

AN INTERVIEW WITH FILM DIRECTOR APARNA SEN ¹

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APARNA SEN, a renowned actor in film and theatre and a director of parallel cinema, made her debut as an actor in Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya* (1961). Twenty years later she switched to directing with *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981). With this film and many others Aparna Sen has won many National Film Awards in India, and several other international accolades. Her extensive filmography as a director includes *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002), *15 Park Avenue* (2005), *The Japanese Wife* (2010), *Iti Mrinalini: An Unfinished Letter...* (2010), *Goynar Baksho* (2013), *Saari Raat* (2015), *Arshinagar* (2015), *Sonata* (2017), *Ghawre Bairey Aaj/The Home & The World Today* (2019)

FH. You started your acting career in the film *Teen Kanya* in 1961. What memories of Satyajit Ray do you cherish?

APARNA SEN That was my début film. At that age, when I was 14 years old, he was just huge with a booming voice with a larger than life personality, but also very kind. I remember him as being very kind. What I do cherish most was in 1976 when he was the chairperson of the jury of the India International Film Festival. I was a member of the jury and we really became friends at that time. When I made my first film, I took it to him because it was in English and everybody said: 'No one will see a film in English in India' and 'treat it as an intellectual exercise and put it away in a drawer'. So I said 'OK I will, but let me just show it to Satyajit Ray'. He is the one who said 'please make it' and he'd had a heart attack and he thumped himself very hard on the heart. He's got a

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lot of heart and I got a bit scared, actually, because I thought he was pumping his chest so hard... But anyway, these are the memories that I have. I used to visit his house often, chat with him and bats would fly around, fruit bats and I'd be afraid of them getting tangled in my hair so I used to have a cushion on my head, and I'd keep sitting and chatting because I didn't want to interrupt the conversation. I also interviewed him for *Economic Times* on his literature. These are some of the memories. There are many. He loved board games. We used to play a lot of board games together.

FH. You embarked on your career as a director in 1980 with *36 Chowringhee Lane* (released 1981). That film is centred around the loneliness of an Anglo-Indian teacher in post-independent India. In a more recent film in *15 Park Avenue* (2005) a film that focusses on schizophrenia, you show how the female members of a family struggle to cope with a stressing illness that forces Meethi to live in an imaginary world. The link between these two films seems to be the incredible loneliness that can rule the lives of women. Could you comment on this?

APARNA SEN A lot of people have said that almost all my films have been about loneliness. I like to examine the psyche of a character until I get to a point where the person is completely isolated and really look at that part of the character. They are very different films in a way. *15 Park Avenue* is more about the nature of reality because I feel I have known schizophrenia. I have at very close quarters a relative who has that condition, so I've had the occasion to observe it very closely. And I feel that all our reality is actually that, in a very minor way, different. Your reality or your perception of what is happening here today is slightly different from my perception of what is happening. But with schizophrenic, it is widely divergent. Who are we to say that their reality is not real and our reality is real? So it is about that. Is it the tyranny of the majority, in a way? I wanted to examine that point. Of course, it is also about marginalised people. The Anglo-Indian was marginalised in post-independent India and so is a person with schizophrenia or some sort of disability and our citizenry is comprised of all these people and yet we constantly look at able-bodied "normal" [her emphasis] upper caste Hindu Indians. That's all we look at in most of our films.

FH. In *36 Chowringhee Lane*, Violet Stoneham muses aloud, "Why leave a place you've known all your life?" but the question remains hanging, to what extent does she really

know India? She doesn't seem to speak Bengali even though she's lived there all her life. Through characters like Violet Stoneham and Meethi/ Anu you portray the tenacity of women which, at the same time, reveals their emotion and social vulnerabilities.

APARNA SEN Yes, precisely. We were taught by Anglo-Indian teachers, who were born and brought up in India. But at the same time, they knew India from a time when the British were there. And they really wanted to identify more with the British and less with the Indians. But the Indians rejected them. For instance, if an Indian boy wanted to marry an Anglo-Indian girl, this was considered very *infra dig* at that time. Most of these teachers that we had knew India quite well. They could speak a smattering of Hindi – a very sort of pidgin Hindi. But they knew what the bazars were like. They knew how to buy fish in the market. They knew the prices of things. They knew quite intimately the students that they taught. They were very kind, very kind old ladies mostly. I think [in *36, Chowringhee Lane*] Violet knew India, more than her brother did. Her brother lives in a kind of delusionary world where he still talks about King George while she says India has been independent now for nearly 37 years.

FH. The agency of women has undergone vast changes in recent years as has the treatment of communalism, yet there continues to prevail a no-go area when it comes to certain subaltern subjectivities, namely Hindu women and Muslim men. In this sense, would you agree that your film *Mr and Mrs Iyer* appears to ask more questions than it answers, and in doing so offers a space for negotiation just how one should deal with extreme situations. Rather than describing it as a brief but poignant love story that is played out against a backdrop of communal riots, would you not rather read this film as an act of generosity and commitment which saves a man's life?

APARNA SEN Yes, of course, but there is more to it than that. It started out as a love story, as a love story during a journey. I felt that a physical journey makes a wonderful metaphor for an internal journey, where people change during the journey because of the experiences that they have. Now, they were not meant to be Hindu and Muslim. I don't know how that came in. It must be a part of the subconscious, which I don't want to analyse too much, because that's part of the magic of creativity. In 1992, when Babri Masjid was destroyed on the 6th of December, everything changed. India changed. India changed in that such a violent, unconstitutional act could take place and go unpunished.

I mean, even up to the night before, my father and I were saying ‘No, no, India is a secular country. It can’t really happen; they’re just talking about it...’ and it happened right before our eyes. I’ve also been an editor of a Bengali magazine for 19 years and most of my editorials, as my colleague Rituparno Ghosh, also a film maker and also the editor of another magazine in the same company, said, about 60% of my editorials were about communal harmony, the two important communities in India, the majority community of Hindus and the minority community – a large minority community– of Muslims. I think it must have just happened that the characters in the film turned out to be Hindu and Muslim and it is not a coincidence that she was from the South. Because I found that in the South, most men and women, are very grounded, very rooted to the soil and connected with their culture and, at the same time, they are very brilliant: they go abroad, they study, they are very good in science and maths. It is possible for somebody so rooted in her culture that she will not eat this kind of food, touched by this kind of person etc. For her to make that leap that she does, it is really an act of kindness and also of the humanism that I firmly believe exists inside the ordinary citizen.

FH. You don’t portray the Indian male in a very flattering light, but you do seem to highlight the importance of the role of women as mediators and conciliators.

APARNA SEN They have not been [portrayed in a flattering light] in my earlier films, I think. But then, later on, people kept saying that my male characters are, in a way, some sort of fantasy males because males like that do not exist. I said that I maybe set them up as examples. You need to see this new film of mine. *Ghawre Bairey Aaj* - which is *Home and the World* - where one of the three protagonists in Tagore was a landlord, a very liberal landlord and, over here, he cannot be landlord anymore. Instead, he is the online publishing editor of a journal called *India Online* and he has variable views, very secular views. I am a bit of an activist – I guess I am because I firmly believe in my idea of India, which is a diverse, secular India. And it is now very badly threatened in the present situation.

FH. You have said in an interview that some women film directors in India play according to the rules of the patriarchal system and that is perhaps the key to their success. Are you saying that sometimes women are women’s worst enemies?

APARNA SEN I am not, really. I think that there was a bit more of a context to that. I actually referred to Farah Khan. I said she plays by the rules of the game, with her tongue – and this is important– with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek. Because she plays the game according to the rules but she is also making fun of the rules at the same time. So, I do not. Among the women filmmakers, Farah is one of those and I admire her a lot. I admire her films a lot. I mean they are mainstream Hindi, Bollywood films but there is a tongue-in-cheek approach.

On the contrary, I think there is a great sisterhood amongst women, and I think that is evident in my film *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, where there is a scene which laughingly the unit used to refer to as the “sorority scene”. All the women are there, and all the men have gone out and they do not speak one another’s language, and yet they are inquiring about whether they have food and about where the husband has gone etc. So I think there is a great sisterhood. Particularly today, when more and more women are working, coming out and coming across other more intelligent women. It used to be there, even earlier. Even in the joint families they always used to stick up for one another and there were also lots of times they would plot against each other also. But today I think very much there is a great and very important sisterhood among women. India is a country where feminism has caught on in a big way.

FH. On the other hand, sometimes you do find in the literature that it’s the sister-in-law who tells on the younger sister, who is going out with the boy from the “wrong” community.

APARNA SEN Yes, but not so much today. I think that used to be in the past. Today, at least urban India has changed a lot. But the danger that urban India is threatened with and the rest of India is not so much about women telling on women or anything like that. It is more about nationalists telling on those who believe in a much larger variety of humanism. That is what is happening in India today.

FH. You were awarded the Padma Shree in 1987 and are the recipient of countless other awards. Which of them has been your own personal favourite?

APARNA SEN It is a difficult question. To start with, let me say that awards are very important because they are a recognition of your work. But I think no single award can say the last thing about any work of art. After all, it is something that is decided by a jury, and a jury is a group of human beings who come along with their own baggage of associations and so on and so forth. I have been on enough juries to know that, to know how they argue and what actually happens behind the scenes. But awards are important because, if you are finalist for one CN award at Berlin or Cannes, which none of mine have, immediately, even I, when I look at a film on Netflix I will think OK, this has got an award at Sundance so let me watch this film. So, to that extent, awards are very important. They also make up a very good CV.

I think the award that has satisfied me the most has probably been the national award for direction for *Mr and Mrs Iyer* because I got four awards that time. I mean, the film got four awards not I. I got the award for best direction and best screenplay. Konkona, my daughter, got the award for best actress and we got the Indira Gandhi award for best film of national integration. So, a whole lot of awards. In Locarno I also got an award that has been very valuable for me. It was for the same film, *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, which actually got something like eleven international awards. It had a lot of awards. I think people relate to that film because recently in the Telluride Film Festival I told them that *Mr and Mrs Iyer* has been seen by everyone. Why don't you take my new film? And then they saw it and then they said yes, it's very good, very strong, but we think *Mr and Mrs Iyer* is more suited to our festival. So I think that's a film that people relate to.

FH. In your recent film *Sonata* (2017) you also deal with the theme of loneliness again. Was it a challenge to adapt a play to the screen? I know some critics have said the film is rather verbose but the three women's conversation is so revealing about the issues that concern working women today.

APARNA SEN Yes, I think a lot of credit has to go to the playwright. Mahesh Elkunchwar is a very, very important Maharashtra playwright a lot of whose plays have been turned into films. Many people have made films out of his plays, but *Sonata* was something I had to make very quickly and with very little money. Therefore, I think the only way I could do it was if I could make a chamber piece and have it in one location.

And I thought that we have things about friendships, a lot of mainstream films are about friendships between men. But here, it is not only about women, but women in their 60s. Who's interested in a woman past her prime? Very few people are [laughter from the audience]. Yet it is interesting and there's a kind of grey area as far as the relationship between the character Shabana [Azmi] plays and the character that I play. You do not know what their relationship exactly is. Whether it is heterosexual or whether there are lesbian overtones. You do not know. And yes, it is about loneliness and it is about friendship.

FH. What is your opinion of Bollywood cinema? It is a very general question, I know

APARNA SEN It used to be very bad. But Bollywood has changed along with the rest of India. The globalisation has had one very good impact along with several very bad ones. But one of the good things is that there has been a tremendous amount of exposure also with the coming of the digital media. People are exposed to cinema all over the world. Therefore, audiences are. So obviously, Bollywood is interested in getting into audiences, and audiences are rejecting the old kind of hackneyed cinema: the kind of films that you keep seeing over and over again. You know, there is one film that succeeds and immediately several xeroxes come out in various forms or avatars. And I think audiences are tired of that. They really want to see something new. We are getting here the very strong dividing line that used to be there between so-called, 'commercial films' and 'art-films'. That has begun to blur, which is a wonderful thing. We have films now like *Article 15* or the new ones like *Lipstick Under My Burka* by Alankrita Shrivastava. They have come out of Bollywood. Or even *Aligarh* (2015), which is a wonderful film, has come out of Bollywood, even though these are not mainstream Bollywood cinema. But even mainstream Bollywood cinema like *Gully Boy* (2019) for instance, which was recommended by the jury for the Oscars, of which I was the chairperson. But the reason being, you know, that there are some very interesting things: there is a Muslim boy. This is still today, in India, very important. I cannot begin to even stress the importance of that. Here, a Muslim boy from a slum becomes a success. Yes, in a very mainstream way, but the message is there. I think that is very important. Earlier on, it just would not work.

Member of the Audience: What about the possibilities that Netflix, Amazon Prime and so on offer to release different types of films in India? I think it opens a huge market, right?

APARNA SEN It is one of the things that we're very dependent on. Many of our filmmakers are making future forms with lots of web series like *Sacred Games* (2018) by Anurag Kashyap. There is a very interesting Tamil film *Super Deluxe* (2019) which is being shown on Netflix. It is bizarre, wonderful, liberating and fun. I do not know how to describe it. I just completely fell in love with that film. And sadly, though, Netflix has put a hold on Bengali films. Maybe it is because they think they do not have enough of an audience. Another reason why these digital platforms are important is because censorship does not apply. At least, up until now. Maybe it will later, it is creeping in. But my new film *Ghawre Bairey Aaj, Home and the World* based on [Rabindranath] Tagore's novel, is going to be produced on 25th September [2019] on Amazon Prime. Then it will be available for the whole world. That is the great thing. We are very dependent on it because, especially in Bengal cinema audiences are small so we cannot really put a lot of money into our budgets. They have to be small and, therefore, we miss out on production values. We have to sacrifice a lot in order to retain the production values, if we want to. That is not something you need to remember when you are watching our films, but it will help us if you do.

Member of the Audience: I just want to ask you how your distinct aesthetics in film making is contributing to a post-modernist Bollywood film genre. Do you think that you're somewhere in the streamline which current filmmakers want to project to Indian audiences? Because they're going to the kind of world and particular concerns which are very much into the underclass and undercut kind of society like *Baadhaai Ho* (2018) or *Masala* (2013). Are you there somewhere in your film making?

APARNA SEN I doubt it. I do not think so. They know of me. They know of me through mainly *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *Mr and Mrs Iyer*. My English films have been seen and liked, particularly *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, which has really been liked very much. That is how I have acquired a national image. Otherwise, I am a Bengali filmmaker essentially. I do not know if my aesthetics have contributed, actually. So now, in *Baadhaai Ho* for instance, a woman of that age becoming pregnant and people resenting it first or family resenting it at first and then accepting it – that kind of thing is

new. These are the new kind of subjects that are now coming into new mainstream Bollywood cinema. But it is essentially a middle of the road film. But images are fantastic. No, I do not know if I have contributed at all.

Member of the Audience: How do you think that one of the great cities like Kolkata has changed, for instance in the last seven-eight years with multiplexes coming out? How do you think that has influenced not only your cinema, but for instance also Kolkata's cinema?

APARNA SEN You know when multiplexes came up, initially we were very much for them but unfortunately, the multiplexes, which we thought would be interesting art theatres for good independent cinema, actually catered to mainstream Bollywood. That is what they do. For instance, my film *Sonata* was released there and it was doing very well but at some point, it had to be elbowed out because a big Hindi film came in and room had to be made for it so *Sonata* had to go. So that has impacted us in an adverse way. Single screens are still very good, and their tickets are not that highly priced. We once thought that single screens were dying out. In fact, there is a very interesting film called *Cinemawala* (2016) which was made by a good Bengali director called Kaushik Ganguly. It is about this man who owned a single screen theatre and how he lives in that nostalgia and how his cinema burns down and how he walks into the screen. It really mourns the death of single screen theatres. But now we find in Calcutta some single screen theatres coming up and doing very well.

Member of the Audience: Can you explain if censorship has affected the way you're filmmaking? Or if it has changed?

APARNA SEN It has changed. It is sad that my new film, because it had some intimate scenes, was given an A certificate, but that's very strange because there are so many films which have a lot more violence and a lot more sex and are not given A certificates. So, again, this is about a jury, a body of people. You do not know what you will have as there many kinds of juries. But in the digital (ODT) platform, Amazon Prime and Netflix and Hot Star and so on and so forth, censorship has not yet come into effect. You do not need a censorship certificate. Actually, we call it censorship, but it is not supposed to censor but just offer a certificate. But they get around that. For *Lipstick*

Under My Burka, they would not give it a certificate and without a certificate, you cannot release the film so that's how they penalise the filmmakers who dare to say something different.

Member of the Audience: Would you consider producing a film on Indian trans women?

APARNA SEN Well, I don't produce but in terms of direction, yes, I might do that. In *Sonata* there is already a transgender person. The playwright had huge objections to that. If you haven't seen *Sonata*, it's mainly about two friends who live together and a friend who comes to visit them. Now, I wanted the friend who comes to visit them, played by Lillete Dubey, to be a transgender female. But the playwright had severe objections to that. He said 'she is my darling, you can't change her'. So I then had a Skype-conversation with a transgender friend and I brought in little elements like the attack on the Hotel Taj Mahal by Ajmal Kasab, and how terrorism actually steps into your own homes. Because until it does, like in *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, all the news that you read about, so many people being killed, so many people being abused, shot etc etc. All these, even what we read in America, about gun-toting people going to school and just killing off children, these just remain like numbers. After that, you start getting immune to it. You know of course. 'oh god, it's happened again'. It's happened in Washington or some city in India. But if you make a film about it, immediately those numbers acquire faces and then you begin to care about the characters. And then the impact of the whole thing, of tragedy, actually impacts **you**. So it's important to do that. And I think what is important, whether you make a film about a transgender woman or a man, is to include them as a protagonist. That is important. But it is also important to include them among the citizenry that you see in the films. Because in our films, the citizenry that we see is a very selected citizenry and I object to that.

FH. As the theme of this conference is Gandhi and new ideas about his legacy perhaps you could say a few words about him.

APARNA SEN We need him desperately. We need him and Tagore. These are two people – two visionaries that we desperately require in India today. And there is a strong attempt to vilify him now and to make his assassin Nathuram Godse into a patriot. Recently, somebody garlanded him, Pragya Thakur, who is from the RSS, which is a very fundamentalist Hindu party, not political party but a party, which is behind the ruling disposition. She garlanded Godse and then Veer Savarkar who sent four or six mercy petitions to the British when he was in the Cellular Jail in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and who was actually behind the plot to assassinate Gandhi has been given the Bharat Ratna, which is the highest award in India. And Gandhi now, has, I think been reduced to a toilet because Gandhi, went on about having sanitation, which is true but that doesn't mean that's all he was. There's so much more to him. What we need now is what Gandhi wrote about banning beef. He said 'I can't do it, and I can't eat it' but here are so many people in India, Christians, Muslims all of whom eat beef. I can't stop them, and they are as much Indian citizens as you or me. Now that is going away. In fact, that is a subject of my new film. Our diverse, secular India is slowly being turned into a Hindu nation.

FH. Thank you so much for being here and answering our questions. We're looking forward to watching your films as there's so much in them. I just have to beg to differ about a woman being past her prime in her 60s.

APARNA SEN: Yes, me too.

This interview was conducted on November 28th 2019 during the 6th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Interdisciplinary Studies on India, held at the University of Valladolid. November 27th-29th 2019.