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Hidden alienation, sexual repression and the search for Self in Aparna Sen's *Parama*: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract:

In our paper we have tried to explore how Aparna Sen through the portrayal of the eponymous heroine *Parama* has tried to engage with questions of how patriarchy operates through hidden alienation, oppression and sexual repression in the Indian society and tries to control its women through the Politics of Shame and Backlash. It is through the genre of counter cinema that Sen attempts to redress these wrongs meted out to women and also provide an alternate solution to all women. When *Parama* released in 1984 it created a revolution of sorts and is still studied as a supreme effort in expressing women's aesthetics as far as cinema in India is concerned.

Key Words:

Marginalization, alienation, auteur, feminist film, counter-cinema, Identity, Aparna Sen.

In 1976 Silvia Bovenschen posed the question, "Is there a feminine aesthetic?" If only aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception were concerned the answer was yes; if one had to talk about an unusual variant of artistic production the answer could very well be no.

In India there have been efforts to change the content of cinematic representation to present realistic images of women as opposed to the binaries women have been reduced to - virgin/vamp, the femme fatale vs the angel in the house, etc. but mostly these efforts have not been successful nor popular (even today we choose to look at women in a particular way). The history of women film directors in India is not very long and there are only a handful of them namely, Kalpana Lajmi, Sai Paranjypte, Tanuja Chandra, Deepa Mehta, Aparna Sen being the foremost among them.

At the end of *Parama* when the eponymous heroine says, "But I don't have any guilt feelings" and completely switches herself off, having at last discovered her own identity and sense of self, to the dismay and horror of all, especially the doctor and the husband which is all too transparent. One wonders as to whether this oughtn't to be the status quo of all Indian women, especially the dissenting ones and also the silent sufferers.

Meet Aparna Sen, the director of *Parama* which happens to be her second film after she created a revolution in the cine world with her debut film *36 Chowringhee Lane*. She appeared on the scene when alternate cinema was slowly dying a painful death due to the onslaught of Hindi cinema's 'masala' films which by the way is still celebrated and is much feted.

Sen also made her debut at a time when Indian female, non-mainstream directors were totally unheard of, perhaps with the exception of Sai Paranjypte and Kalpana Lajmi who made their debut in 1974 and 1986 respectively. And here was a film helmed by a female director who sought to adorn her cinema with women's aesthetics and produce a counter-cinema of sorts. The director in her perhaps fought a bitter fight to make a place for herself in the male pantheon of directors. And what a fight it must have been to present the story of a forty something housewife who indulges in an extra marital affair, loses her family in the bargain but regains her sense of self and identity in the end. This she achieves through subversion, bringing to the fore *Parama's* hidden alienation, her socialization and ultimate redemption. For what else is Rahul but a means to awaken and identify the 'Woman' in her.

A Look at Women's Representation and Bengali cinema

Women on Indian silver screen have always been portrayed in an identical manner regardless of their religion castes, class, socio-economic status and the different kinds of ambitions and desires. It is to be expected that an urban middle class woman's story would be entirely different from that of a woman in a village. Films, have thus to be extremely sensitive to the context in which they locate women. To a certain extent Bengali cinema both commercial as well as art cinema have differed from Bollywood in its representation of women.

In the 1950s perhaps only with the emergence of the star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen that women were seen performing a greater variety of roles on screen. Between 1954 and 1961 there was a sudden spate of films by the directors Ajoy Kar, Asit Sen, Niren Lahiri and the Agradoot and Agradami film units which was a unique enterprise of star backed romance and this they achieved through the star couple of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen who were discovered through the hit comedy, *Sare chuattar* (1974).

In most aspects, Satyajit Ray revolutionized the way Bengali films were made but specially in the depiction of his women characters. He made films that were women-centric and allowed his women a variety of roles. He also gifted the Bengali cinema industry with some of its most gifted performers, both male and female. The other two directors who come close to him in comparison are Ritwik Ghatak remembered for his truly offbeat masterpieces gifting posterity with some strong women characters from his films and Mrinal Sen who dealt with contemporary issues and who is known for his sensitive and humane portrayals and also fresh renderings of some women characters.

The roles of the female protagonist in Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), *Khandahaar* (1983), *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), *Antareen* (1994) and others are an interesting mix of innovation and fresh characterization on the director's part and his ability to think beyond the given. Mrinal Sen is one of the first directors alongside Ray to assess the changing position of women with industrialization and urbanization. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* considered as path-breaking films about the agony of the Bangladeshi refugees, are shown from the POV of the woman protagonists-Neeta and Sita. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is the story about a woman's extreme sacrifice to keep her family together.

Tapan Sinha, another contemporary filmmaker of Ray's was identified with films that bespoke of good acting and good storylines too and as someone who made several woman-centric films; they marked a wonderful turning point for Tanuja through *Adalat O Ekti Meye* and a striking beginning for Satabdi Roy with *Atanka*.

In later years, Aparna Sen made *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), her directorial debut-a memorable film exploring the loneliness of an elderly Anglo-Indian lady - Eddie Stoneham. Rituparno Ghosh, has women-related subjects as theme in all four of his award-winning films-*Unishe April* (1994), *Dahan* (1997), *Asookh* (1999) and *Bariwali* (2000). Like Aparna Sen, Rituparno also chose to look at how the middle class dealt with issues of gender, sexuality etc. through a film like *Dahan* which is an exploration of the issue of rape. The women characters in the films of Gautam Ghose and Buddhadeb Dasgupta are equally intriguing.

Yesteryear heroines of commercial cinema too like Suchitra Sen, Sabitri Chatterjee, Supriya Devi and Arundhati Devi also contributed significantly to project the image of strong women in several of their films. Amongst the younger generation of actresses Debasree Roy, Satabdi Roy, Rituparna Sengupta, Indrani Haldar changed the scenario to a certain degree because they proved courageous in performing in out-of-the-box films. Tarun Majumdar is among the last commercial filmmakers

who are still linked with quality Bengali cinema of the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. Indeed, he stands out as a director capable of meeting the expectations of his public, the middle classes with some memorable women characters in them.

Invisible oppression and the Woman's Question in *Parama*

Aparna Sen's *Parama* begins with a series of photographic frames capturing the various nuances of the Durga puja, with Parama the protagonist at the centre. The various frames depict the eponymous heroine feeding the deity *sandesh* (as per puja norms), looking back as one of her numerous relatives' calls out to her for help, performing the *sindoor khela* etc. In all of these frames even though the traditional Bengali (Indian) woman is captured, the essence of Parama is missing. Parama another name for Durga the almighty Goddess in Hindu pantheon, the heroine Parama is only playing a subservient role and that of an aunt, wife, housewife even mother. We miss the "power" that is inherent in the name Parama. Aparna Sen who chooses to name her heroine Parama, which is another name for the goddess Durga and is almost always used as a prefix meaning the ultimate woman or the incomparable one however uses it as a satire of identity. The paradox lies in the incomparability between the two as Parama, Sen's heroine has subsumed her identity in the many relationships she portrays and has none to call her own. Even though exquisitely beautiful and almost a perfect mother, aunt, wife and daughter-in-law she ultimately is reduced to a nothing.

Parama the protagonist is quite happy with this effacement. Here the viewer fails to notice her own alienation from her real self. She is more than happy, willing and contented in playing the various roles of 'ma' 'kakima', 'boudi' 'chhoto bouma' that confuses Sara, Rahul's American assistant and forces her to ask Parama: "What is your real name?" It is indeed a genuine enquiry and one that could be asked of various Indian women who have collated socialization with acculturation so much so that they have effaced their identity and are quite happy having done so. Even on being asked such a pertinent question. Parama does not answer but it is her husband who does so, "it is Parama" he says simply and smiles to which Bubu her nephew replies, "Choudhary"-her husband's family name which acts as a traditional marker for all married Indian women. Her worth in the Choudhury family is determined by her ability to perform these roles suitably. Parama's life holds to light the socialisation of all women in the Indian society, where the woman is circumscribed by an invisible *lakshmanrekha* (marker of the limit of her independence, a sure cause for alienation). A woman's socialization takes place in a certain specific manner in which she inevitably is subjugated to an extremely defined lifestyle which has taught her how to behave exactly like "a woman" and conditions her into becoming the ideal subject: the ideal wife, the ideal mother etc. a male on the other hand is never subjected to such a socialization. Indian society in fact celebrates his birth at first and then proceeds to hand over all sorts of privileges to him. This separate socialization of the girl and the boy exists across all strata of society. It is in fact even stricter in the upper classes which while giving off an impression of liberal attitude tends to be far more hypocritical and stricter in terms of controlling the bodies of its women's socialization, thus teach her to subsume her own identity as a woman in the face of other roles which she has to perform. Right from childhood a woman especially in the Indian context is taught that her father's house is never her own and she herself is almost always described in terms of being the wealth-honour and chastity, thus circumscribed onto her body she leaves for her husband's home (which again is not her own, it belongs to the father-in-law). She is thus taught that right from birth till her death a woman is never her own person, she belongs to the various men in her life, in the beginning her father, then her husband and finally her son's.

Parama's worth in the Choudhury family is determined by her ability to perform the prescribed roles suitably. Parama's life holds to light the socialization of all women in the Indian society, where the woman is circumscribed by the *lakshmanrekha*. Woman's socialization takes place in a certain manner in which she inevitably is subjugated to an extremely disciplinary type of life which teaches

her how to behave exactly like a woman and conditions her into becoming the ideal subject-the ideal wife, the ideal mother etc. a male on the other hand is never subjected to such a socialization, society in fact celebrates his birth at first and then proceeds to hand over all sorts of privileges to him. This separate socialization of the girl and the boy exists across all strata of society. It is in fact even stricter in the upper class which while giving off an impression of liberal attitude tends to be far more hypocritical and stricter in terms of controlling the bodies of its women. Socialization thus teaches her to subsume her own identity as a woman in the face of other roles which she has to perform. Right from childhood a woman especially in the Indian context is taught that her father's house is never her own and she herself is almost always described in terms of being wealth-honour and chastity thus circumscribed onto her body she leaves for her husband's home. She is thus taught that right from birth till her death a woman is never her own person, she belongs to the various men in her life, in the beginning her father, then her husband and finally her son's.

This state of learned helplessness of the Indian woman is highlighted by the director through telling shots and especially through the camera of Rahul Roy, the New York based photographer friend of Bubu. Parama who is first espied working for the Durga puja, a festival celebrated by Bengalis with much fanfare for five days, in which they worship the goddess Durga, blessed by the male pantheon of gods who bless her with divine Shakti and a plethora of weapons for each of her ten hands. She goes onto kill the demon king Mahishashura and saves heaven from being overrun by him and his cohorts. It seems that Parama much like Durga too seems to sprout ten hands while tending to the various puja rituals, the needs of her relatives and family members as well. But in spite of the goddess whom she worships, who has an identity of her own, Parama lacks one. There is thus a huge gap between the self and identity and active role performance. Parama is the perfect and typical wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and nothing beyond that.

It is Rahul who takes the initiative to get to know the real 'Parama' and is indeed the first person to address her by her name while all the other actors in her life insist on calling her by some socially defined names based on relationships. In fact, her husband also refers to her as "shunchho/ogo" which roughly translates as "Hey, are you listening?" which reduces the person addressed to almost a non-player.

Almost as a counterfoil to this character is Sheela, Parama's friend who having set up a spastic school divorces her husband willingly when he chooses to leave for Bombay for better opportunities. As Parama, her daughter and mother-in-law talk about this, Parama's young daughter Esha states that it is indeed commendable that Sheela has been able to move out of her husband's life and establish a life of her own while her mother lives a secondary life in the shadow of her father. Although Esha's is one of the first dissenting voices in Aparna's film nonetheless it is bookish knowledge that she spouts. Later in the narrative when Parama, her mother will flout societal norms by having a lover, Esha appears almost distant and judging.

Politics of Shame

The protagonist Parama's agonized self-reflection is to a certain extent based on her own ideas about respectability. Sudha Pishi's (Parama's own aunt) incarceration and the socialization and acculturation brought about by society via her natal family members leave her with a deep sense of anxiety and fear. To a large extent, her ostracization is also brought about by notions of what an ideal woman should be. Society restricts a married woman to be an ideal wife or mother. Her husband and other men do not have any such demands being made upon them by society. In fact it gives a free rein to men to pursue whatever they want to, be it in terms of professional choices, personal as well as their unbridled sexuality. So while Bhaskar Choudhury is free to make a pass at his secretary in a hotel room in Bombay Parama is even forbidden to go out of doors. Even her limits

are circumscribed by others as well as her desires. This division of male and female socialization is well depicted by the film indicating a deeply ingrained gender politics and resulting in differential power positions. The woman's sense of shame and guilt is not her own creation but has been imposed on her via social norms, beliefs and customs.

When her affair with Rahul is discovered, thanks to a very callous gesture on Rahul's part (or is it an intentional statement of defiance by the director against patriarchy?) when he sends across the magazine *Life* with her semi-nude photo and a hand written note scrawled across with "Remember?" the husband finds it very difficult to accept it. Very soon, the whole family comes to know about Parama's transgression with various family members commenting on it.

Parama takes to her bed shunning all family members living on a darkened claustrophobic room in which even her children are not allowed to visit or they chose not to of their own volition. And when the youngest does, Parama bursts into tears, it is perhaps an internalized response to socio-cultural gendered ideals, and her failure to perhaps live up to these ideas that triggers maternal shame in her. The family then goes about silencing and othering her in a well-planned manner. The husband first goes about alienating her by asking the old maid to look for his cuff links in a deliberate attempt to insult Parama when it is she who has looked after his needs always. When she protests, he asks the maid to help him remove his personal belongings to the guest room. When Parama tries to stop and question his actions he maintains deliberate silence. It is she who raises the question whether he is in fact not feeling a sense of loathing for her?

The 'othering' of Parama continues in other ways too when her mother-in-law whom she has served so faithfully these many years turns her face away from Parama literally and asks her to leave. Everyone else acts in an awkward manner around her, while her older son seems quite angry and disgusted (a typical male response) with Parama. In such cases it becomes clear that shaming occurs in a systematic and ruthless manner only for women. Had Bhaskar her husband indulged in an affair it would have been considered normal and Parama asked to accept the 'truth'. A hegemonic vigilance for perceived sexual transgressions is applicable only in the case of women, in this case Parama.

The Politics of Identity

Much like Rahul who is a freelance photographer, Parama could well have been a successful professional who had considerable skills had she not been constrained and socialized in a particular way. When she goes out with Rahul for the first time she is re-introduced to her own city by him from the top of an unfinished flyover which makes her see it in a whole new light. At the same time Rahul also gets introduced to a totally new Parama who recites poetry beautifully for him. But at the same time she announces that whatever she liked did not matter any longer in the life which she now led. She reveals a lot about herself which makes Rahul look at her anew.

After meeting Rahul she even thinks of taking up a job and approaches Sheila her friend to help her but since Parama hadn't completed her graduation having been married off which prevents her from being able to apply for any job.

Parama's affair with Rahul helps her find her true self. It prompts her to recall her childhood self and her sitar lessons with her teacher on the balcony, the incarceration of Sudha pishi which she suddenly recalls on climbing up to the rooftop and to return playing the sitar as an expression of the sense of fulfillment which she finds.

But when her family rejects her Parama attempts suicide by cutting herself up in the bathroom, a timely warning by the old maid of the family however saves her and gives her a new life. Even as she is recovering the family tries to 'manage' her, especially her husband who along with the doctor

advises her to be counselled by a psychiatrist, thus questioning her thinking. But now the new Parama given a fresh lease of life refuses to be managed and questions the veracity of such a treatment, sending the doctor and her husband into a tizzy with her questioning. She also expresses a desire to forge an identity for herself by working as a saleswoman in the Kendriya Bhandar selling sarees. This idea appalls her husband and he questions her decision- “why do you want to work? Is my salary not enough? Bhaskar Chowdhury’s wife work? I will increase your pocket money if you so wish” to which she gives a resounding reply-“But even that would be your money.” While this idea leaves her husband dumbfounded, Parama’s daughter Esha looks at her mother with renewed respect whom she had earlier failed to understand and support.

This backlash as Rudman and Glick in their article ‘Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes and Backlash Toward Agentic Women’ states, men’s dependence on women (e.g., for sex, sexual reproduction, homemaking, and child care) creates incentives for men to ensure that women remain deferent, compliant, and willing to enact subordinate roles. As a result of women’s increasing movement into the paid workforce, women have started to view themselves and to be viewed by others as being more agentic (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Spence & Buckner, 2000). Although these changes might threaten the status quo, this potential challenge is undermined by continuing prescriptions for female communality (the traits of submission).” (Rudman and Glick 2001:744-745)

We read this as a means to punishing the transgressing female who is supposed to only live a life that her in-laws and husband, his family and society will impose on her or circumscribes for her. This *laxmanrekha* if crossed can have dire consequences for the woman as is evinced by the film. While it is perfectly normal for a man to transgress, society and her family are especially unforgiving in the case of a woman and there is inevitably a backlash against her.

Aparna Sen ends the film with the daughter Esha accepting in her mother’s new identity by aligning with her thinking and her love for a special plant perhaps a representation of uniqueness. Even Parama lets the image of Rahul be blown with the wind- a symbolic representation her own freedom from the past and be her own self.

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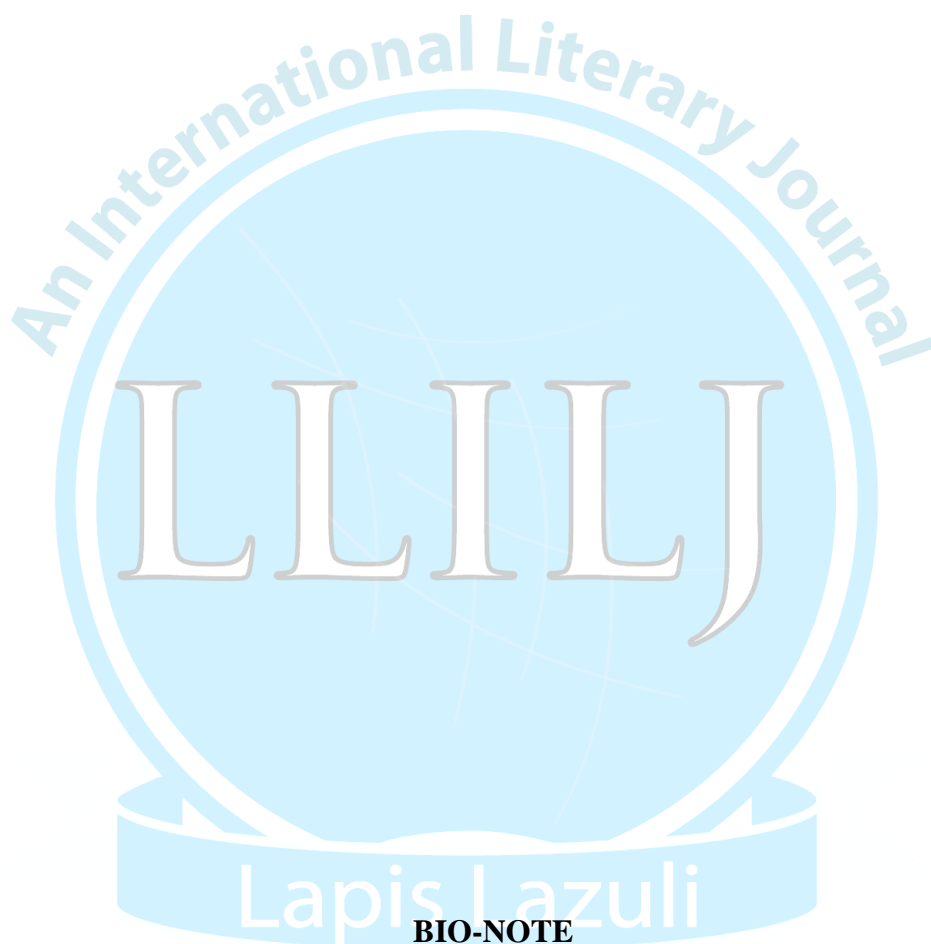
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