Tales in Colour and Other Stories

KUNZANG CHODEN

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My Name, My Identity

The Reverend Mother was getting annoyed. Her sweet smile had melted into an angry frown and her gentle eyes of compassion flashed in disbelief and accusation. "Mother says to tell you that you are lying," stammered my interpreter, a girl no older than myself. She was from Bhutan; she spoke some English because she had been in this school already for a year. She was as nervous as I, fidgeting and twisting her handkerchief and shifting her weight from one leg to the other continuously.

The Reverend Mother, through my tear filled vision, was growing taller and taller until she was towering over us. I meekly raised my head and dared to look up at her for one quick second. She stood firm and strong, waving her uncapped fountain pen in mid-air as she watched us struggle in confusion.

"Mother said that your first name and your father's first name cannot be the same. Your surname should be the same as your father's surname," translated the interpreter slowly and carefully. The Reverend Mother was visibly angry now. She spoke to the translator again, emphasizing certain words, and I concentrated on blinking back the tears that kept filling my eyes. Then the nightmarish dialogue was repeated for the third time.

"What is your name?" "Kunzang Choden."

"What is your father's name?" "Kunzang Dorji"

"Did you have another father?"

"No."

The Reverend Mother was losing her patience and her composure. She came forward suddenly and lifted my face roughly, her fingers under my chin. As our eyes met for one flashing second, she announced, "Your name must be Choden Kunzang and your father's Dorji Kunzang."

Unable to explain anything, I shook my head so vigorously that the held-back tears poured down my cheeks. I was crying, wiping my face with the back of my hands in great big sweeps and emitting hiccups that rocked my entire body. My interpreter's eyes were filling with tears, her voice was choking and strained as she interpreted something I did not quite comprehend. I knew my name and my father's name better than anybody else and I was not ready to allow even the Reverend Mother of my new school to change it.

I was barely nine years old; I had never before been separated from my parents or travelled beyond my village of a few hundred people. Now I was in this Anglo-Indian convent, a well-known boarding school, in the Indian state of West Bengal. Ever since I came to the school I had been in a sea of disorientated confusion and now the school administration had found a problem with my name.

The nuns at the convent spoke only English and the only language I knew was the one spoken by a few hundred people in Tang, Bumthang. But the problem had to be rectified, and the Reverend Mother had taken it upon herself to remedy it.

It all began some days after *losar* 1962 (New Year), when my parents bade me farewell, solemn faced and moist-eyed, "Study hard and succeed," were their last words of advice to me. I wonder if they had any idea what studying hard, and succeeding entailed! My quest for study and success had begun with me being told that something was terribly wrong with my name.

The Reverend Mother had lost all her patience and her

composure. Her face was beetroot red and her deep blue eyes shone with impatience. She waved her fountain pen angrily at me, creating a small streak of blue, across my chest, on my brand new white blouse. As if that was not enough she gave a ringing slap on my fidgeting fingers which I now held close to my chest, in a feeble but not quite daring enough attempt to examine the damage to my ruined blouse.

Then she turned and swept away like a gust of wind, her long habit swishing and her rosary beads clanging. I heard her repeatedly saying something that sounded like, "Isstupad, Isstupad." Later I was to hear this word (stupid) many times. Soon, in my eager childish mind I learned to associate this word with all that was negative and I wondered if there was indeed something wrong with mine and my father's names. But by shaking my head vigorously at the crucial time I had refused the supreme authority in the school to rearrange my name, and I continued to be Kunzang Choden daughter of Kunzang Dorji.

Granted the confusion was magnified by the fact that both my father and I happened to have the same first name, but the main problem was that the Reverend Mother would not move away from her singular understanding that children must take their father's surname, the family name. I had neither the language nor the maturity to tell her that in my culture that is not the case, and she had neither the patience nor the wisdom to accept something that was different.

I often think of that incident, even four decades later and at each reminiscence, the significance of the episode is amplified in context to the new emerging realities. In retrospect, I could have told the Reverend Mother that, according to our tradition in Bhutan, names have nothing to do with fathers or families and everything to do with the individual who bears a name. Individual names praise, wish, bless or even empower the person who bears the name. Names, for us, are not simply identification tags but they say something about the person. My name, "Kunzang

Choden", means, 'Perfect and Blessed'. For formal documentation purposes, I would be identified as Kunzang Choden, daughter of Kunzang Dorji (Perfect and Indestructible Vajara) and Dorji Doma,(Indestructible Tara), my mother, born in the year of the water dragon in the village of Ogyen Choling, Bumthang.

More importantly, nearly all our names are androgynous; males and females share the same names. People may have two names or a single name. In the case of single names, it is impossible to tell from the name whether the person is male or female. When two names are combined then it is often possible to differentiate, because the second name may have female or male connotations. Traditionally, in some parts of Bhutan it is the daughters who inherit the family's lands; so why should we carry our fathers' names? If at all we took our parents' names then daughters should take their mother's names. In the past, married women did not, traditionally, take their husbands' names so women retained their names and identities. Their identities as women, daughters, mothers and wives were built on their own self perception as independent, confident, productive women who were economically viable individuals, who worked hard, made important decisions pertaining to their resource management and family matters.

Did I miss a valuable lesson from my encounter with the Reverend Mother in 1962? Was she preparing me for the future when names and identities would indeed conform to other ways? Many of us are unaware that as we adopt new ways and submit to the dominant cultures, we gain a little but may lose a lot.

What are the new realities for Bhutanese women today that influence our identities? Women have been exposed to all kinds of lifestyles and livelihoods in the last few decades of development and change. Some have had the good fortune of being able to choose the course of their lives but many have been propelled into new situations and settings. Nothing is perhaps more phenomenal than the transition from subsistence rural lives to emerging urban lives. While this transition impacts the whole society, I think the

women face a greater challenge. Many women have followed their husbands who are employed in the civil services, the armed forces and now the private sector. Women have had to grapple to bring coherence to their new existence. The social safety net afforded by the traditional extended rural family in close-knit communities has been replaced by the nuclear urban family in a society that is becoming increasingly anonymous and unfamiliar. Not only did the physical world of women change but our own perceptions of ourselves as viable contributors to the economic well-being of the rural household has also changed with women becoming economically dependent upon their husband's income.

Women's lives may have become easier in terms of less hard work and more leisure time but their economic roles and self-esteem has perhaps diminished. In a culture where babies were named at birth and sometimes while still in the mother's womb (*khongming*) by astrologers and religious persons with no allusion to family name or paternal maternal connections, the prefix "Mrs." is unconsciously being adopted, and women's identities are becoming inseparable from their husbands. In this new world order with shared names and identities, women are losing out. The emergence of the "culture of silence" with regard to domestic violence, sexual harassment and abuse of women in the workplace and in families is becoming unacceptable and must be stopped. Bhutanese women have always enjoyed a comparatively favourable status on a regional context as they have never suffered many of the gender based prejudices and discriminations endured by their sisters in the South Asian Region. We are now at a crucial stage in our transition and we must not let go of our hold on our traditional archetypes of strong and independent women. We must draw on these identities and our inner strengths and not be swayed by outside influences and changing social environments so that we can continue to be who we are, as we would like ourselves to be.