

The Monk without Dharma: A Novel by Thukten Yeshi, Routledge, ISBN 9798990353602, Amazon Digital Services, pages-366, 2024.

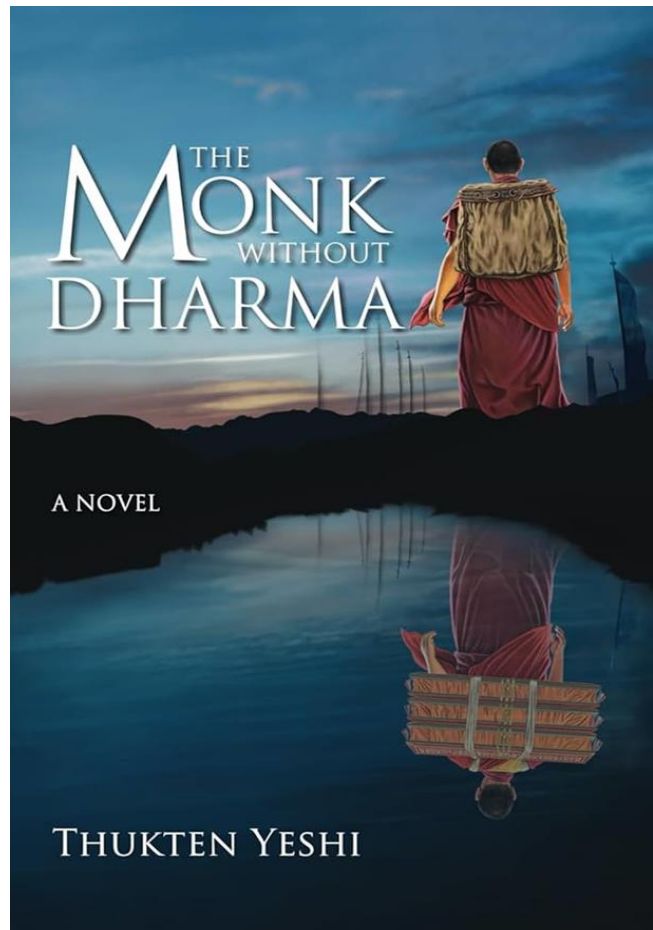
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*“Oh ye who tread the Narrow Way
By Tophet-flare to Judgment Day,
Be gentle when the heathen pray
To Buddha at Kamakura !”
(Rudyard Kipling, Kim, p. 03)*

Dwelling somewhere in-between the category of exploring the existence and essence of the devout devotion of Chaucer’s *The Monk’s Tale* (Btwn. 1387-1400), Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), and Hesse’s *Siddhartha* (1922), the Bhutanese litterateur Thukten Yeshi’s debut novel *The Monk without Dharma: A Novel* (2024) makes its raga and saga in its ways. Reminding, respectively, the monks of Chaucer, Lewis, Hesse, and Kipling in their thoughts and actions, Thukten’s two

monks, opposites in character and disposition, pave their assorted ways of seeking enlightenment separately. In the form of a book, it is a self-published novel comprising 366 pages edited by Victoria Zackheim, an American editor who edits for *The New York Times* and international bestselling authors. The story of this novel revolves around the philosophical premises of Vajrayana Buddhism, incorporating the lives of the dual protagonists, Kathog and Tompo, profoundly exploring their dichotomous paths leading toward enlightenment. The profundity of such exploration is a testament to the novel's intellectual stimulation that challenges the old minds and stimulates the new minds to explore new ideas related to dharma and karma. Moreover, its halcyon narrative adds a feather to its cap; it unfolds such a delicate



thread woven into the grand tapestry of philosophical inquiry on the literary sheet, where dateless dancing of dharma and karma intricately shapes the soul's odyssey, leading toward the luminous shores of spiritual truth.

Title of the Novel

The title of the novel, *The Monk without Dharma* (2024), raises a conundrum by combining the disciplined identity of a monk who lacks dharma, the base of the spiritual and ethical order of the world. This paradox suggests a break from conventional morality and questions all the age-long and contemporary accepted ideals by portraying the inner conflicts of the two protagonists, Kathog and Tompo. In the title of the present novel, the phrase "without dharma" suggests a search for meaning and a rejection of the suggested obligation. Be what it is, but this title serves as the key to the novel, and with that perspective, readers can guess the plot and story of the novel. Whether their guess is correct or not depends on the novelist's intention. What depends on the novel's title, if twists in the story are left, is that it glimpses how the book will explore spiritual disappointment, the tension between personal agency and social expectations, or the search for enlightenment outside the conventional wisdom, begging whether actual knowledge comes from within or outside institutional structures. However, under this title, the novel offers an introspective story that questions ethics and religion, ultimately proposing an introspective trip redefining spiritual goals outside traditional wisdom.

Summary of the Novel

The Monk without Dharma is a bright tapestry of Thukten Yeshe's magnum opus, presenting readers with two young men, Kathog and Tompo, whose futures are as assorted as the sun and the moon but intricately entwined by the threads of destiny. The former, the son of a puissant landowner, is a paragon of lucky karma because of his remarkable intelligence and distinguished pedigree. Nonetheless, the latter, a modest bondservant tied to the former's mansion, suffers the vagaries of an unfavourable destiny for his dreams imprisoned by the bonds of slavery. Driven by different events but the same aims and objectives, both go to a far-off monastery to follow the holy road of dharma. The former's (Kathog's) rapid rise in the monastic system is evidence of his unmatched clarity and accepted heredity, which jointly ascends him to the highest level of a Lama. Meanwhile, the latter's (Tompo's) entreaties for monkhood are turned down in sharp contrast, relegating him to an errand boy's humble chores.

However, Tompo's indelible personality and pure goodness are extraordinary qualities: the quiescence of the wind and the lush efflorescence of meadows under his care. He is caught in the maze of basic ideas despite his constant loyalty; his seeming lack fuels the anger of his teachers. Despondent in a storm, he escapes from the closed-off sanctuary, precariously close to oblivion. However, the relentless currents of karma guide him toward a mysterious monastery, where a revelation of cosmic proportions transforms his understanding and reveals the magical quintessence of dzogpachenpo. When the former (Kathog) returns, he revels in the people's adoration and growing reputation as a developing Lama. Clutching the traces of obscurity, the latter (Tompo) suffers the slings and arrows of criticism without realizing he is transcending into a Tokdenpa of unmatched wisdom. The story, therefore, conducts a symphonic investigation of the mysterious nature of dharma, highlighting the contradiction wherein those least ornamented wear the garments of insight.

Thematic Exploration

The theme with which *The Monk without Dharma* deals is vividly penned in the blurb of the book *The Monk without Dharma*. Dictating the gist of the novel: "Nothing is as it appears," it presents the story of "Two young men—polar opposites in disposition and character but destined to cross paths—pursue the path of dharma. One is of good karma, the scion of nobility with a brilliant mind. The other is of bad karma, an orphan without anyone or anything, fated to suffer and fail" (Blurb). The noble scion Kathog is shown as a dharma prodigy. His wealthy background and sharp intellect help him to be the model of an ideal spiritual seeker.

On the other hand, Tompo, the novel's protagonist, is an orphan thrown into slavery. He epitomizes the opposite of Kathog's nature, and his existence is defined by suffering and social marginalization. He is a "monk without dharma" but a monk with karma. This juxtaposition questions accepted ideas about spiritual merit and the reach of enlightenment. This novel's story explores karma and shows how frequently people believe one's situation is predetermined. Tompo's "bad karma" causes him hardship; Kathog's "good karma" gives him chances and respect. This is the dichotomy that Yeshe challenges by showing that spiritual awareness cuts over these surface differences. Though full of suffering, Tompo's path results in a deep insight into dzogpachenpo, the Great Perfection in Vajrayana Buddhism. It implies that enlightenment is reachable by endurance and purity of heart rather than being the territory of the privileged or mentally talented.

Character Analysis

Thukten's characters in *The Monk without Dharma* exemplify the concepts of round and flat characters, respectively. Kathog, the prodigy of dharma, has exceptional wit and intellect. Owing to that, he rapidly ascends to the position of a Lama. His dynamic nature makes him pass through significant growth throughout the novel. It makes him confront challenges that test his understanding of dharma, character, and karma, in which he utterly fails. This evolution in his personality and beliefs puts him in the category of a round character. However, Tompo, a bondservant to Kathog's family, is delineated with consistent sincerity, hard work, and unwavering faith. Although he faces numerous hardships and is denied monkhood, his virtuous nature remains steadfast. It does not stir a little, i.e., it neither changes nor experiences substantial internal development or transformation. Consequently, he falls in the category of flat character.

The interaction between Kathog's metamorphosis and Tompo's veracity enhances the novelist's dharma, karma, and destiny exploration. Their disparate personalities draw attention to how they pursue their spiritual aims and objectives in diverse ways and react to unexpected obstacles falling on their paths. Kathog's swiftly changing nature and his swift response to the challenges of his goal with sharp wit and intellect indirectly indicate that a “devil can cite scripture for his purpose” (Shakespeare 52) and “all that glitters is not gold” (Shakespeare 76). In contrast, Tompo's ignorance, his simplicity, and his never-lasting odyssey for bonafide spirituality indicate that dharma is alive not because of such one that enchants great mantras with mean soul but because of such one that is unknown to great mantras but possesses the piousness of the soul. It is the fact that deepens the thematic exploration of the novel, making people crazy for it.

Excerpt from the Book

The success of a book does not depend on the plot construction, story narration, and character portrayal. It also depends on cryptic lines that play a significant role. Such cryptic lines that catch the readers' hearts' eyes contribute to its success. A good single line lines the mood of the readers, changing their mode of seeing the world and its belongings. Yeshe's *The Monk without Dharma* does not fail in this context. It has several lines that arrest the soul of the readers for their cause. For illustration, as he writes:

If your life is hard, it is meant to be for a reason. Sometimes, everything in life is designed to test and prepare us. In the working of karma, it is often not as it seems. A misfortune today may bring a fortune tomorrow, and a fortune today may bring a misfortune tomorrow (p. 168).

Every word of these lines reveals one thing, and that one thing is philosophy. Unlike philosophers who bind simple philosophy with hard words. Nevertheless, like such philosophers who bind complex philosophy with simple words. The next lines that can be illustrated in this queue follow as follows:

I find it funny because the mountain doesn't have silver or gold from any side, nor does it appear silvery or golden. These are names, and with little meaning. Likewise that giant rocky mountain, which has neither copper nor looks coppery, is called Copper Mountain. But then, what is in a name? It is merely a label, yes? Unfortunately, who you are outside by label is exactly what you are inside in essence is the most fundamental thing in dharma (p. 265).

Yeshi does not stop here. He goes beyond it. He goes on and on in putting great philosophy in simple words. His simple but familiar philosophical writing style runs throughout the book's ink. Its best example can be seen in the lines given below:

See, Pentsa, whatever others say and do to you are perceived from your point of view. Those words and actions don't reflect them, but yourself. For whatever happens to you, whether caused by humans or nature, is brought about by your karma (P. 319).

The microscopic study of his writing style reveals that, like R.L. Stevenson, the English essayist, he reveals the great philosophy in simple words. His great thoughts in simple lines glitter even in the murky ways of modern life, serving as the beacon in the ocean of struggling men.

Literary Devices and Narrative Framework

The novelist uses several allegories, metaphors, and ironical satires that make the novel grave, enriching the plot and exploring the theme. Not only events but also individuals reflect deeper spiritual truths. Stern scholasticism overlooks the significance of experiential knowledge, which is criticized in Tompo's failure to grasp basic dharma notions despite his honest efforts. Moreover, to depict the mystical aspects of the novel, the author has fantastically applied vivid imagery. Literary or figurative imagery and kinesthetic or philosophical imagery have their place and position in a literary piece. Usually, the internal states of the characters' minds suggest their surroundings in nature, harmonizing the external world with enteral consciousness. This strategy emphasizes the interconnectedness of all occurrences and enhances the text's aesthetic quality.

Philosophical Implications

The Monk without Dharma sharply questions the core of the existing religion that has become a thing of hypocrisy with its utterly altered parameters. Through Tompo's ways, rays, and pays, Yeshe contends that genuine knowledge about dharma does not come from rote learning or intellectual aptitude. Rather than this, it comes from direct experience, feelings, and musings. According to him, like other fields of life, practice perfects person in it also. This thought aligns with Dzogchen's dharma concepts and his three paths, view, practice, and conduct, to underline the importance of realizing one's real nature and the mind's and soul's inherent purity. The book also challenges the conventional wisdom in seeing monastic life as the exclusive or superior path to enlightenment. Tompo's final realization—spiritual awakening transcends institutional settings beyond the traditional monastic framework—amazes the literary and philosophical world in its ways. His viewpoint about religion democratizes the quest for enlightenment, hoping, as the novelist considers, that anybody from any social or religious background or formal religious affiliations may get it.

Message of the Book

The idea of karma at the root of the novel *The Monk without Dharma* is the leading concept of this book. The story it presents explores the gist that both good and bad things eventually end. Bad things are made right by time; however, good things are not forever in one's life. The reason behind it is the inevitability of change that is immutable in its course. Having such thought in his mind, the novelist presents a story that serves as a reminder to one and all and convinces that nothing in life should be taken for granted. Moreover, the novel's central theme is the fleeting nature of life that, in its course, reveals that appearances are often misleading. What seems permanent today may change tomorrow. The activities of appearances and the permanency of things jointly shape a person's destiny, whether good or bad. Whatever it is, no state, prosperity, or suffering lasts forever. Brooding with this thought, the novelist reaffirms that neither comfort nor adversity lasts forever; this cyclical pattern emphasizes how fleeting human experiences are. The narrative asks readers to consider the more profound mechanisms of cause and effect via this perspective. It calls into question the appearance of stability and exhorts people to acknowledge that reality is dynamic and ever-evolving. The things that seem permanent to human beings may eventually crumble, and this crumbling of the things exposes a distant reality lying under the surface. Consequently, the story of this novel offers a significant lesson: everything is prone to change, and nothing is as it appears.

Critical Analysis and Cultural Context

Since its May 2024 publication, *The Monk without Dharma* has drawn notice for its astute presentation of Himalayan tantric Buddhism. Readers have commended Yeshe for deftly weaving challenging philosophical concepts into engaging narratives. Readers from the nook and corner of the world are crazy after this book. The simple reason behind it is dealing with a dual sphere of life: the physical and the metaphysical. Its plot, story, and character portrayal catch the eyes of the readers, denoting that philosophy does not ever need philosophical language. As a book, for some, 'it shows the essence of dharma in simplest terms, written for layman's understanding.' For others, its protagonist (Tompo) is nothing but the readers' existence and essence. More than this, this book contributes to the growing corpus of Bhutanese literature meant to convey ancient spiritual practices in a contemporary context. Because of personal experience, Yeshe's works provide a nuanced perspective that honours traditional knowledge while challenging readers to rethink it.

Last consideration

In this compelling novel, *The Monk without Dharma*, Yeshe examines spirituality, challenging existing and received knowledge. To him, appearances are often deceitful in spirituality, and firm faith with a pure heart is hard to find. For this, through the different pathways followed by Kathog and Tompo, the book demonstrates how everyone who desires enlightenment may access the road rather than being exclusive or straightforward; otherwise, Keats' quotes on monk, monastery, and imagination go on. The quote follows: " My imagination is a monastery and I am its monk...you must explain my metaph to yourself" (p. 390). However, Yeshe's attractive title, palpable story, thought-provoking theme, familiar-looking characters, mesmerizing events and incidents, analytical narrative, and, more than this, his colloquial diction gently forces readers to examine the essence of spiritual realization, the meaning of dharma, and the purpose of karma together with the simple but glittering contemplation that appearances are often deceptive.

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Note:

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