget and forgive the rest.

Kunzang Choden has written a most humane novel with wisdom and empathy. Her voice is distinctive but should one want a comparison it could be with Mahasweta Devi and Gloria Naylor because of the elegance, earthiness and sense of control that permeates her work. *The Circle of Karma* is a heart-winning first book that is warm and witty, unafraid to explore in the most unexpected ways karma but above everything else the human spirit. Really, 'a must read'!

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Figures Of Speech

KAISER HUQ

It pleases me greatly that my ancestral village stands on a river if only because running water lends itself to profound observations e.g. Heraclitus's aphorism about the impossibility of stepping into the same river twice which I revise in the light of Lord Buddha's wisdom, viz. it isn't quite the same person who steps in the second time & suddenly for no rhyme or reason remembering Rimbaud's mysterious self-definition *Je est un autre* see clear as the dear cool water a small boy thrill to the liquid touch as it laves around skinny shanks & leaves mica glitters on dark skin while a slippery susu in the distance punctuates the rippling syllables—a kinetic comma!— & small fishing boats fill up with a rainbow-bright catch.

Now cut to the present: peer into the constricted river's polluted mirror, watch your haunted eyes tremble: no flash of fin excites the shallows, the water's unfit to drink, unfit to swim in, unfit to touch...

Looking over this depressing draft for a poem only the images seem to have any life, similes and metaphors as sharp and clear as the river is murky—

that's another one;
well, as doom
looms—nice sound effect there
eh? Anyway—
as doom
looms—
you might of course interject
that it always does—
still, right now
as our very own
doom
looms
is that all we have
to fall back on—
figures of speech?

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