

FILM REVIEW

Travels through another world

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15 Park Avenue. Director: Aparna Sen. English, 2006

When she is at her best, Aparna Sen takes us through the corridors of the human mind, opening the doors one by one. She pushes us closer to the protagonists, wanting us to feel their breath. Soon we lose the comfort of objectivity and start looking inwards, we start relating what we see to our inner self. At the end of the trip, we are emotionally drained and left with a feeling of understanding.

15 Park Avenue is the third film in Sen's trilogy on loneliness. The first was *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and the second was *Paroma* (1986). The first was based on the theme of the loneliness of old age; the second was about the loneliness of being trapped in a lifeless marriage. *15 Park Avenue* is about the loneliness of being in another mental world.

Meethi (Konkona Sen Sharma) is a young journalist who is engaged to Jojo (Rahul Bose). A brutal rape raises a dormant schizophrenia in her, sending her into an elusive world. This world takes the form of an imaginary 15 Park Avenue, a place where she is married to Jojo, has five kids, and a perfect life. Sadly, this is frustrating for people around her. Jojo backs off from the relationship. Her elder sister Anjali (Shabana Azmi), a university professor, and her mother (Waheeda Rehman) both cope with Meethi's condition.

Compared to the escapist fare that Hindi cinema usually churns out, this film is far ahead. For 122 minutes you get to watch a substantive story. But at the end of it, I was disappointed. *36 Chowringhee Lane* ranks in my book as one of the finest films made in India. Never before had anyone captured isolation with such sensitivity. *Paroma* too had poetic moments that lingered long after the film. So when I sat down to see another Aparna

Sen film, my expectations were high.

The translation onto the screen of *15 Park Avenue's* superb script is rather literal. So much so that it is the dialogue that pushes the story forward. In cinema, words can get in the way of communication. This is my biggest grouse about the film: too much inane talk. This robs the film of Aparna Sen's characteristic sensitivity.

She should have let the camera talk. Considering that schizophrenia is primarily a mental condition and film is a medium that best approximates thought, the visual interpretation could have been more imaginative, even lyrical. For example, in a sequence where Meethi is first shown taking to her imaginary children, the depiction was so objective that when Anjali interrupts her to ask her to go to bed, you didn't feel the jolt. There are other such moments.

What saves the film is Konkona Sen's performance. Her interpretation of Meethi is a lesson for anyone who aspires to play a mentally disadvantaged person on screen. So much so that the veterans around her often seem to just speak their parts.

Despite its drawbacks, the film is relevant. This is probably the first time that schizophrenia has been depicted in Indian cinema without cinematic clichés. *15 Park Avenue* sets right a lot of wrongs done by mainstream cinema to mental illness. What's more, Aparna Sen has shown not just the trauma of the patient but also of those around her. The film is recommended viewing for anyone who knows someone who is suffering from this medical condition. A sequence on shock therapy is particularly eye opening. Counsellors will find that this film is a good starting point to begin a conversation.