

FILM

TWO FILMS BY PAN NALIN

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Samsara (Ladakhi/Tibetan, 2001, 105 min, colour) based on an original story by Pan Nalin, and directed by Nalin, has the ice capped barren Ladakh mountains, natural lakes, and fleeting white clouds as a backdrop. A five-year-old monk has a reverie of an overhead, hovering eagle dropping a large stone, on a lamb. A stone does crash down on a flock of sheep, and chanting monks give water to the dying lamb. Buddhist monks on horseback, pass along a river. Monastery ghumpas, prayer wheels and cymbals are scattered on the 15,000 ft. altitude. On a mountain top ghumpa, behind closed doors, Tashi(Shawn Ku) has been in meditation for three years on way to Nirvana. His fingers are bent with long nails.

As the other monks arrive at the secluded monastery, Tashi becomes unconscious. The monks blind fold him, carry him to the riverside, where his long hair, beard and nails are cut. He is given a bath ; and a meal of grounded walnuts and herbs. Returning to consciousness at night by the fireside, Tashi smiles and spins a prayer wheel. Next day Tashi meets the senior monk Rimpochery and others of the monastic order. But he utters his first words to Kala, his old pet dog. Musicians in masks, with drums and horns gyrate, while little lamas perform acrobatic dances. There is a congregation of the lay in the monastery. Tashi through his mask, stares at the naked breasts of a mother, feeding her child. After the ritual dances, Tashi removes his mask and remains silent. The harvest ceremony continues, as naked children splash in a pond. At Tenzin Threygey's house, Tashi watches a woman's bare hand , as she pours water in the bowls of the visitors. Tashi gazes lingeringly, as the woman gives food. At night on the courtyard steps, Tashi encounters a young girl Pema(Christy Chung) who holds a lamp. He dreams of the girl. Next day wh'fje leaving on horseback, Tashi spots Pema tying prayer flags on strings.

At the next monastery, Tashi feels disturbed, and ejaculates at night. Another young monk cries. The elder monk, Apo gives Tashi old maps, as he is to leave at dawn. Next morning Tashi rides away alone, with his dog. Halting at a ghumpa embedded in cavernous rocks, Tashi meets an old monk, Jhulley, who offers him buttered tea and sketches of love making and erotica on papyrus scrolls. Tashi laughs as religious scrolls follow. He has inner doubts. Everything to contact is a manner to pass the way. Even Buddha was allowed a worldly existence, until he was twenty nine years but Tashi has been under monastic discipline, since age five years. Before Buddha's statue, Tashi is burdened with dilemmas. There are things one must own to renounce Tashi halts by a stream, and takes a bath. He removes the monk's habit, and puts on lay robes. He takes up a reaper's work in a farmer's household and helps in the harvest. The owner of the homestead is Pema's father. In the afternoon, when Pema carries food for the farmers, she

recognizes Tashi. Glances lead to comfort for a moment. Later Pema and Tashi lie on the grass and make love.

Jealous villagemen, led by Pema's fiance, Jamayang, beat up Tashi. Wounds are dressed up by Pema's father, Pema gives her fiance a bath. An astrologer throws three dice, and reads a religious scroll. An auspicious date is fixed for Pema's wedding. But Jamayang walks away, and Pema marries Tashi. Women's chorus echo the wedding rituals, as rice is shared by the couple. Soon Pema conceives, and spins woollen thread. Tashi works in his in-law's farm. The grain is weighed and sold in bags to Dawa, the trader from Leh. Tashi points to defects in the weights, and persuades the farm owner not to sell to Dawa, the trader from Leh. Pema wraps 'momos' (meat patties) and prayer beads in a scarf for Tashi, as Tashi and Pema's father move to Leh, with a truck load of packed grains and villagers. The grain is sold in Leh town, fetching a higher price. When Tashi is away, Pema is seized with labour pains. Jamayang calls for help. Son, Karma is born, and with time learns the alphabets. Night snows and sunlight interplay. It is freezing outside, and Tashi watches a nineteen year old labourer, Hindi speaking Sujata (Neelasha de Bora) drawing wood.

Amidst the harvesting and the rushing streams, Tashi watches Sujata bathe in the mountain waters. Pema walks home with a yak. Feeling uneasy, Tashi tells Pema that migrant workers are not required. He interferes when Jamayang sells the harvest to Dewa. There is fire and arson at night. The harvest is set on fire. Son, Karma watches helplessly. Half the crops have been destroyed. On suspicion, Tashi hits Jamayang. He rides to Leh, throws various articles from Dewa's office table, and flings himself on Dewa. Goons of the trader beat up Tashi. Pema's father brings home injured and limping, Tashi. One day Pema takes the grains to town. When Tashi is alone at home, Sujata comes to Tashi for her monetary dues, before leaving the farm. They kiss and embrace lustily. A monk visits Tashi. In a sacred cave, Tashi meets the elder monk, Apo, in meditation, who gives him a letter, There is a theological debate : What is more important ? - Conquering thousands of desires, or just one. Sujata bids farewell to Pema, and departs for good. Tashi also leaves the farm, with a bag. He bathes in a river, shaves off his head, and stares in a hand mirror. Dressed in a monk's robes, he meets Pema on a valley track.

Pema confronts Tashi's quest for enlightenment, recalling the story of Yashodhara and Siddharth, and their son, Rahul. She is seized with anger and bitter tears, Tashi cries and falls on knees. But there is no answer to Rahul's eternal question : Where is my father ? Pema ponders whether it was possible for only a man to leave a son at night. Love and passionate thoughts intervene. Tashi was approaching 'dharma', and begs forgiveness, Pema departs with the horses, and leaves a box of food, and holy beads for Tashi. Trudging along rock edicts, Tashi discovers the old question : "How can one prevent a drop of water, from ever drying up? The answer is written behind the rock : "By throwing it into the sea."

“Samsara” is a deceptively simple movie, with riveting encounters and incidents. The action is cleverly constructed, and strongly played, even by the host of amateurs. Freed from inhibitions, the young Buddhist monk blossoms and discovers the joys of life. Retribution does not accompany the later quest for redemption. Cyril Morin’s music of chords and key boards resonates and echoes in the mountain landscape. The camera movements are sufficiently mobile to frame the human situations and the bizarre rituals. But the monastic courtyards, the rituals and the pastoral documentation are occasionally intractable, which disillusion the social commentary.

VALLEY OF FLOWERS

Pan Nalin’s “Valley of Flowers” (Hindi / Japanese, 2006, 155 mins, colour), attempts an understanding of time from an Asian point of view. The story commences in early 19th century and drifts to modern day, Tokyo. Numerous meetings with holy men and martial combat try to establish that “the demon exists within a human being, and disappears within.” A train tunnel penetrates to the Himalayas of 16,000 ft. altitude, in early 19th century. With the snow ranges in the backdrop, there are close ups of Ladhaki faces. A bandit leader, Jalan (Milind Soman) tears up a rope, from which prayer flags drift. He shoots at villagers on horseback, driving a herd of yaks. The marauders attack, and the yaks, goods and previous stones are stolen. The villagers retreat on foot. But one girl, Ushna (Mylene Jampanoi) remains. As she had dreamed of Jalan, she joins him.

Jalan’s horsemen play string instruments. As Ushna undresses, there is a storm. Ushna and Jalan make love at night. The lovers represent fire and flame. There are grand rides with horses. A shepherdess sings amongst her flock. The scenario shifts to the banks of the Jhelum, with Kashmiri women and men on shikaras. Robbing along the silk route, the bandits seize jewellery and attack caravans. There is a feeling amongst the bandits that all their misfortune as arisen from stealing, and they are suspicious of Ushna. Another bandit, Yeti (Naseeruddin Shah), with two armed guards is on the search for Jalan, following foot prints and horse trails. The bandits are tired, and believe that passion and peace cannot live together. The streams are frozen, and there is no food and water. A buddhist priest Onpo offers blessings. Jalan and Ushna walk on foot and climb rocks. The bandits plunder gold and silver coins. Ushna suggests attacking the deserts of Rajasthan and the ravines. Jalan is picked up by villagers from a river bank.

Jalan wakes up to find himself surrounded by gunmen, and the Yeti. He shoots Ushna, even without the sound of a bullet. The armed villagers retreat, as Jalan prays over Ushna’s pyre. The passage of time leads to sounds of trains, planes, bombings, and gun shots. The setting is of escalators at a hotel lobby in Tokyo. Amidst the anti-ebola fever in Japan, Jalan is attacked by youngmen, on charges of murder, as he assists old men in search of death. He gives tethal injections, and becomes a protector to those without protection. The students

protests continue , and Jalan crashes inside a toilet. In the realm of various beings, Jalan searches for old and neglected people, suffering from liver cancer. On a rooftop, Sakmoto is too scared to jump. Jalan jumps from a high rise, and falls 72 storeys, and remains perfectly unharmed. He is 197 years old in 2024. Ushna and Jalan again meet through TV screens. They embrace on a train, though Ushna does not have any remembrance of past life. But eternal longing is abiding. A Buddhist monastery appears in the background. Only Buddha knows to convert conflict into collaboration. While lovers are not eternal, sacrifice is true love. Yeti walks through forests and reaches a coastline.

“Valley of flowers” does not provide any shocking reality, nor does the physical track of chants and thuds of horse hoofs, provide any avias of desolation. While Michael Englert’s camera provides realistic cinematography, he narrative is shallow and hysterical. The horse opera, the lootings, the killings, and the hero’s invincible life are bizarre, without any life affirming attitude. The love episodes remain gravity defying fantasies. Nalin’s script is large canvas, but heavy handed and the clotted and tangled story lines are never straightened out by the end. At all stages the film flirts with sentimentality and action drama. “Valley of Flowers” was the inaugural film at the 8th Osian’s Cinefan’s festival of Asian Cinema, at New Delhi, in July 2006.