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## TRIBAL MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS: A READING OF YASHE DORJEE THONGCHI'S *SONAM*

**Dr. KAILASH KUMAR**

Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Rang Frah Government College Changlang,  
Dist.- Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh  
Email - [kailashrfgc85@gmail.com](mailto:kailashrfgc85@gmail.com).



Dr. KAILASH KUMAR

### ABSTRACT

One of the key aspects of Y. D. Thongchi's novel, *Sonam*, is the tribal marital relationship. *Sonam* is a novel that is basically concerned with the indigenous native Monpa culture of Arunachal Pradesh. The novel makes a thread bare analysis of the social conflict prevalent in the families of the Monpa tribe. It holds the age old social customs such as polygamy and polyandry prevalent among a particular section of the Monpas responsible for the social conflict. The families fail to adapt strictly with the prevailing social custom giving rise to such a conflict. The novel is notable for its depiction of such human values as kindness, courage, perseverance, hard work, ability to lead from the front, respect and reverence for one's tradition, culture and religion.

**Keyword:** polyandry, Monpa, tribe, indigenous, tradition, culture, religion.

### Introduction

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi is a Sahitya Academy Award winning novelist in Assamese. He is a writer of such renowned novels as *Sonam* and *Mauna Outh Mukhar Hriday* (Silent Lips, Murmuring Heart). His widely acclaimed novel *Sonam* has been made into a feature film and is the first full length feature film from Arunachal Pradesh. Thongchi was born in 1952 in West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. He did his schooling in Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh and completed his graduation from Cotton College, Guwahati and Post-Graduation in Assamese literature from Guwahati University. Being an IAS officer, he has held senior administrative positions. After his retirement from administrative service he has been actively engaged in serious literary and creative works and has been the President of the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society.

Thongchi's name and fame as a novelist in Assamese is beyond doubt. He is a writer of great capability and merit. He uses Assamese language to write about his native land, Arunachal Pradesh. His writings bear out his deep social commitment. Thongchi wrote his novel, *Sonam*, originally in Assamese which got published in the year 1981. *Sonam* was translated into English by Mridula Borooah and the English translation was published in the year 2001. Thongchi himself confessed in his Author's Note to the English edition of the novel that the primary basis of his novel was the oral narrative that he heard from a certain person called Sonam Tsering. The novelist's purpose behind writing this novel is not merely to comment on the tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh but to discern human values and delineate a wide range of emotions. The author attains artistic heights as he delves deep into the human mind.

Both gender and sex have been crucial towards furthering the cause of feminism. Kate Millet in her seminal book *Sexual Politics* (1969) makes a very succinct distinction between gender and sex. According to Millet gender is a human construct, something learned or acquired whereas sex is a biological construct, something natural. The novel, *Sonam*, vividly describes such feminist issues as gender, sexuality and the polyandry system which were at work among the Brokpas - a particular section of the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Polyandry involves the practice of two or more men sharing a common wife. The age old system of polyandry is not new in the Indian context where we have such an instance as the five Pandavas sharing a common wife Draupadi in *The Mahabharat*.

In the novel *Sonam*, the author is particularly concerned with the physical, mental and emotional hardships faced by the male shepherds residing in the high mountainous regions of the Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh who share a common wife. Lobjang is such a shepherd who happens to be the protagonist of this novel. He is a young Brokpa, a shepherd man found in the high hills of the Himalaya. He is a resident of the Sakteng village but spends the greater part of his life in his Broke, the animal farm that is situated at the top of Choksum hills. His friend Tikoro is also having a farm nearby. The distance between the farm and the village is approximately six miles. One stops only once while coming down the hills with a heavy load but has to make at least two stops while moving up on steep slopes to reach to the top of the hills. When Lobjang comes down to his village, he brings with himself Mar (milk fat), churpi, a type of cheese made from milk, and sheep wool. He carries these items to far off places like Tawang, Kalaktang, Rupa and Dirang and in the neighbouring country Bhutan where he makes use of the barter system to exchange the items with plenty of rice brought from Assam.

Lobjang has to remain at his farm for many days at a stretch. He wants to meet his young and beautiful wife Sonam who is living in his native house located in the Sakteng village. His conjugal life is not running smoothly as he is separated from his newly wedded wife due to his working condition. He

is not happy with himself for having left his wife alone in the village as he loves her better than anything else in this world. He wants to take her to the farm but due to certain complication he is not able to do so.

Y. D. Thongchi, the novelist, relies heavily on the use of folklore in the novel *Sonam*. He adequately exploits the local and indigenous myths and folk tales to showcase its impact on the existing marital relationships. His use of myths and folklore is evident when he says that the tradition and custom of the Brokpa society does not allow Lobjang to take Sonam to the farm and live with her as husband and wife as it will disturb the purity of the place. Lobjang's attempt to have physical relationship with his wife at the farm will invite the wrath of the Sungmu, the god of wealth and the result will be the disappearance of good fortune from the place and the breaking of epidemics leading to the death of animals of the farm. This age old myth was a big bottleneck in the smooth functioning of the conjugal relationship of Lobjang and Sonam. Thus the novelist through his brilliant use of myth seems to be justifying the idea of the writer and fictionist Shashi Deshpande that myth and folklore are the very backbone of Indian culture. While making a comment on the use of myth in the context of Indian culture, Deshpande opines:

Myths are still important to us, we do not want to demolish them, we need them to live by; they have shaped our ideas for a great many years, they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. In India, especially, myths have an extraordinary vitality, continuing to give people some truth about themselves, about the human condition. (Deshpande, 2000:94).

Once Lobjang had been at his animal farm, located on the Choksum hills, for twenty days. So he decided to go to his native village. His mind was preoccupied with the idea of seeing his wife at the earliest which led his friend Tikoro remark in such a manner: "I am sure your mind has already flown to her, and here we have a lifeless body." (Thongchi,

15). Lobjang left for his village early in the morning as he wanted to reach there in the daytime itself. When he reached his village, it was already evening time and darkness had engulfed the whole village. As he approached his house, he found no trace of light inside his house. Instead he heard sound of two people talking inside the house. Suddenly the door of the house opened and a young man named Pema Wangchu appeared from inside the house and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Lobjang became angry on seeing a young man coming from inside his house because he expected his wife to be alone in the house. As he went inside the house and into his bedroom he found the impression of two bodies on one pillow and the bed had been recently occupied. This confirmed his suspicion that his wife had slept with another person and thus had committed adultery. He wanted to kill his wife at that moment but held back. He passively accepted the situation as Buddhism – the age old tradition, culture and religion of his community – favoured peaceful coexistence instead of indulging in violence. Sonam, on the other hand, pleaded innocence and gave the following reply in her favour:

“What wrong have I done? It’s me who sleeps alone everyday, and finding me staying all alone in the house the boys of the village come and trouble me all the time. Being a helpless woman what am I to do, how can I keep them away? And that Pema Wangchu? He paid no heed to my repeated warnings. How I pleaded with him not to come near me. Now what should I do? You tell me! Either you take me to the Broke to stay with you or otherwise you might as well kill me ..... ?” Sonam started to sob. (Thongchi, 20).

The pitiable condition of Sonam highlights the fact that despite getting married she is forced to lead a solitary life in the absence of her husband. She being a woman leads a vulnerable life as her husband is away at work in the distant farms. The youths of the village take advantage of this fact and they try to develop illicit relationship with her. They try to undermine the chastity and integrity of a woman. Here there is a question mark on gender equality

too. The woman craves for the fulfillment of her sexual desire. Since her husband is absent from the house her desire to lead a happy married life where she can fulfill her sexual urge remains unfulfilled. The result is that she has to yield to the advances of the other village boys.

Sonam is a silent, submissive and suffering woman. Even Lobjang accepted the fact that it would be really difficult for Sonam to stay alone for months at a stretch. She needed a male companion in the house who can provide her with love, care and safety. The solution to this problem lay in the system of polyandry which was favoured by Lobjang’s own community – the Brokpas. Sonam also felt the need to share herself among two men and she became ready to take Pema Wangchu as her co- husband under the rules of the polyandry system. Unlike Thongchi’s heroine who willingly accepts polyandry, Draupadi the heroine of *Mahabharata* is frustrated at her polyandrous state as is discernible in her statement:

I am Yudhisthir’s queen, not his beloved. He keeps a distance between us. And Bhima treats me as a fragile, precious flower, he is afraid to pluck. He cannot see the woman in me, the woman hungry for love, for passion. And Nakul and Sahdev are only boys. But Arujuna....If any woman was deceived in a man, I was in you (Deshpande,2004: 243).

However, not everybody in the community was ready to accept Pema Wangchu as co-husband of Sonam. Lobjang’s friend Kejang vehemently opposed the idea of taking Pema Wangchu as co-husband of Sonam. He said that Lobjang and Pema Wangchu belonged to two different castes. If a child was born in their family, it would be difficult to decide whether that child belonged to Pema’s or Lobjang’s caste. Even the women of the village were against this relationship. But the greatest opposition to this relationship came from the side of Pema Wangchu’s parents. Pema’s father, Tsewang, was of the opinion that his son could marry any of his brother’s wife instead of marrying Lobjang’s wife as Lobjang belonged to a different caste. It proves that caste played a decisive role in the subconscious mind of the people of the Brokpa community.

The novel *Sonam* brings to the forefront the fact that the village hierarchy played a pivotal role in determining the matrimonial relationship of people in the Brokpa society. It is evident in the form of the village council Tsopa which gave its nod to the proposed marriage between Pema and Sonam subject to the fulfillment of certain condition. The first condition that the village council put forward was that Pema would denounce his caste and accept Lobjang's title. Secondly, Pema's father, Tsewang would disown his son and with that Pema would lose share in his father's property. These important tribal marital issues governed the life and destiny of the Brokpa community.

The custom of the Brokpas ruled that under the polyandry system the senior husband had to share his property with his co-husband. So after the marriage of Sonam and Pema, Lobjang shared his property with his co-husband Pema as he tells Pema:

"The animals that you see, the cows and sheep, the entire lot from today are all yours. From now on I am no longer the sole owner of the property, - it belongs to us both. You have an equal share and responsibility, so look after the animals well." (Thongchi, 36).

Lobjang not only shared his property but also his responsibility with Pema. As per the agreement both of them would spend turn by turn equal number of days on the farm and at home. When Lobjang would be at the farm looking after the animals, during that time Pema would be at home giving company to their wife Sonam. To make marriage successful under the polyandry system both the husbands need to work hard and put their best effort. However there was a major lapse on the part of Pema Wangchu who failed to perform his duty properly. Pema had prematurely arrived at home because a snow leopard had attacked the farm and had killed one of the sheeps. The sheep had been killed because of the carelessness and negligence of Pema. Hence Lobjang immediately ordered Pema to go back to the farm and take care of the animals. On the other hand, Sonam was in no mood to allow Pema to go back to the farm at this time of night. The way Sonam tried to defend Pema did not go well into the head of Lobjang who

developed a peculiar expression upon his face: "Lobjang narrowed his eyes and cast a piercing glance at her, - his insides contracted and a hard look came to his face." (Thongchi, 54).

That same night all three of them – Sonam, Lobjang and Pema Wangchu - spent their night together in one room. Lobjang lying alone in one corner of the room was not able to sleep the whole night as he was mentally disturbed because of the loss of the sheep. When he found Sonam and Pema Wangchu sharing the same bed and sleeping together peacefully, he was not able to tolerate all this. It seemed as if the system of polyandry had failed to solve his problem. He had allowed his wife to take Pema Wangchu as her co-husband so that he would get an additional person to look after the farm. But, till now, Pema had proved to be good for nothing. The sheep had been killed because of Pema's negligence. Dambu the loyal dog of Lobjang was supposed to guard the animals at the farm. However Pema Wangchu chained Dambu to his post at night which prevented the dog from rescuing the sheeps. When the snow leopard attacked the animals, Pema did not come out of the house due to laziness and fear.

In the novel *Sonam*, tradition and culture play an important role in strengthening the institution of marriage. It is clearly visible in the Brokpa society particularly in the life of Lobjang. Lobjang had great respect for the Buddhist religion and tradition and closely followed the Buddhist way of life. He visited the great Monastery of Tawang multiple times. The author describes this monastery in the following words:

The famous Galden Namgyal Lhatse Monastery, popularly known as the Tawang Monastery, is perched on top a hillock, overlooking the scintillating valley of Tawangchu. The Monastery has served as an abode of spiritualism and center of learning of Buddhism amongst the Monpa and Sherdukpen tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. (Thongchi, 45).

Once Lobjang took his wife Sonam along with him for a visit to the Tawang monastery. He and his associates entered the monastery through the Kakling, a decorated gate. As they came near Dukhang (main prayer hall), they walked round it

several times and made the Dharma wheels attached to the walls move. After that they went inside the prayer hall where they found the huge statue of Tomba Sakya Dawa, the Sakya Muni, the future Gautama Buddha and also the seat of the Palden Lhamo, the Reigning Deity of the monastery.

In the novel, *Sonam*, we get a good glimpse of the Buddhist tradition when Lobjang and his friends participate in the *khata* throwing ceremony. *Khata* is a traditional piece of white cloth used in ceremonies. They took out their *khata* and put some maize seed on one end of the *khata* and tied it properly. Then they threw their *khata* by taking an aim at the hollow opening of the Palden Lhamo's seat. Both Lobjang and Sonam prayed to the Palden Lhamo and to the Rinpoche, who happened to be the head of the Tawang monastery, to bless them with children. Rinpoche blessed them and Lobjang promised that if ever children were born in his family he would give away one of his children to serve this great monastery. It proves that people of the Monpa tribe has got great reverence for the traditional Buddhist religion and culture. Even for the success of their matrimonial relationships they heavily rely on their religion and culture.

The blessing given by the Rinpoche worked and soon a girl child took birth in Lobjang's family. The moment Lobjang came to know that his wife had given birth to a child, several thoughts occupied his mind. The novelist has beautifully captured the thought process going on in the protagonist's mind:

As he sat by the fire looking at the mother and child all kinds of thoughts came to his mind. He was not sure who might be the real father of the child. Pema Wangchu or he? Perhaps it might be Pema Wangchu's child as he is now spending more time with Sonam. As he thought deeper, he lost his enthusiasm and felt morose. With great effort he suppressed his doubts over the fatherhood of the child, as it mattered no more after he had accepted Pema Wangchu as his co-husband. Whoever might have sired the child, it was their child equally now. (Thongchi, 67).

From the above thought process it was imperative that Lobjang was not sure who was the real father of the child. Both he and Pema Wangchu shared the

same wife. Even if Pema happened to be the father of the child, Lobjang was ready to accept the child as his own. It proved that Lobjang, the protagonist of this novel, is quite a mature person. Later on when Sonam revealed that Lobjang is the real father of the girl, his happiness grew in leaps and bounds. Both Sonam and Lobjang were beaming with joy at the birth of their first child. They seemed to be amply justifying Alexander Walker's opinion on the characteristics of women and the social institution of family and marriage. Walker says:

The advantages resulting from the states of marriage are that the two sexes may reciprocally satisfy the natural desires which are felt equally by each... that they equally submit the exercise of the reproductive organs to a heartfelt regularity; that they may equally perpetuate their common species; that they may equally by respective duties; provide for children proceeding from their mutual union; that they may equally assist each other throughout life by reciprocal affection and cares; that they may in health and well being, reach that age which all those circumstances generally enable married pairs to attain. (Walker, 78).

The success of the polyandry system depends upon the complete faith, sincerity, devotion, ability to understand and to solve each other's problem and total coordination among its stakeholders. It seems as if the characters in the novel, *Sonam*, are in real conflict with each other as some of them lack these qualities thereby putting a question mark on the very effectiveness and genuineness of the polyandry system. Sonam, Lobjang and Pema Wangchu were stakeholders in the system. However, their relationship was in danger as they started quarreling among themselves. First it was Pema Wangchu who quarreled with Lobjang. Pema had long back borrowed money from Ngawang who belonged to Mirok village. Unable to pay his debt by himself, Pema sold one cow of Lobjang to clear his due with Ngawang. When Lobjang opposed this act, Pema started making hue and cry. He started leveling charges against Lobjang by saying that if Lobjang could sell cows in the name of buying foodgrains then why he could not sell a cow to repay his debt. He further said that he had that much right over the



property as Lobjang had. He called Lobjang a miser and alleged that Lobjang had exploited him by keeping him hungry on the farm. This enraged Lobjang and he ordered Pema Wangchu to get out from his house.

A woman's social identity is heavily dependent upon her family as Patricia Waugh observes: "A woman's experience is primarily defined through interpersonal, usually domestic and filial, relationships. Her identity exists largely as being – for – others rather than being-for-itself." (Waugh: 43). Therefore, the moment Sonam found that one of her husbands had been thrown out of the house by the other one, she started opposing it. She was in no mood to lose her second husband. She questioned her senior husband as to why he had thrown her other husband, Pema Wangchu, out of the house. She charged him for treating Pema like a subordinate. According to her, Pema's status in the house is equal to that of Lobjang as both were her husbands. Hearing this Lobjang became angry and frankly told his wife that he had to keep Pema in the house only to satisfy her lust. However Sonam clarified that it was not lust but her feelings, desires and sufferings that made it necessary for her to bring Pema Wangchu in her life as her second husband. She tells Lobjang,

"What do you take me for? Do you think that I am a piece of stone or a log of wood? Am I not a human being, don't I also have feelings? What about my desires? Have you ever given a thought to my suffering? You have always stayed away from me. How much strength do you think you have? What should I have done? Slept with a dog.....?" (Thongchi, 80-81).

These words of Sonam reveal a woman's unfulfilled sexual desire even though she is married and living in her husband's house. They seem to justify her decision to keep two husbands at a time.

Despite Lobjang's best effort to fight against the odds of his life, it seemed as if luck was not favouring him. He was hoping to bring his family life back on track but destiny had something else in store for him. A misfortune occurred in his life in the form of the untimely demise of his wife, Sonam. The death of his wife left a deep void in his life. At the

same time he was left alone with two children to take care of.

Transformation and change are part and parcel of human life. Nowhere this fact proves to be as true as in the novel, *Sonam*. In this period of change and transformation, there was change in Tsering Dolma, the sister of Sonam. After struggling much she decided to rebuild the lost world of her late sister. Her new world would be a bit different from the world of her sister. Her world would include herself, her sister's children and Lobjang but would discard Pema Wangchu. She could not afford to commit the same mistake that was committed by her sister. Her late sister, Sonam, made a blunder by sharing herself with two men. To Tsering Dolma, polyandry cannot provide a solution to their problem but can put the lives of all the stakeholders at risk. Unlike Sonam, Tsering Dolma seems to believe in monogamy. She did not approve of her sister's marriage with two men. In this regard Tsering Dolma is like Duryodhan of *Mahabharat*. Duryodhan does not approve of Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas as he says:

A woman with five husbands, he could never understand how they could call her virtuous. He himself had never been able to look at her without having lewd thought of her giving into all five of them at once. (Deshpande, 2004: 16).

### Conclusion

Y. D. Thongchi in his novel *Sonam* lays much emphasis upon the institution of marriage. Hence after the death of Sonam we find Tsering Dolma shouldering the responsibility of her late sister's children. Tsering Dolma felt as if she had already become a mother. She began to breastfeed Tashi, the infant son of Sonam, with her own milk. She wanted to marry Lobjang unaware of the fact that he was still devoted to the memory of his late wife. On the other hand, Lobjang decided that he and his children would go to the Tawang Monastery and devote the remainder of their life in the service of Lord Buddha. However, Ngoiru, the father of Tsering Dolma, opined that Lobjang needs another Sonam. So he must keep Tsering Dolma with him even if he was living in the *Gompa* (the Monastery). He told Tsering Dolma, "If the world is to survive, man and

woman must live together, because it is they who create life. So go ahead and without fear began your new life, – keep the world alive, – nobody has the right to destroy it.” (Thongchi, 124). These words of Ngoiru in the novel *Sonam* have stood the test of time. They are in conformity with our age old endeavour to mutually coexist in order to keep the world alive through procreation.

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**Dr. Kailash Kumar** has taught English language and literature for ten years. He is Assistant Professor of English at Rang Frah Government College Changlang, District – Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh, PIN – 792120. Email - [kailashrfgc85@gmail.com](mailto:kailashrfgc85@gmail.com). He holds specialization in Indian English Fiction, Postcolonial Literature and Diasporic Literature.

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