



LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

In Conversation with Aparna Sen + UK Premiere: *The Rapist*

An early scene in Aparna Sen's *The Rapist* sees a bunch of slum-dwelling boys mocking one among them for being weak 'like a girl', while playing football. In the subsequent scene, these young adults express their resentment over women getting jobs. With these moments, the veteran filmmaker lays the ground for the heinous crime ahead.

The Rapist is a multi-layered film, which not only spotlights the deep-rooted misogynistic, patriarchal and sadistic attitudes in the milieu of a rapist, but also empathetically uncovers the traumatic after-effects of sexual assault on the victim and her loved ones.

Sen is among the most prominent actors and filmmakers in Bengali cinema, making her acting debut at the age of 16 in Satyajit Ray's portmanteau drama *Three Daughters* (1961). She made her directorial debut in 1981 with *36 Chowringhee Lane*, a key film of India's Parallel Cinema movement. Since then, she has made 15 more films and is a winner of nine National Film Awards.

I believe the idea for Naina (Konkona Sen Sharma) to meet her rapist (Tanmay Dhanania) in jail came from your research on restorative justice. What was her key motivation for meeting him?

Aparna Sen: I don't think Naina knew about restorative justice when she decided to meet her offender. I think she just wanted to know why he committed the crime. And also because she wanted to know what the child's biological father was like after she had decided not to abort her pregnancy. She could have been worried about what kind of child would be born. In such delicate situations, one can be indecisive and full of doubts and contradictions. That's why it's difficult to ascertain a concrete motivation for her actions. The characters in my films operate in grey areas mostly.

That's evident in the character of Naina's husband, Aftab Malik (Arjun Rampal), too. At first, he comes across as the ideal husband – full of love and care – but his insecurities start to show up as the film progresses.

All three principal characters go through an inner struggle in the film. When Naina plans to meet her offender in the jail, Aftab tauntingly asks her if she is meeting him because he is the biological father of her child. Aftab's male ego is bruised as he cannot become a father due to his low sperm count.

I am sure Aftab himself would never have imagined he would behave in such a manner. Certain things are inherently coded in a person that their superego doesn't even recognise. Hence, one might have a specific image of themselves as a person, but there's a lot of conditioning and childhood influences, which brings out an unexpected reaction from them. This happens in all my films. For example, in *Mr and Mrs Iyer* (2002), the character of Meenakshi Iyer (Konkona Sen Sharma), who is prejudiced against Muslims, would never have imagined she would ultimately end up feeling the way she felt for Raja Chowdhury (Rahul Bose).

It's remarkable how you examine the power dynamics between the rapist and rape survivor. The psychological aspect makes the film more engaging.

I deliberately shifted the power dynamics between Naina and her offender during their meetings in jail. When Naina was being raped, she was on the ground, and he was above her at a height. Later, when she visits him in jail, he's always sitting on the floor. So, I reversed the power structure visually. But I don't know if this was noticed. And then later, when she starts to feel more empathetic and compassionate towards him, we see them sitting together on the same level.

One of the other important revelations is that she begins to enjoy her power over him during her interactions. It is terrible that despite having suffered because one was powerless and somebody else was powerful, when the powerless gains power, they're unable to see the powerlessness of others. That's the self-absorbed nature of power, and I didn't want to shirk away from that.

The Delhi police are portrayed as callous and irresponsible. Do you see that as a challenge for the film's release in India?

A lot of police officers are like that. Not just in India but elsewhere as well. Just look at how the American police have been treating Black Americans. It's human nature: when you are in power, you start doing things you shouldn't be doing.

The producers of the film are in talks with streaming platforms. I don't know what will happen, but I am totally against censorship. The release of many films like *Lipstick under My Burkha* (2016) was held up in the past by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC); threatening not to give a movie a certificate unless a few scenes are omitted is wrong. That's a complete infringement of the right to freedom of speech, which is enshrined in the constitution. The CBFC is supposed only to certify and not censor content. They justify their demands for chopping off scenes by asserting that community sentiments might get hurt. That's a stupid excuse because India is a diverse land of multiple cultures; someone or other is bound to get offended. Issues must be resolved by law and order, not by curbing freedom of expression. Holding up the release of a film is no solution; artists need to be supported.

Tell us a bit about your collaboration with Satyajit Ray. How has he influenced your craft or sensibilities?

I didn't act in that many of his films: *Three Daughters*, *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1970), *The Middleman* (1975) and *Pikoo* (1980). That's about it, which is a pity because I would have loved to work more with him. As Bengalis, he and Rabindranath Tagore are people we've inherited, and their worldview has naturally seeped into our consciousness. Ray used to look at human beings not only as an identity by themselves but also in the larger, much more universal context. That makes his work so layered and philosophical. Despite being rooted in the Bengali ethos, his stories and characters had cross-cultural appeal, making him stand apart from other Indian filmmakers. So, I think that may have influenced me.

Also, when I wrote the script of *36 Chowringhee Lane*, I requested Ray to read it, who liked it and convinced me I should stick to making the film in English. He urged me to write to Shashi Kapoor to produce the movie, who has supported some fabulous non-mainstream films. Had it not been for Ray,

I might have never approached Kapoor. I was also one of the privileged few whom Ray would sometimes consult while scripting his films. Discussions with him form some of my most cherished memories.

You and Sai Paranjpye were among the few Indian female filmmakers in the previous century. Now, there are many promising women filmmakers in India, and we're being treated to some great work from the female perspective.

There have been a lot of women making exciting films, and I'm delighted with the number of women who are making films now: Seema Pahwa, Nandita Das, Zoya Akhtar, Konkona herself, Geetu Mohandas, and more.

Interview by Arun A.K., bfi.org.uk, 27 June 2022

THE RAPIST

Director: Aparna Sen

Production Company: Applause Entertainment

Producers: Suchhanda Chatterjee, Sameer Nair, Deepak Segal, Shubha Shetty

Casting: Taran Bajaj

Screenplay: Aparna Sen, Hussain Haidri

Director of Photography: Ayananka Bose

Editor: Rabiranjan Maitra

Production Designer: Tiya Tejpal

Art Directors: Neeraj Kumar Singh, Ajay Thakur

Costume Designer: Damini Das

Music: Neel Dutt

Cast

Konkona Sen Sharma (*Naina Malik*)

Arjun Rampal (*Aftab Malik*)

Tanmay Dhanania (*Prasad Singh*)

Jintender Agarwal (*DM*)

Shravan Arora (*Judge*)

Sukhesh Arora (*Subhash*)

Gagan Bhasin (*Naina's lawyer*)

Anindita Bose (*Malini*)

India 2021

132 mins

LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

LIFF Opening Night Gala: World Premiere: Dobaaraa + Q&A with Anurag Kashyap and other special guests

Thu 23 Jun 18:00

British Gala: Little English + Q&A with director Pravesh Kumar, cast and crew

Fri 24 Jun 20:30

Gandhi + intro

Sat 25 Jun 19:00

Last Film Show (Chhello Show) + Q&A with director Pan Nalin

Sun 26 Jun 15:00

Once upon a Time in Calcutta + Q&A with director Aditya Vikram Sengupta

Thu 30 Jun 18:00

Too Desi Too Queer + Q&A

Fri 1 Jul 18:00

In Conversation with Aparna Sen + UK Premiere: The Rapist (Busan)

Sat 2 Jul 17:00

LIFF Closing Gala: Superfan: The Nav Bhatia Story + Q&A with Nav Bhatia and producer Rinku Ghei

Sun 3 Jul 15:00

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