

Pretty Woman

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Date: 23.07.2010

Category: Orality

[NOTE: Bhutan is a small Buddhist kingdom in the Himalaya Mountains.] Dasho Kinley Dorji, former chief editor of Bhutan's Kuensel News Corp, feels his country is going through difficult times, on the road to a complete destruction of the country's values systems. One way to combat that, he believes, is to create stories calling attention to the situation and ensure that those stories are shared and heard. His creative non-fiction short story *Pretty Woman* portrays how the introduction of television to Bhutan in 1999 thrust the country into dramatic and painful change. The story tells how, over a period of seven years, a young boy and a young woman collide with forces much greater than themselves, their community and even their country. She was the prettiest girl around - strong, sun-darkened, and hard working, with a face as round as the moon and a singing voice that enchanted all the men. He was a young boy, growing up in a volatile climate of change (still continuing today), confused by what he observes. The story invites important questions, Dorji said. 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. (Electricity comes to the story's setting in 2003.) 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 altar room (as it does in the story), he said. Over a period of seven short years, the country's hero is no longer the king, but athletic superstars and Bollywood film actors, and the beautiful image of the hard working village girl is replaced by singing and dancing Bollywood stars and bikini-clad Pepsi models. The end of *Pretty Woman* is poignant and bittersweet: 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 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 had changed. This story is Bhutan's story, Dorji said. 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 the pair's community feels the impact of globalization is that there is an urgent need to put on the brakes before it is too late to do anything about it. Bhutan is a country crying for help and believes in the power of story to help them. What do you think?