

*Ala Changso* (nga yi chang gsol rogs), directed by Sonthar Gyal. Premiered at Shanghai International Film Festival, 2018.

**Reviewed by Palden Gyal, Columbia University**

Often a personal crisis has the power of changing one's purpose in life. It can prompt earnest reflection on life, a reexamination of the past and a discovery of path forward. *Ala Changso*, directed by Sonthar Gyal, tells a story where a tragedy initiates the divulgence of a number of secrets that impugn confidence and trust in interpersonal relationships. While *Ala Changso's* narrative centers on a long-distance pilgrimage to Lhasa from Gyalrong, the eastern fringe of the Tibetan plateau, a psychological drama unfolds of guilt, jealousy, and remorse, relating universal themes of unfulfilled dreams and promises.

In Tibetan Buddhism one of the most physically taxing spiritual practices is the prostration pilgrimage which takes months if not years to complete. Sonthar Gyal returns to the theme of pilgrimage in *Ala Changso* (2018), which he explored in his debut feature film *The Sun Beaten Path* (*Dbus lam gyi nyi ma*, 2010). It follows the prostration path of Dolma (Nyima Sungsung), a remarried widow, who upon discovering that she is afflicted with an unnamed but fatal illness, resolves to undertake a pilgrimage to Lhasa. That is a promise she made to her late husband. Menaced by the same illness that claimed his life, Dolma is convinced that it is her karma. In a solemn moment of retrospection, she persuades herself that the cause of her ailment is her unfulfilled promise to take her husband's ashes to the sacred city. *Ala Changso* offers a biting commentary on how the notion of karmic justice proscribes deeply held values of social and family relationships in a Buddhist society. Concealing her health condition to her current husband, Dorje (Yungdrung Gyal), Dolma decides to set out on a prostration pilgrimage to Lhasa. After the two girls accompanying her desert, Dolma is joined by Dorje and her son from her previous marriage, Norbu (Sechok Gyal).

Lhasa is to Tibetan Buddhists what Jerusalem is to the Jews and Mecca to the Muslims, and pilgrimage to the holy city is a common practice for all Tibetans across the Tibetan plateau and beyond. But the fact that this story takes place in Gyalrong is noteworthy for several reasons. First, Sonthar Gyal subtly calls attention to the linguistic landscape of Tibet, the diversity of Tibetan languages beyond the simple classification of the three regional dialects. A non-Tibetan observer might not appreciate the variety of Tibetic languages that feature in *Ala Changso*, from Gyalrongkay to Drogkay and Khamkay. Despite his self-confessed inaptitude at speaking other dialects, Dorje manages to hold basic conversations with Tibetans from across the

plateau whom they encounter in passing. Secondly, the fact that Ganden Monastery is their final site of pilgrimage and the destination for the remains of Norbu's father is notable. Gyalrong, ostensibly a stronghold of Bon religion, has historically supplied a disproportionate number of Ganden abbots, and Buddhist scholars hailed from the region for centuries. Therefore, Ganden Monastery, one of three seat monasteries of the Geluk tradition, occupies a special position in the minds of Tibetan Buddhists from the region. Such snippets of historical memory serve as important nodes in both imagined and real institutional networks that connected Tibetan communities across the plateau in the absence of an all-encompassing political state.

Sonthar Gyal's approach in *Ala Changso* is highly anthropocentric with little attention to the aesthetics of the settings and shifting scenes of the natural environment. The only exception is a long take of the Potala Palace at the end. The camera focuses on the characters who appear plain and unadorned, striving to portray realistic images of the characters. Notable in *Ala Changso* is the absence of a single protagonist. The would-be protagonist retires halfway through the film leaving a mild sense of shock and suspense. Dolma's death unveils a secret that momentarily blinds the otherwise very patient and considerate Dorje by jealousy. Norbu, the sulky son, suffers from maladjustment after his mother left him with his grandparents for the second marriage. He seems to be unperturbed by the death of his mother yet he remains resolute on continuing the pilgrimage, refusing to take off the backpack that contains his father's ashes. The bereaved Norbu copes with the loss of his mother by embracing and befriending an orphaned foal. The parallelism between the orphaned foal and Norbu is compelling but the symbolism is at times a little overdramatized. The foal accompanies Norbu and Dorje all the way to Lhasa. "Ala Changso" is the title of a song that means "please drink up this cup of good wine," and the song underlines a high point in the narrative, a rare moment and an occasion of reunion and reconciliation. Norbu is finally accepted as a member of Dolma's second family and he is no longer an alienated child seeking refuge at his grandparents' home.

*Script: Tashi Dava, Sonthar Gyal.*

*Photography: Wang Weibua.*

*Editing: Tsering Wangsbuk, Sangdak Kyab.*

*Cast: Yungdrung Gyal (Dorje), Nyima Sungsung (Drolma), Sechok Gyal (Norbu), Jinpa (Dandar), Liao Xi (hospital doctor).*