



how a serene place like this can be filled with such complex histories.

As Anam gets out of the church and takes his journey towards Imphal city in a van, Paban places the camera in the back seat looking through the windshield over the shoulders of the characters that will get in the vehicle. The camera, which is always the proxy for the audience, acts as a silent observer and listener to the conversation inside the van. The well-constructed frame with the image of Anam seen in the rearview mirror epitomises the *mise en abyme* technique as a sense of self-reflexivity, a trope in the film. Different people whom Anam gives a lift on his journey have a moment of self-reflexivity throughout the film. The first person to get into the van is a young girl who studies in Chennai but currently taking a break to help her parents. They have a conversation about the conditions of places outside Manipur, especially Delhi, where the girl tells him that it's not a safe place, especially for northeastern girls. Paban carefully addresses the racism and racial attacks faced by northeastern people in mainland India. In considerable irony, the girl talks about places being unsafe for girls when she gets in the vehicle and takes a lift from a person who is a stranger. The film gives a pointer to the audience that Manipur might be a place of armed conflicts, but it's a safe place for women. Thus, the gaze in the film shifts from Manipur as a place of conflict to a communitarian place. Each narrative deals with a certain sense of trauma and reconciliation as different people get in Anam's van. There are conversations about the Kuki and Naga ethnic clash of 1993 and how the victims of the conflict have come to terms with the trauma. Some got healed with time; some took solace in religion. The film cuts these ruminative testimonies with an extremely long shot of the van meandering through the hills. As the vehicle slowly wanders in the massive landscape of the hills, the audience is immediately brought into a Kiarostamian world where the journey itself is the dwelling. As in most Abbas Kiarostami films, where a car is a realm of domesticity, Paban treats the van as a space for

understanding inner reality. Inside Paban's van, one's identity fault lines are not seen or reflected, but the person is just a human who has come to terms with the violent history.

On the journey, Anam loses his way and finds a huge train tunnel being built. He meets a journalist from a different community who tells him the train will arrive soon in Manipur. Even though it's a sign of development, both were sceptical about the influx of migrants in the state. Thereby, the film comments that all the ethnic conflicts that Manipur has been facing have a larger battle to fight through the influx of outsiders. In a self-referential moment, Haobam Paban appears in the film and talks about how he wants to make a film on the hill-valley divide issue looming in Manipur. He tells Anam that if only once they could talk to each other, things would be better instead of hating one another. The director's appearance and conversation with Anam inside the van is a meta moment, as what Paban was referring to in the film is the film itself.

Nine Hills One Valley is an essential film where film ceases to be an immersive experience but liberates the audience from the shackles of emotionalism and guides them towards self-reflexivity. The film tries to depict political and historical reality through the mnemonic testimony of people from the different communities representing Manipur. The film is structured on the viewer's perceptions of reality through the images and not only how the character experiences reality. Even though the film talks about many violent histories, we don't see any pictures of the violence, and as such, the film creates an image of reality that can see the invisible. Even though Anam is the main character that threads the whole movie, the vehicle is the protagonist symbolising the journey towards peace through the depiction of trauma and reconciliations. The car ultimately becomes the metaphor for the ideal Manipur, where everyone from different communities communicates with one another without any identity baggage, just as Paban envisages in the film.