

## **ALTERNATIVE VOICES FROM BHUTAN: A STUDY OF BALLAD OF PEMI TSHEWANG TASHI**

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### **Abstract**

The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is one of the most popular Bhutanese Lozey (a kind of English lyrical ballad). In this heroic tale, the chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi recites how he has been ordered to lead a group to attack an opponent of his master, although his own heart is not willing to imply. He sets off with a feeling of uncertainty but puts loyalty to his master above personal presentiments. He reflects with wistfulness the persons he is leaving behind. After the battle, he is cornered and trapped by forces of his adversary at the formidable cliff at Thomangdrak near Trongsa. As well as dwelling on notable features of the landscape of western and central Bhutan, the Ballad reminds the reader of the romance and hardships of the past and also of the nature of virtues such as courage and obedience. Technically, the ballad adds life to Bhutanese values and unveils the beauty of poems and verses at its best. The ballad mostly exhibits loyalty and a strong bond between the master and his subordinate in a typical Bhutanese context. This ballad has survived for generations and safeguarded its survival over a hundred years through oral transmission and monastic education.

**Keywords:** Lozey, ballad, obedience, sacrifice, loyalty.

The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is one of the popular Bhutanese which takes the readers back into the historical event of 1877 and it is originally set to a piece of music with continual chorus, just like a song. The term 'Lo' means 'statement' and 'Zey' means 'back hair'. According to Michelle Herrin, a ballad is

"A type of poem that is sometimes set to music and it has a long history found in many cultures". As quoted in folk music.net by Cecil Sharp (1907) in his study of folk music (English Folk Songs), he defines, "The ballad as opposed to the song because the language is singularly simple, direct and unlabored and poetical imagery and figures are rarely employed. What is superfluous is rigorously excluded".

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Whatever may be the definition, it is generally accepted that ballads are the traditional music that is described as narrative stories that are sung. The story of ballads stretches back to thousands of years such as King Orfeo, the ancient Greek tale about Orpheus's attempted rescue of Eurydice from the underworld (Nick Caffrey, January 2002) but these ballads have been popular only during the Romantic movement of poetry in the late 18th century. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one, such kind that talks about a sailor who has returned from a long voyage.

The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is no exception. It has all the striking features of a ballad. It talks about the conflict between the Jakar Dzongpoen Pema Tenzin and the Trongsa Penlop Dungkar Gyeltshen for the throne of Trongsa Governorship. When the latter fails to acknowledge and respect the mutual understanding as to resign after three years for the former, it brought the warrior groups of two masters into a great horror that finally made the chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi to throw himself from the formidable cliff of Thomangdrak after losing the war to his opponent. In this heroic tale, the chamberlain of the title recites how he has been ordered to lead a detachment to attack a foe of his master, although his own heart is reluctant. He sets off with an intuition of disaster but puts loyalty to his lord above personal feelings. He reflects with nostalgia and persons he is leaving behind. After the battle, he is cornered and trapped by forces of his adversary at the dreadful cliff at Thomangdrak near Trongsa.

The notable features of the landscape of western and central Bhutan, the ballad reminds the reader of the romance and hardship of travel in the past and also of the nature of merits such as courage and obedience. Technically, the translator has demonstrated a masterful control of the rhythm of this orally-transmitted tale. In his expressive introduction, this particular lozey has fortunately ensured its survival over a hundred years. The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is perhaps one of the most composite literary texts available from a Bhutanese author unraveling the stories of medieval Bhutan. The obedience of the courtiers for their lordship was a commendable example. The words of their lord, then, could be equated with the law of their land. And for this matter, the discussion thence will be purely based on obedience in the context of the hierarchal and social fabric of the Bhutanese society.

Dasho Karma Ura in Pemi Tshewang Tashi, The Wind Borne Feather claims, "The action of Chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi were provoked by the powerful creed of courtiers and attendants, which asked them first to serve the Lord, secondly to attend to the condition of people in hardship and adversity, and thirdly to pursue their own success"

(Ura, Introduction, 1996). Such was the social set up of those days. Pema Tshewang Tashi's own words create a frontage of the then social environment: "The command of Zongpon Angdruk Nim- to dismiss it, is as dear as gold, to carry it out, is as heavy as the hills." (Ura, Introduction, 1996).

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This extract above also shows the autocratic nature of the bureaucrats then. Those were the hard times in the history of Bhutan and the society was ruled by the iron-fisted, Hitlerian kind of insignificant rulers. The chain of command was so strong that the Lord above had all the authority over his member of staff. Such was the society then and there was no question of disobedience. The untimely tragic death of Pemi Tshewang Tashi, one of the finest Bhutanese Literary figures was perhaps because of the nature of the governance then. An admirable title bestowed to outstanding civil servants in Bhutan by the Monarch.

The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi portrays a variety of themes such as isolation, hostility, vanity, trust, and faith. The theme of fidelity in war is also presented in this ballad because the ballad is set around the time when civil wars were fought and the power struggle was at its peak in Bhutan. The protagonist Pemi Tshewang Tashi lives on watching and obeying the orders of his master until the end of his last breath like that of Bedivere in Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem

“The Passing of Arthur”. In this poem, King Arthur, even on his verge of death, asked Bedivere to follow his last orders that are to fight the last grim battle and to finally cast his trusted sword named Excalibur into the lake (Basu, 2017). The themes of mourning and revenge and a preoccupation with the proper disposal of the eliminated hero's body and honour, give this final portion of the ballad a particularly powerful and haunting cohesion. The ballad raises the question of Homer's attitude to heroic violence, the elusive blend of admiration for the ferocity of warriors, and recoil from the more blood-curdling things. These are acts or threats of decapitation and dismemberment (Claude Rawson, 1981).

Pemi Tshewang Tashi is isolated from the rest of his warring factions that addresses the theme of isolation and alienation. Alienation is a powerful feeling of isolation and loneliness and stems from a variety of causes. Alienation may occur in response to certain events or situations in society or one's personal life. For instance, the relationship between him and himself as well as him and his master and his surroundings are revealed in the bond between Pemi Tshewang Tashi and his sacrificial life. The ballad talks about how he was forced by his master to face the opponent and get himself separated from his loving families, parents, villagers, and friends. His alienation from friends can be traced from the following lines, “My friends who have been a companion since I was a child, do not be remiss, please listen to me once; you must strive carefully” (p.43-44).

The aftermath of the war was a great tragedy to Chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi. He found meaningless and disapproving to live or die from the hand of his enemies. This meaningless existence of his life as a defeated warrior is all that made him fling and take a satisfactory death. To me, the war between Choeji Pem Tenzin and Choeji Dungkar Gyeltshen itself was meaningless and baseless as the war was between the close relatives of Desi Jigme Namgyal that had continued even during the time of Ugyen Wangchuck. It must be for this reason why both Jigme Namgyal and Ugyen Wangchuck failed to interfere with their invitation.

Things are falling apart. The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi suggests that this is the natural result when men are allowed to operate outside a social system of checks and balances. Power, especially over other human beings, certainly corrupts. Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi thus at its most abstract level, is a narrative about the difficulty of understanding the world beyond the self, about the ability of one man to judge another.

Literally translated as speech ornaments, the ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is also a Bhutanese literary genre that is almost equivalent to the western ballads with almost the treatment of the same themes and verses.

“Lozey is a form of oral expression, appropriately described as one of the Ornaments of speech”

(Lhendup, p, 8). Despite using colloquial language, this Lozey has achieved poetic height through the employment of poetic devices such as similes, metaphors, symbols, and constant rhythm. The simplicity of structure, style, and diction is another characteristic of a ballad, making them the form of poetry in grand style. To flavor a meaning to the lines, lots of similes are employed in this ballad. To mention but a few, as versified below:

Should there be any need to describe it  
 My upper frame is like a poised lion  
 How does the lion spring and leap?  
 My lower frame is like a peak cock  
 The peacock with its iridescent feathers (p. 65)

Like songs and poems, a ballad is just a product of language. “Lozey cannot be overlooked. It is poetry in its own right and is transmitted orally” (Kuenga, 2002).

It can be either sung as songs or recited as poems. The very meaningful use of language in this ballad verified the real height and the taste of literature. For the most part, Lozey is of three types such as popular Lozey, Loju Lozey, and Labja Lozey. The shortest ballad will vary from three lines to fifteen depending upon the depth of knowledge of a person. The author has employed iambic octameter as the form of this ballad in his Dzongkha version, but as it translated into English it suffered a little dilution in meanings and metric dimension. This Che toed (praising), nyen lu or zalu (romantic), dralu (odium), medlu (disgrace), trolu (joy), cholu (sad), tse tshol (debating), trashi/monlu (supplication), lozey labja (advice/guidance) and kortam (indirect statement) are different forms of Lozey. Pemi Tshewang Tashi has a special poignancy for the society and the protagonist himself that encapsulates and reveals the actuality of obligation, sense of alienation, attachment, confusion, etc. Of different balladic forms, it qualifies and fulfils the form of cholu (song of sadness).

Like much of the best modernist literature produced in the early decades of the twentieth century, Karma Ura's *Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* is as much about confusion, and profound doubt as it is about the thrust of power and usurps which is illustrated in the following lines;

“One who was born to the princess of Dungkar, Choje Dungkar Gyeltshen. And in the lap of Kikila, in the fortress of Yujel dzong, one who was born to the princes of Tamshing: Choje Pem Tenzin. With the power of their minds, never did appraise; overpowered by others,” (p.37).

Chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi's braveness and boldness at the end of the *Lo-zey* has forced him to surrender to his fate. His gleaming sword which turned out to be useless of his defeat becomes clear to all the readers that nothing stands when fate provokes. There is no meaning and purpose of having a glowing weapon if the purpose is defeated. Chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi bid farewell to all his friends and well-wishers on their expedition way towards Trongsa but all his prayers have turned useless when in reality he lost the war and his life too.

“You are the one to stay, you must remain. I, Tshewang Tashi, the chamberlain, I am the one to go, I must go. After defeating my enemies and foes. Pray for us then to meet again...”

His prayer of meeting back with all his acquaintance remained futile as he could not come back to his place.

There is also the alienation caused by the culture of obedience. Feeling separated from society isn't the sole way individual experiences alienation, sometimes the individual feels alienated as disharmony together with his or her true self. This condition develops when a person accepts societal expectations like taking over command of his master that are counter to the person's true goals, feelings, or desires. He may appear to be successful in the role others expect him to assume but his true wish is hidden, leaving him feeling deeply disputed and alone.

The *Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashie* chooses ever strongly the values of obedience and sacrifice to one's master. His immortal words serve as a reminder to all the citizens of Bhutan to serve the King, country, and the people with dedication and obedience as did Pemi Tshewang Tashi for his master. Pemi Tshewang Tashi in sacrificing his self-interest and living for the interest of the state sanctions his obedience to authority. He demonstrates obedience not only to be necessary but also to be a perfect to measure up to. Pemi Tshewang Tashi is an inadequate official under Dzungpoen Angdruk Nim but his willingness to face death within the name of obedience elevates him to the status of a legendary figure and makes the ballad a timeless model in this contemporary world.

Pemi Tshewang Tashi conveys how trivial his life was to the mighty master. In a way, it also portrays the division and therefore the indiscrimination of the insignificant low classes of the society during that specific time. As Pemi Tshewang Tashi claims, “My consciousness like a wind-borne feather” (p.67) he was literary a wind-borne feather with no power of his own to

vary and guide the course of his life. Nevertheless, the location of the very best priority within the hierarchy was still an unsolved dilemma within the lifetime of Pemi Tshewang Tashi. Not to mention that this sort of priority is still an escalating dilemma for the thinkers of our time and to see all this on important occasions and others are but evident even to this day in Bhutan. This obedience is still a real feast to our eyes when government officials visit rural Bhutan. My assumptions of these social biddings are worth a mention. In due course of time, I feel the way of life during Pemi Tshewang Tashi's was masked with the mysteries of obedience for their lordship, yet I feel the need for it at this modern time. Their life then maybe primitive but the human closeness they shared weighed heavily within the minds of the Bhutanese people. Now it is becoming just the otherwise. We even don't know our next-door neighbour. Are we making progress? It indeed is a question to ask ourselves. There are times in our lives, where we derive inspiration from Pemi Tshewang Tashi's life.

Although the command of his lord weighed heavily on his mind, yet he could come up with one among the best poems ever composed in Bhutan. In his Ballad we see that life in medieval Bhutan is being portrayed in a picturesque description. It is also a befitting resource of medieval Bhutan for the students alike.

Like much of the best modern literature produced in the early decades of the twentieth century, Karma Ura's Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi is as much about alienation and profound doubt as it is about the thrust of power and annexes.

However, if we critically analyze the Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi and his heroic deeds as mentioned in the ballad, there are some reservations on his heroic act because a hero is one who would face the enemy without any fear. Here in this ballad, the protagonist is not willing to face the enemy nor does he accept defeat from his enemies. Rather the protagonist in desperation commits suicide by jumping over the cliff and easily gives up his life. In the real sense, this is not an act of bravery but rather an act of cowardly. The chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi commits suicide rather than fighting the war with bravery. As such, this pathetic ending leaves the readers with an incomplete sense of appreciation for the ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi and his heroic act as described in the ballad.

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