

Schizophrenia, as It is: a Picture of Woman Schizophrenic in Aparna Sen's 15 Park Avenue

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Received Date 02/12/22, Revised Date 9/01/23, Accepted Date 10/01/23, Published Date 12/01/23

Abstract: The essay examines a de-romanticized representation of Schizophrenia as depicted in *15 Park Avenue (2006)* and its relation with women and their trauma. It attempts to inaugurate a discourse that has yet to find a mainstream voice. The essay advocates the protagonist's illness as an experience of suffering without conscious realization of her condition. It investigates the position and circumstances of a less empowered woman in Indian society trying to achieve professional recognition and personal happiness. It dwells further to understand the methods of care. Instead of reaching an absolute conclusion, the essay analyses Meethi's inner chaos as a woman and as a person with Schizophrenia.

Keywords: Film, Gangrape Gangrape, Schizophrenia, Woman,

Mitali's Syndrome

The conundrum of mental illness and the state of mental health is an understated subjective experience that has recently gained attention and medical parameters to define it. The study undertaken here attempts to discuss Schizophrenia (one of the most bewildering mental illnesses) about womanhood and

gendered violence. Insel states, "Schizophrenia is a syndrome: a collection of signs and symptoms of unknown etiology, predominantly defined by observed signs of psychosis. In its most common form, Schizophrenia presents with paranoid delusions and auditory hallucinations late in adolescence or early adulthood. These manifestations of the disorder have changed little over the past century" (*Nature* 187-193).

The subject for this study is Meethi, aka Mitali of *15 Park Avenue (2006)*, who suffers from Schizophrenia; she wanders for her nonexistent husband and children at 15 Park Avenue, a place which does not exist. The narration of the plot is non-linear, yet, it successfully delivers Mitali's linear degradation of sanity. The story indicates that the protagonist suffers a mental disharmony (to begin with) which develops as Schizophrenia after she is gangraped. Consequently, it breaks her perception of reality; she develops psychosis, gets entangled in hallucinations, and starts to reside in an unreal world of her own.

Therefore, as essential as it may seem, the disease is far from finding any exact theorization. Its viability mainly relies on the symptoms and psychosis, which does not imply a lack of discussion. The visual representation provides an opening discourse, and its palpability reaches the masses unhinged.

The Spectacle of Madness as Cinema

The idea of motion pictures originates in the simplified palpability of the image, which

conveys the director's intention. The director's vision is the characters' essential qualities and the narration's tone. However, a skilled director like Aparna Sen holds her power and creativity, which enables the audience to see. The film is multi-dimensional and has a surreal atmosphere, allowing the audience to judge and interpret it.

Aparna Sen, a prolific filmmaker, has always been a sensitive observant. She has touched upon the issues like communal disharmony, divorce, and social stereotypes and displays her excellent skills at *15 Park Avenue*. In an interview given to Hindustan Times, Sen reveals that the character of Meethi is based on someone she has known and has seen her suffering. "This is too close for comfort," admits Ms. Sen about her *15 Park Avenue*. "But the role of the schizophrenic girl is designed on someone we have known and seen suffering" whose suffering has been witnessed by her. "This is too close for comfort," reveals Aparna about her latest film that was released Friday." She further says, "15 Park Avenue is my most honest film. It has been born completely out of first-hand experience. I have lived through the trauma of dealing with mental sickness in the family. I love dealing with the question of who and what is normal." Prateek Sharma, a mental health activist, remarks, "I am usually skeptical about Indian cinema's misguided portrayals of mental illness that has, more often than not, bordered on romanticization. In the 15 years since this film came out, I doubt any other Indian film tailored sensitivity and accuracy with a poignant storyline on the subject as beautifully as Sen managed to portray in *15 Park Avenue*."

Aparna Sen's artistry claims novelty. She reveals one of her characters, known as Shruti, a mute girl conceived in a dream, and she pairs her with a tree because a tree is a very Indian archetype compared to a white stallion. She

further elaborates that it is hard to confine the origin of her characters and their characterization as they are woven from different sources. They have multiple life forces. Her first film, *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), deals with the solitude of a lonely woman who finds respite in the friendship of a young couple who later avoid her, and she returns to her privacy and its rest. Sen's artistry allows the film to say the things which must not be said, confront the ugly and celebrate the taboo; in the film *Sonata* (2017), three unmarried women, busy in their lives, spend an evening pondering about life, society, and circumstances and introduces lesbian-continuum. However, *15 Park Avenue* is Sen's tour de force.

The film is biographical and marks its artistry in the best of ways; winning the National Award, it establishes its purpose, which is not to torment the subject or find a magical or an extra-terrestrial cure but to be a true empathizer and showcase the ambiguity of Meethi's mind on the cinematic screen to shock the audience and sensitize the issue by alienating the audience instead Mitali's fate is most tragic, not only she disappears in the end but the audience also witnesses her fall and her condition worsens which never seems to cured or at least relieved. Discussing Pixar's animated film *WALL-E* (2008) as an example of subversive filmmaking, Brian Mattson writes that subversion is the act of telling a familiar story, one that "everybody knows" with a moral or lesson "everybody knows," but making subtle changes and introducing new themes, elements, and symbols that point to a different conclusion than the one the audience was expecting. (Mattson). Like in her other films, Aparna Sen uses the subversion technique in *15 Park Avenue* (2005).

Correlating Gendered Violence and its Trauma: an aftermath

The disease does not discriminate. It subjects all genders, sexes, classes, and colors. However, the relationship between women and madness stands on its own ground with its history. Sometimes, madness was understood as an innate ability of a woman. It was either blamed on their hormones or their minds that they were mad. For the best part of history, women's lives have been dictated by their biological destiny; a protest against the physical destiny was 'hysteria.' For a long time, 'hysteria' was a mental condition exclusive to women. Egyptians explained it with a wandering uterus, while the Greeks found its cause in a malfunctioning womb. Modern medicine does not approve of hysteria and has seen several gender-mutual explanations to understand this sudden outburst of emotions, seizures, and fits. These women suffer their fate of being different and expecting more from the world than it offers. Their sad state results from instances, incidents, and genealogy. In the introduction of *Women and Madness* (2005), Phyllis Chesler notes, "In my time, we were taught to view women as somehow naturally ill. Women were hysterics (hysterics, the womb), malingerers, child-like, manipulative, either cold or smothering as mothers, and driven to excess by their hormones" (1)

The film displays the spectrum of Schizophrenia. Meethi, though diagnosed with a mental condition, lives a socially awkward life and meets Joydeep, who is engaged to marry. In her struggle to prove herself worthy and capable of living an *everyday* life, she goes to a village to

report an election and is gangrapedgangraped by goons. After the rape, Meethi is never the same. Joydeep refuses to marry her, and her Schizophrenia takes a toll on her. She creates an alternative reality where she is married to Joydeep and has five children. Her caregiver is her elder stepsister, who is a professor. Meethi becomes so disconnected from reality that she believes her husband and her children live at 15 Park Avenue, a place that does not exist. The film's opening scene speaks the essence of the story, when Anjali, Meethi's elder sister, and Meethi try to locate the nonexistent house known as 15 Park Avenue.

Anjali: Which way do you want to go from here?

Meethi: To Park Avenue. You know my address, sister.

Anjali: No, I do not. You direct me. I said you lead me. I am tired of this, Meethi.

Meethi: I will direct you. It is straightforward. We have to...we have to take a left and. It is a white house, with a big black rot iron gate. Moreover, it has a nameplate over there..... .with this name, Joy Deep Roy. And lots of brogan villa. Moreover, it is number 15. 15 Park Avenue.

This is a crucial scene, as the story begins and concludes in the same topography, where Meethi is trying to find her house where her husband and children live. This completes the character's arc and the madness that evolves the character. The narrative shifts from the opening scene to Meethi's previous life and struggles, which advance as full-blown Schizophrenia after the gangrapegangrape and the abandonment.

Later in life, when she meets Joydeep, aka Jojo (as a chance event), she does not recognize him and tells him that her sister is keeping her captive. The incident suggests Meethi's loss of memory and her dissociation from reality which has created a distinction as Jojo, her husband who lives on 15 Park Avenue, is nothing like Joydeep, and she has forgotten Joydeep.

The film attempts no way to cure or make her rest in some way, which the audience would expect from the character. The film throws her Schizophrenia in the face of the audience. Meethi, a journalist, goes to town to cover malpractices related to the election.

Goon: Oh, Reporter sister, where had you gone?

Meethi: Excuse me!

Goon: - Oye! She is feeling shy. Where are you going alone? Could you take me with you wherever you go? What is the rush? - Madam-ji, listen! Stop! Isn't she the one from Calcutta? She wants to be a big reporter. Hey! Where is your tape recorder? Get it out! - Get it out. - Get it out! Get it out! Isn't that interview in this? Say yes. -

Meethi: Yes. - Very good.

Goon: This must be too petrifying for her. She got scared so soon. Brother! Camera! - Give it to me. Camera? Will you click more photographs? Take this. Come... come. Have you come to take an interview? Do you want to take an interview? Then take... take my interview. Could you take it?

In the following event, she is gang raped gang raped, and once she

returns, she is highly unstable. Jojo, her fiancé, realizing that he cannot deal with Meethi or the trauma she is going through, abandons her with an apology letter. Meethi's Schizophrenia finally reveals itself in its most frantic form. She starts believing that she is married to Jojo and has five children, and they all live happily at 15 Park Avenue.

De-romanticizing the Protagonist

Mental illness (which originates in the condition of *not normal* as defined by society) has been a subject of curiosity. It has been romanticized in literature and cinema as unrequited love, passionate lover, isolated intellectual, and other tropes. These tropes often do not aim at displaying the horrors of having a troubled mind; instead, they invoke curiosity and sympathy. Characters from these tropes either die in their madness or get cured.

The subversion in the film lies with Meethi; she is not coy like is expected from a person with a mental health condition. The characterization of Meethi is devoid of stereotypical romanticization. Meethi's character is an honest display of the syndrome. She is vocal and often convincing about her hallucinations. She challenges her elder sister, who is her primary caregiver. She constantly looks for her house and children. The spectacle of cinema presents an outstanding boldness about Meethi's symptoms; the audience is neither sympathetic nor amused by her presence on the screen but shocked, baffled, and, at times, crucified. Meethi's tragedy is undoubtedly caused by the trauma of the gangrape and enhanced by Jojo's abandonment. The rape scene is not graphic. It shows the

camera smashing and the cassette Meethi uses for the reporting. As soon as the goons approach her, the audience anticipates what is about to happen but wishes for it not to happen.

The dramatic irony used for the scene by Ms. Sen intentionally foretells a vulnerable women's fate in the hands of brutal men, who would torment her for their ego and display their power. There is no one to save Meethi. Jojo, the man who had loved her and promised to marry, abandons her for his reasons which are justified in society. He is no savior, as the men have been depicted in the art of commercial cinema. He is no empathizer. He is himself and chooses to be so. He understands the warning signs given by Meethi's family when he comes to ask for Meethi's hand in marriage. He submits to those warnings late, however. As the plot progresses, the audience sees him happily married with two children. Meethi does not surrender to her family, doctors, rationality, or even the claims of sanity. She does not care about the claims people make of her madness. She goes on and on to find 15 Park Avenue. According to Dr. Cheek, " She found that female schizophrenics were more dominant and aggressive with their parents" (quoted by Chesler as she obtained the information in private communication, 112). It suggests Meethi's *insane femininity*, a revolt against the *normal*, the reality that has brutalized her personhood.

The plot completes the arc, as the opening scene in the film shows Meethi looking for 15 Park Avenue, and the closing scene shows that she has disappeared after locating 15 Park Avenue. The climax, with its surreal

realism, completes the character arc for Meethi. Her quest is completed, unlike other characters that depict mental illness in different forms of narratives. These characters often do not know if they will be fine in the future to come or bid farewell to the readers on the note that they are still recovering. The completion of Meethi's quest is the ultimate subversion the audience is unprepared for. Madness can be decisive and conclusive. Meethi shows the verve to rise against the system of patriarchy which tormented and failed her not by fighting it but by dissociating from it. In a scene when Anjali, Meethi's elder sister, tries to tell her that she only imagines things, Meethi asks her sister, 'How would you like it if I told you, you are not a professor, only imagining it?' Anjali fails to counter-question, realizing Meethi's world is as natural to her as Anjali's is.

However, Meethi cannot be idolized for her courage, and Ms. Sen certainly does not intend this to happen. Meethi shows the audience an escape from hallucination, but that cannot be realistic and humane enough because "Their behavior is "mad" because it represents a socially powerless individual's attempt to unite body and feeling." (Chesler 115) Of those women who have been declared mad by being a woman or whose trauma was caused by male violence or women who are oppressed in this patriarchal society where gendered violence is normalized, or the victim is blamed for being in the wrong place in the wrong clothes at the wrong time. Women have long been ornamenting society and, being added as assets to man's worth, have deemed

women less than human. The dehumanization of women has been a major not, if only cause, of women's mental illnesses and melancholia. As Chesler comments

'And I began to document how patriarchal culture and consciousness had shaped human psychology for thousands of years. I was charting the psychology of women who, as a caste, did not control the means of production or reproduction and who were, in addition, routinely shamed: sexually and in other ways. I was trying to understand what a struggle for freedom might entail, psychologically, when the colonized group was female. (Chesler 8)

The Polyphonic Feminist

The work can be understood as a *feminist* (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 13), as the phrase *feminist* define women writing as a protest against the definitive where women voice themselves as they experience their woman and struggles of womanhood in a patriarchal world. The film retaliates against the common understanding of mental illness, or at least it protests against the way mental illnesses have been portrayed in Indian cinema, along with the subversion presented in the film is another form of protest Ms. Sen registers against stereotypes of all kinds, whether it's Meethi, Anjali or Jojo, none of them live as expected.

Moreover, the brilliance of the film lies in its polyphonic narration. According to Bakhtin, the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels is "a plurality of

independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices." His principal characters are, "by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse." (Bakhtin, 6-7). Though the titles of the film originate from Meethi's hallucinations and her illness is the plot of the film, every character in the narrative has their own story to tell and their thoughts to express. Meethi is a part of their life, and so is her illness, but she is not their life; therefore, their point of view is neither dominated by her nor is the film. The narrative allows different voices to emerge, like Anjali, Joydeep, and Sanjeev (who is Anjali's colleague and whom she is dating). Sanjeev, who has little screen time, reveals his point of view when he asks Anjali to live her life and go to the USA with him, and when she fails to make a decision, he does not sacrifice his career and life as it is expected from a lover. Sanjeev is an independent man who does not associate himself with Meethi's miserable condition but is sympathetic and contributes his opinion, which makes the film a platform for different voices to emerge independently. Anjali, a college professor, has a thriving career and an ex-husband. The narrative has scenes where she is taking classes, writing a research paper, and going on dates; also, she is the primary caregiver of Meethi, but like a character with a voice, she can be selfish and unsympathetic, which is a very human quality, she often tries to correct Meethi's hallucination. She has her moments of outbursts which are the result of all the frustration and trouble she has in her life.

Joydeep, aka Jojo, who is Meethi's fiancé but abandons her after the gangrape, followed by her deranged mental health. Jojo, though apologetic, 'chose' not to marry her. He chooses his happiness. Years later, he is shown to be married with two kids. During a vacation in Bhutan, he meets Meethi, who is vacationing with family and her friends. Meethi does not recognize them and tells him he is finding her husband and kids. Joydeep, with a mild sense of guilt, tries to help Meethi. During this process, Joydeep's wife is shown to have her struggles and doubts and tries to reason with Joydeep's desire to help Meethi, but often she ends up in tears and sadness.

Despite 15 Park Avenue being Meethi's story, it is a story of several other characters. With each character's consciousness collaborating, it creates 'event potential.' The reduction of predictability and commotion of consciousness makes the narrative polyphonic. The characters developed on their line instead of Meethi's. The narrative climax comes with Meethi's disappearance; while it is shown, Meethi finally locates 15 Park Avenue, the one she has been looking for from the narrative's opening; she sees her children and joins them. However, for other characters, she disappears, knowing that the place she is looking for does not exist. Anjali roams around looking for her sister, but she cannot be found.

Anjali: Goodness heavens, she does not know her own house. It is all right. - Which world are you living in, sister? Take the car ahead. Did you see it? - She was

here. - Here? There was a girl in Indian attire roaming around here. There was a girl who went this way.

Man on the Street: Come. - No.

The climax, again, is a result of a different consciousness. Meethi finds her family. Meethi's descent into madness is more permanent. Meethi is permanently lost in the world of nonexistent reality. However, it is her reality, and no one can deny it to her or on her behalf, indicating against the thought which subscribes, "ideally, women are supposed to "lose" in order to "win," Meethi, neither win, nor she loses. She dissolves in the world she believes in, signifying the ultimate choice, untampered by the world.

Conclusion

Women who succeed at suicide are, tragically, outwitting or rejecting their "feminine" role, and at the only price possible: their death. (Chesler, 109). Meethi, who had lost her stereotypical femininity, virginal chastity, and her sanity, resigns to meet her imaginary family, this is a refutation of the audience's expectation, in extension, not revealing Meethi's exact fate but her resignation and disappearance from the sane world, revolutionizes, the fate of fictional characters who suffer the mental disorder. The climax does not conclude the narrative; it creates chaos to be interpreted by the audience. Each character contributes to the manufacturing of the climax, and they meet their conclusion with anti-climactic magic realism. It is the polyphony of the novel which invites such interpretation from film theorists and film buffs. The polyphony is very important in the

narrative, which discusses such severe mental illnesses being suffered by a woman as mental illness is invisible suffering, and the universe of *15 Park Avenue* presents characters growing within their consciousness, giving scope to understand mental illnesses better as it is not a one-dimensional condition. Hence, the film successfully draws the predicament of mental illness, which is inherently chaotic and often anti-climactic.

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