

Pretty Woman

Kinley Dorji

The village

The young woman is bent almost double, vigorously soaping her hair, face, shoulders, and neck. Her faded blue flannel petticoat is pulled up so the elastic holds it just below her breasts. It is wrapped around her buttocks and thighs with the end bunched together and held between her knees. She is singing as she rubs the somewhat hard cake of red Lifebuoy soap with some effort to work up a lather.

The water, a natural spring, flows down the mountain into the village which is a scenic sprawl of terraced fields that are cut into the steep slopes. The foot-wide community canal meanders down through the terraces, taking the spring water past the houses. As the water flows past each house it is tapped with a *zaa*, a three or four-foot hollow half log that channels a small jet of water towards the house. It is shared by the people and domestic animals and the drain-off waters the vegetable gardens.

The 12 houses in the village are spread out. Each house has its own space, surrounded by clumps of trees, bamboo, and vegetable gardens. Beside every house is a cowshed and a pig sty and some have chicken coops. Multi-coloured hens, mostly with red, brown, and white feathers, and the occasional rooster clucks around the houses during the day, pecking tit bits from the ground. Most families keep a fierce guard dog to warn them of leopards that come to steal hens. They are usually locked in a strong wooden house to stop them from biting visitors and to protect them from the leopards.

Bent forward to catch the stream of water before it hits the drain, the woman does not see 10-year old Kuenley who runs down the slope along the canal. Ignoring the twisting path, he nimbly dodges artemisia and cannabis bushes and clumps of bamboo, and jumps over a variety of dwarf shrubs, some of them with serrated leaves that have sharp thorns sticking out of them. Puffs of dust rise as his bare feet hit the dry earth. He clears the last patch of yellowish green shrubs with a leap, landing near the woman.

“Ow Thrimi,” says Kuenley. “My mother sent me to borrow your *dre* (measuring bowl).”

Rubbing a new layer of soap into her closely cropped hair, she does not hear him.

“Ow Thrimi!” Kuenley shouts.

Still bent over, Thrimi stops and turns her head sideways to look at Kuenley. She squints through the soap bubbles that make her eyes smart.

“Oy Kuenley,” she says. “Wait, I can’t hear you.”

She places the soap on a stone on flat piece of stone on the edge of the canal and moves forward, placing her head under the stream of water to rinse the soap off. When she is satisfied that the soap is all gone she runs her fingers through her hair and straightens up to face Kuenley. Her neck, rounded shoulders, and muscled arms are burned dark brown. Her large and firm breasts are much fairer. The water trickles from her hair and face, down her arms, between her breasts.

“What did you say?”

“My mother wants to borrow your dre. The trader from Thinleygang has come to collect the rice that we owe him and uncle Tashi has taken our dre to Thimphu. He’s gone to sell some rice at the weekend market.”

“Let me finish washing,” says Thrimi. She lifts her petticoat higher up her thighs and sticks out her legs, one at a time, under the jet of water. She soaps her sturdy thighs and calves and rinses them. Then she soaps her feet and uses a small flat stone to scrape the hardened skin around the edges of her feet. The skin on her heels are cracked and the soles of her feet coarse from years of outdoor life without shoes.

Kuenley likes Thrimi, with her red cheeks and bright eyes and ready smile. She is known to be the prettiest woman in the village. She is the best singer and the centre of attention at village festivals. Twenty years old, she is also admired for her strength as she goes about the seasonal chores of a village woman. In winter she carries home loads of firewood for the house, dry oak leaves for her cowshed, and takes baskets of manure out to the fields. In spring she plants the chillis and spinach in the garden front of the house and raddish and turnips behind the house. In summer she is out in the rice fields transplanting the seedlings as her uncle ploughs the ground. In autumn she has to harvest, thresh, and mill the rice.

Thrimi picks up a small gray cotton towel sitting on the ground and quickly wipes her face, neck, breasts and stomach. "Come," she says. Throwing the towel around her neck so the two ends cover her breasts, she picks up the soap with her left forefinger and thumb and walks to the wooden ladder that goes up to the outdoor deck that leads into the house. She climbs the near-vertical ladder with ease, ignoring the handrail that runs on her right, her back muscles rippling gently on both sides of the spine.

Kuenley follows her up to the deck and through the large open door into the house. The spacious all-purpose room has a neat mud hearth against one wall and a double-deck window on the other. An array of pots sit on two rows of shelves above the hearth. The only furniture in the room is a wooden box against the wall beside the hearth, the rice container. Some ropes and tools hang on wooden pegs near the door. Thrimi unhooks the *dre* which is hanging by a thin leather strap above the rice box and hands it to him. "We need it back tomorrow."

Kuenley glances at the man in a black *gho* sitting cross-legged on a black bear-skin rug near the open window, his back to the room. He is using the late-morning sunlight to see better as he turns and twists strands of dry nettle bark into a rope. His head is cocked a little to the right so he can use his good eye. Kuenley knows Thrimi's uncle, Dom Saymi (bear killer).

All the boys in the village are in awe of Dom Saymi who got his name because he killed a bear with his *dozom*, a double-edged 18-inch knife that tapers evenly into a sharp point. The *dozom* is a multi-purpose tool that every man, and some women, carry, tucked diagonally into their belts in front. The story is that Dom Saymi and the Himalayan Black Bear suddenly came upon each other on a narrow path above the village. The bear sprang on him as wild animals do when they are surprised. As they wrestled over the bushes Dom Saymi pulled out his *dozom* and stabbed the bear repeatedly in the stomach until it collapsed on him. The bear had ripped off the left side of Dom Saymi's face, including his left eye and nose.

He does not talk because his mouth is disfigured. He works on the farm and makes nettle ropes that the farmers use to tie their oxen and cows in their sheds at night, to carry firewood, and for other necessities. Thrimi lives with him, her father having left the village with another woman when she was 10 years old and her mother having died of a stomach disease when she was 15 years old.

Kuenley bounds down the steps and runs up the path towards his house. He suddenly bumps into Nado, an 18-year old cowherd who lives with his mother on the outskirts of the village, who jumps out from behind a thick Rhododendron bush. "Isn't she pretty?" asked Nado. "Did you look at her breasts? I couldn't see them too clearly from here because she was bent down most of the time."

"Yes," said Kuenley, who had not looked at her breasts. It seemed the right thing to say to an older boy who had been hiding in the bushes peeping at Thrimi washing.

The dancing picks up pace. Four men and two women started at an easy gait, singing a pleasant folk song, and maintaining the rhythm with their steps, as they moved in a circle around the bonfire. Other men and women join as they get inspired by the songs and as they drink enough to find the courage. By the third song eight men and five women are stomping in unison, singing a little breathlessly as they move. The leader, Thrimi, sings the verses and everyone joins the chorus. Her voice is clear and strong and her expression conveys the mood of the song. Her eyes are downcast and her expression reflective when she sings a sad song. She smiles and moves into a bouncy rhythm for a happy song.

The party is at Ap Tandi's house. He has held his annual *lochhoe* ceremony that day and invited all his neighbours for the evening's festivity. The entire village is there. At dusk the men, women, and children sat in two rows in front of the house and were served the traditional evening meal of rice, pork and beef strips and Ap Tandi's legendary pumpkin stew, spiced with green chilli and hot pepper corn. Now the *ara* flows. Ap Tandi's wife, Aum Zam, is known to make a powerful brew from fermented wheat. She had loudly made her annual vow that nobody would leave her house until all her *palangs* were empty.

A few of the men and women, including Nado, are visibly tipsy as they sing and dance. Every song is greeted with shouts of appreciation, from the young and old alike. They shout requests for their favourite songs. As the men flock around Thrimi gray-haired Dopfu, the wittiest man the village shouts, "Thrimi, with her face like the full moon, has more admirers than the flies on Ap Tandi's dried meat." Everyone laughs. "Nado will get nowhere because he won't be able to stay on his feet for long." Everyone laughs again.

The older people sit close to the fire and children run around, playing their own games. A bamboo container of *ara* tucked under his arm, Ap Tandi pours drinks for the dancers. "We will

sing the tashi lebey (auspicious closing song) only at dawn so you can see your way home,” he says, laughing. “We will not let Thrimi stop singing tonight.”

Kuenley is fast asleep as his father carries him home a little before midnight. His school holidays are over and he leaves for Thimphu tomorrow. He lives in Thimphu with his aunt who is married to a clerk in the finance ministry. Most of the villagers send their children to schools in Thimphu if they have relatives to live with because the village school is in Thinleygang, a two-hour walk. Children find it difficult to reach school for the morning prayers. And there are too many leeches when it rains.

New Times

Kuenley is 14 years old and home for the school holidays when the electricity lines to the village are completed. The village astrologer chooses an auspicious day for the inauguration ceremony. The astrologer and three lay monks start the prayers at dawn. The dzongda, the district’s highest official, arrives at the auspicious hour of 9.00 am and turns on the transmission station below the village. “Our nights have turned into days because of the selfless service of our beloved King,” he says. Thrimi leads a group of women in a few songs. Everyone has contributed ingredients for suja-dresi (butter tea and sweet rice) and nominated the village’s best cook, Ap Dago, to make the dresi. The astrologer and the dzongda are served first and everyone else sits on the grass in two rows their cups and bowls placed in front of them for the suja and dresi.

Now the houses are brightly lit with naked bulbs at night. Children do their homework and women weave. The village is changing. The people are changing. Thrimi has married a 55-year old former government official who bought land from an old couple who have left the village to retire into a life of Buddhist practice. The couple sold their land because their two sons have both left home, one to join the civil service and one to become a monk.

Everyone calls Thrimi’s husband “dasho” because he had been an official. He had resigned from the government and made money by becoming a trader. He has built a new house with the village’s first zinc roof. It glistens in the sun, in stark contrast to the traditional wooden shingles that the others used. He also brought from Thimphu a large-size rice cooker, an electric pan to cook meat dishes, and a refrigerator. He has a special sitting room in his house, with a sofa set and two *choedroms* to entertain visiting officials.

Nado is a telephone line-man at the district telephone exchange. He left the village to look for a job. He is trained to look after the telephone line between the Thinleygang exchange and Lobeysa. His parents still look after 17 cows, grazing them during the day and milking them in the morning and evenings to produce butter and cheese. They sell the produce at the Thimphu market.

“No archery this year, huh?” Kuenley is sitting on the raised edge of a terrace. His childhood friend, Tenzing, is ploughing the field, his right on the plough handle, pushing the ploughshare into the ground to get a deep groove, his left hand maneuvering two oxen with a long wooden cane. Tenzing looks around at the rows of unploughed terraces. “It’ll probably take me until Losar to finish these,” he says. Kuenley finds his friends changed every year. At 14 years he is in Class IX, a boy grappling with homework, obsessed with basketball. The 14-year olds in the village are men with adult responsibilities.

It is February. As they do every year, Kuenley and his mother go to Lobeysa village to make offerings at Chhimi Lhakhang, the 15th-century lhakhang built by the popular saint, Drukpa Kuenley. Drukpa Kuenley strikes a chord in the Bhutanese people because of the outrageous antics he used to overcome evil and to expose the hypocrisy in society, including the religious hierarchy. His teachings are often expressed as graphic sexual exploits, symbolic of his “crazy wisdom”.

The lhakhang, according to legend, is built on the spot where he subjugated the Dochu-la demoness who was terrorizing the people in the valley. It sits on top of the dramatic hillock that resembles a giant breast. On most days a stream of pilgrims are seen on the bare grassy slope leading to the lhakhang. Many are pregnant and many carry babies to be named because Drukpa Kuenley is most revered for his blessings of fertility for which pilgrims come from all parts of the country. Kuenley’s own parents had lost three babies before him and have no doubt that he survived because they made the pilgrimage to Chhimi Lhakhang when his mother was pregnant with him. So every year, his mother packs rice, meat, fruit, and a bottle of alcohol to be offered to his “spiritual father”.

They stop at the village shop in Lobesa valley to buy a packet of dalda (oil) and a roll of incense sticks. It is a warm afternoon, typical for Lobeysa valley. Last year the government had introduced a second crop of paddy, in autumn, so the people had two harvests and doubled their

income. But this year many families refused because it was too much work. They had no time for their winter festivals, archery matches, and the favourite winter pastime, basking in the sun.

A group of children are leaning on the open windowsill of the shop, gazing longingly at the variety of imported fizzy drinks in the store that they cannot afford. Some older village boys are gathered outside the shop to stare at the latest attraction in the village, a large glossy advertisement for a new soda drink.

The advertisement shows a fair-skinned dark-haired model lying on her side, her raised head resting on her left hand, propped up by the elbow. She is wearing a red bikini. Her slim body is sensuously poised so that the curve of her waist and hips resembles the “waist” of the pepsi bottle that she holds in her right hand. Her red bikini and the dark red liquid in the bottle contrast sharply against the blue backdrop of the billboard. But it is her bare arms, hips and thighs that are best accentuated in the picture.

“Is she made of plastic?” says one. They break into laughter. They are all in the late teens. Three of them are wearing grimy singlets and shorts that were once white. Two of them are wearing ghos with the tops taken off and sleeves wrapped around their waists.

“I don’t know what she’s made of but Drukpa Kuenley would know what to do with her,” says another. They all laugh.

Twelve-year old Kuenley is not amazed by the billboard because he has seen many of them in Thimphu. He has even watched television. His uncle’s boss in Thimphu bought a television set when he went on a study tour to Bangkok. One day his uncle had sent him with some papers to the boss’s house. The boss was not home so his wife had allowed Kuenley to wait in the sitting room where her son and daughter were watching a Hindi film.

Back in the village his friends ask him over and over again to repeat what he had seen on television. He can see the amazement in their eyes as he describes the handsome hero, in fine clothes, who fights dozens of bad guys and the heroine who literally glitters with make up and fancy dresses that change even as she dances through fields and forests, over mountains and rivers, on trains, cars, and motorcycles.

Coming of age

“This is a precious load,” says Kuenley’s brother-in-law, Tshering. The cardboard box containing a 16-inch Akira television set is strapped to his back. Kuenley follows him up the hill. He is 17 years old and has just finished school. Over the past year his family had sent his uncle bags of rice, rare orchids collected by Tshering, vegetables and fruits grown on the farm to be sold in Thimphu. His uncle had saved the earnings and bought the television set. Kuenley’s parents had originally planned to buy a diesel-powered rice mill but his sister, 22-year old Yangzom, and her husband, Tshering, insisted on a television set. Two other families in the village already had television sets.

“I hope you are not going to carry the TV set around the village before you take it home,” says Kuenley. Tshering has a tendency to show off. He did that with a power thresher two years back. “Why not?” was Tshering’s response. “Last year Ap Dophu carried a leg of beef around on his shoulder just to show us that he was going to eat meat.”

For Yangzom, this is the big moment. She has cleared the chhoesham room and had the village carpenter make a special stand for the television set. It is placed in the corner opposite the altar, its glistening presence immediately commanding the room. She covers it with a piece of bright red polyester cloth to protect it from dust and soot. She places a vase of flowers on top to prevent the cloth from slipping off. She is smiling.

The two girls stand on either side of the 21-inch television screen, facing the room. They are wearing short white T-shirts and tight blue jeans, with their midriffs exposed. One of them reaches out and switches on the DVD player on a shelf beneath the television set and on comes a Bollywood dance routine. The two girls gyrate with the line of women on the screen to the fast Hindi disco number, their hands up in the air, their hips rotating.

The audience, about 20 men and women and a dozen children of different ages, are mesmerized. Their eyes move from the screen to the two girls and back to the screen. Sitting in front, Aum Zam has her hand over her open mouth. Ap Dophu, standing little unsteadily in the back of the room, is talking but is inaudible because of the loud music. Kuenley, sitting on the floor near the open door to avoid the sweaty atmosphere in the room, gets an occasional whiff of scent from the girls. He just had his first taste of whiskey and feels grown up.

It is dasho’s Lochhoe. He has killed a fat pig and served slices of pork with fat that was four fingers thick. There is Special Courier whiskey and Dragon rum flowing. Dechen, Dasho’s 14-

year old daughter from his former wife, has planned the modern entertainment for the villagers. Her best friend, Deki, who likes to be called “Diks”, came for the lochhoe and to dance with her.

This is something the villagers have never seen before. The girls dance for an hour or so and then show some films they had brought from Thimphu. The guests are riveted to the screen. They do not understand the dialogue but are fascinated by the action. The older people go home because their sight is not so good. They prefer the outdoor dancing of their times.

Thrimi, now called Aum Thrimi because she is dasho’s wife, serves drinks and food all evening. Her uncle, Dom Saymi, is not well these days. He lives alone.

Around midnight Kuenley goes home. Walking past the two girls, he fakes a little stagger to walk like the other men who have been drinking all evening.

It is around noon as Kuenley walks down the path to Dom Saymi’s house. He leaves the next day and is a little sad because it might be a long time before he comes back to the village. His Class XII marks are good so it is likely that he will get a scholarship to India. He will opt for electrical or electronic engineering because he is one of the few students with very good mathematics results.

Dom Saymi is sitting on the bearskin near the window, hunched over a half-finished rope. He looks much smaller than he was last year and his movements are feeble. He works with his face very close to the rope strands to see better.

Aum Thrimi is stirring broth on a small pot on the hearth. She is very busy these days. She runs the dasho’s household and comes regularly to cook for her uncle.

“My mother says these herbs will be good for Dom Say-mi. She got them from the lam when we went to Chhimi Lhakhang.” He gives Aum Thrimi a clear plastic bag with a mixture of crushed brown leaves, twigs, and seeds.

“Oh good, I’ll put it in his broth right now.” She empties the herbs into the pot and stirs it for some time.

“So what kind of dances do the boys do these days?” she asks over her shoulder. “Modern girls dance just like the movie heroines.” She takes the pot over to Dom Saymi and pours some broth

into a cup on the floor in front of him. She sits next to him and rests her elbow on the windowsill, looking out.

“Men do the same dances, more or less.” Kuenley visited a disco in Thimphu when his uncle gave him some money for passing his final exams. Everyone was writhing to loud music in the dim light. Many were smoking and nearly everyone was drunk. He did not quite understand the excitement.

Aum Thrimi looks into the distance. “They are so pretty, the girls. They are so thin. They are so fair. They smell so nice.”

She looks at Kuenley, a gangly five-foot nine-inch boy, standing with his hands in his pockets. She turns and looks out of the window again.

“Better study hard Kuenley. Otherwise you’ll have to live in the village. You have to work all day in the sun. You have to walk everywhere with no shoes. You have to carry manure on your back and smell of cow dung. In the village you will quickly become ugly. We have no choice because we are already old and ugly.”

Kuenley says nothing. He does not know what to say. Thrimi is 27 years old. She has not changed. But the world has changed.

A commentary

This is not a happy story. As Bhutan goes through a dramatic period of history the writer looks at the excitement and, more important, the pains of change. The rural setting in the story, the people, and their lives are real. Their experiences are very real.

As an effort in creative non-fiction, the story is a journalistic perspective presented with the colour that creative narration permits. It is a memoir that looks at a community’s experience without carrying the burden of a conclusion. It is an attempt to make sense, find order, in a response to crisis.

The story is Bhutan’s story. The metamorphosis of a rural society is documented through the eyes, and the confusion, of a Bhutanese youth who personifies a generation in transition. There are no subtleties because the experience is not subtle.

The message that comes through as a small rural community feels the impact of globalisation, in the guise of modernization, is that the consciousness of Gross National Happiness is needed, more desperately than ever before.

Place

The setting is a typical Bhutanese village. The terraced backdrop, scenic environment, and the cozy farmhouses is a familiar picture in most parts of Bhutan. The daily and seasonal routines, the livestock, and the forested surroundings are common across rural the country. Today, some villages have progressed beyond the stage described in the story, some are yet to reach it, but most Bhutanese will identify with this village.

The physical changes are also typical of the development activities that have been the most significant of Bhutan's successes in the past four decades. Schools, health units, electricity, telephones, and roads are the most visible developments, not necessarily in that order.

Since Bhutan opened up to planned development in 1961, its main concern was the "development process", focusing on infrastructure. Roads, schools and hospitals, then electricity and telephone connections. Starting in the early 1990s the focus moved to information age and development of the media. By the late 1990s globalisation and a small explosion of the media, with the introduction of television, had a visible impact on the country. The previously controlled pace of development saw a new momentum.

Against this backdrop the story portrays the lives and interaction among individuals, families, and the community. The traditional lifestyle comes across as a relatively trouble-free existence where the responsibility on the individual and values are clear. The beauty, talent, and strength of one of the main characters, Thrimi, portays the earthy values that is important for society.

Ap Tandi's lochhoe represents the closeness of the community that enjoys a ceremony and party together, the songs, dances, happy bantering, and bonfire symbolising the warmth in human relations. A family ceremony is incomplete without the entire village taking part. The spirituality of the lochhoe, the feasting, singing and dancing, even the flirting, is all shared as a community.

Thrimi's uncle, Domsay-mi, represents the quiet courage and strength of the people who live with the forces of nature without fuss. Bear attacks is a major problem throughout the country

and represents both the abundance of wild animals because Buddhism discourages hunting and killing and the calm acceptance of the ferocity of nature.

Context

The thrust of the story is the dramatic changes that take place in a very short period. The whole story is developed within a span of seven years. The two main characters, Kuenley and Thrimi, are swept up in a transformation that they do not comprehend.

This context raises many profound issues, each of them affecting the value systems and nature of Bhutanese society. While the changes affect every facet of Bhutan life and existence, some are blatant and obvious and others are subtle and long term.

There is the broad impact of development, symbolized by the electrification of the village. The excitement and appreciation of modernization is quite evident. “Our nights have been turned into days” is a widely quoted phrase around the country as villages turn on electric lights for the first time.

With the power line come rice cookers, electric pans, and refrigerators, more as status symbols than necessities in the initial stage. The implements that shaped launched the economies of commercially successful Asian nations are all coming into Bhutan, most of it from Bangkok and some from Hong Kong and Singapore.

The excitement of progress is, however, overpowered by the fascination with television which comes as an aerial invasion since it was introduced in 1999. The story portrays the helplessness of a rural population against the forces of globalization symbolized here by television.

Bhutan’s single government-owned station is unable to compete with the 40 international channels that came in overnight in 1999. Distributors in Kolkota and other Indian cities decide what the Bhutanese audience should watch. Bollywood dominates the entertainment culture that was traditionally

Advertising has a strong impact on Bhutanese society. A subsistence farming population that believed it was self-reliant suddenly feels poor as television show them what they do not have. The Buddhist concept of needing less is overwhelmed by the new trend of wanting more.

The dasho's lochhoe ceremony is a sharp contrast to Ap Tandi's lochhoe. Tradition has no chance against Bollywood. The community celebration is replaced by the hip-swirling dances of Indian television, performed by two young Bhutanese schoolgirls in this story. Thrimi's role changes from being the heroine to someone pouring drinks for guests who are mesmerized by a Bollywood film and teenage entertainers.

The new values come to Bhutanese villages via the capital, Thimphu. The dasho in the village, obviously better off because of his exposure, represents a wealthier lifestyle. His material wealth awes the village community. Thrimi, the prettiest girl in the village, becomes his wife. But she is not necessarily happier.

The thrust of the story, in terms of media impact on a village community, symbolizing the impact of change on Bhutanese society, is the immediate impact on traditional values like the concept of beauty, age, health, home, strength, community relationship. Thrimi, the prettiest girl and the best singer in the village, is reduced to seeing herself as being the wrong shape, wrong size, wears the wrong smell, and feels old at the age of 27.

Do we conclude then that development comes as a rude shock?

Messages

The story invites important questions. Are the side effects of development taking a toll that is more powerful than the effects of mainstream development? This is symbolized by the immediate excitement over television that far exceeds the advantages of electricity as a source of power for utilities.

In a country where there are now an estimated 50,000 television sets compared with 14,000 computers, television becomes a major status symbol and dominates the altar in the alter room.

The role of women is an interesting issue. The responsibilities that women had, side by side with men in farm work, gave them the equal status in society that has been commended by the international community. With television and the concept of beauty changing, and with the new cosmetic demands of the entertainment industry, their work on the farm becomes something to regret and to be ashamed of.

Development is also a direct reason for rural-urban migration. Youth, like Nado in the story, see far more glamour in being a telephone repairman than in village life. This is an element of the rural-urban migration that is becoming a major problem in Bhutan.

Symbolism

The clear mountain spring that provides the source of water for the community represents the purity of unadulterated village life.

The benefits of development, “as night turns into day”, are best symbolized by equipment, utensils, and tools in farm life. The zinc roof has been a common symbol of success and, with electricity, the rice cooker and curry pan in great demand in rural Bhutan.

The lochhoe parties are changing and wealthier families serve factory-produced alcohol instead of the popular home brew of the past.

The most important symbolism is the contrast between the smell of manure that symbolized fertility in the past and perfume that is a part of modern attire.

Conclusion

It is significant that the story takes place close to the abode of one of Bhutan’s most popular saints, Drukpa Kuenley, the Divine Madman who symbolized the realities of life that the Bhutanese have always appreciated. In fact it is the village closest to Chimmi Lhaxhang where people refused to continue double cropping of rice, and double their income, because they valued their free time. This is an intuitive expression of GNH.

But, in a country where the main livelihood has always been subsistence farming, the occupation of producing food has quickly become a mundane routine.

If Bhutan is vulnerable because of the lack of exposure can we learn from the lessons learnt in other countries?

What is strong in the story is the sense of helplessness in the schoolboy, Kuenley, in the main character, Thrimi, and even if they do not know it, the other members of the community.

This is the dilemma of GNH. Recently the King of Bhutan asked the population to not just love the country but to love the country intelligently. He said that GNH must be the nation's conscience.

All this raises the deeper issue of the need for more introspection and discourse. GNH emphasizes the mandate of the state to create an environment where individual citizens can find happiness. This requires that the government introduce appropriate media and other regulations, not necessarily to control, but to prevent a complete destruction of the value systems of Bhutanese society. GNH also requires a close check on the pace of change itself. GNH must provide a response to globalization.

That is not happening. Not in the village in this story anyway.