

## ***The Red Phallus: A Metaphorical Film***



A Seen From *Red Phallus*

*We all live in one story  
But, Different realities.  
Or. Perhaps.  
We all live in one reality.  
But, Different stories.  
And. In between.  
There is just a mask.*

Tashi Gyeltshen, reputed director in Bhutanese Cinema the noted director of *Red Door*, has made his new film called *Red Phallus*. It narrates a gloomy remote valley of Phobjikha in central Bhutan, where Sangay, a 16-year-old girl lives with her widower father, Ap Atsara, a popular craftsman who is specialized in making wooden phalluses. He has also been playing the role of an atsara (a clown) in the annual tsechu (festival) for the last twenty years. Now, he wants to retire and pass on the mask to a younger talent.

But Tashi brings forth a dark secret from the past. The film shows how in the convoluted

world of phalluses and masks, Sangay struggles to find parity between her inner world and the outer relationships. She gets lost in the vast and beautiful landscape of Phobjikha in search of who she wants to become!!!!

Finally, the film highlights how she finds a mask. And behind it, her world, untold, unseen, untouched before. Tashi reveals a universe dominated by masks and phallus, denoting the wild powers of men or patriarchs. In its weaving, the director uses the girl character to delve into the reality lying beyond the masks and myriad covers. This is difficult for young women yet alien in complex realities and social conflicts that tear through them. The film is marked by much symbolism and metaphors. Masks too play a vital role in the film. It has its own philosophy that Tashi wants us to share.

Like the *Red Door*, the director has found it relevant to leave a litotes in a metaphorical osmosis that merges parable and reality;

this way the film assumes a strong epistemic meaning to be found in Bhutanese myth. Tashi has structured his film in an innovative style making it an object of more debate and controversy. Some may disagree with what Tashi means to unfold as a metaphorical treat but seen from within the film emerges in dichotomy as it were. But the plot used in such a mysterious deconstruction that it is likely to draw those who like to see Bhutanese cinema growing in years. One can challenge the concept from outside, but while on the soils of Bhutan, one has to share what Tashi, as its maker, projects. This is good film made with an eye to social myth and milieu.

Says Tashi: “Cinema came to us as a commodity, not as an art. Watching a film became a vacuous exercise born of market. We didn’t get to experience our culture and our own stories through the art.” It is said not many films go out of Bhutan. A conspicuous trend in the film industry is that almost all the films are commercial and mainstream in nature and typically like Bollywood films. The RED PHALLUS is an aspiration to trust cinema and look at its possibilities as an art form. And as a filmmaker, reveals Tashi, it’s his humble attempt to find his own voice.

Tashi Gyeltshen narrates his tale thus: In Dzongkha, his national language, Adds he: “We “release” a story. We don’t ask someone to “tell” a story. And in my own native dialect (in Khengpa from south central Bhutan) we “unknot” or “untie” a story. So, it has a sense of freeing or being liberated.

A story gives me the hope of possibilities—possibilities of both good and evil, to empathize without the constraints of being moral. A story first comes to me predominantly as a question. Asking the right question to myself is the important starting point. I have realized

that a question does not necessarily have to be answered by an answer. A question can be answered by a question too. A film does not have to provide an answer nor necessarily hope in terms of a moral or a happy story. Just asking the question is the answer. So, asking a question is an act of creation, and the very act of creation is hope. You don’t give birth to a murderer; every mother gives birth to a human, someone with boddhicitta, capable of



Director Tashi Gyeltshen

attaining enlightenment.

An atsara (derived from the Sanskrit word acharya meaning a “holy teacher”) is an integral part of every festival in Bhutan. I have been to many festivals and received blessings from the atsaras’ phalluses (symbolizes the genuine accomplishment of wisdom) but personally I have never known a person who played an atsara. And I have always wondered what kind of person could be there inside, behind that funny red mask and weird red costume? Are the symbolism and the sanctity of the outer shell more important than the person



Character Sangay in *Red Phallus*

inside? But we are also the victims of our own morals, our own ingeniously constructed morals.

We live in a world that is obsessed with phallic symbols. In the film, the phallus as a symbol is a grim reminder of the presence of violence underneath the silence and stillness. It is a symbol of male chauvinism and humanity's decadence.

So, in essence *The Red Phallus* is about the paradox of being a human. It's about how we kill each other and rape each other and at the same time and at the same breath we talk about attaining enlightenment. How much do we know who we are? Unfortunately, at times our mask becomes our identity?

### **The Red Phallus**

Director: Tashi Gyeltshen

Producer: Tashi Gyeltshen, Kristina Konrad, Ram Krishna Pokharel

Starring: Tshering Euden , Singye, Dorji Gyeltshen, Choten Wangchuk

DOP: Jigme T. Tenzing

Editor: Saman Alvitigala

Release date: 6 October 2018 (Busan International Film Festival)

Running time: 82 minutes

Country: Bhutan, Germany, Nepal,

Language: Dzongkha

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