

36, Chowringhee Lane— The Sensitivity Of A Woman's Vision

WITH this, her first film, Aparna Sen has set a new pace for Indian cinema, and shown what breathtaking freshness a woman's vision can bring to the screen. Together, she and Jennifer Kendal have created a work of art that is in every way, technically and thematically, a breakthrough, a revelation of what cinema can be, do, say.

Even the most progressive of Indian film makers have rarely been able to avoid the temptation of presenting women characters as romanticized heroines — with conventionally “beautiful” faces and figures, carefully posed at doorways, or gazing into space with dark, mysterious eyes. Here is a film which looks at a woman through a woman's eyes, and the difference is apparent, is there for us to see and feel. Jennifer Kendal as Violet Stoneham, the elderly Anglo-Indian school teacher, is unashamedly and beautifully a woman — without cosmetic treatment, without affected mannerisms, without eternal youth. A woman like any one of us, our mothers, grandmothers, daughters. She dares to be a woman on the screen, rather than a heroine. Few other actresses have dared this.

And Aparna Sen's camera dwells lovingly on the little daily details, the small repetitive tasks and struggles of a woman's life. She refuses to fall into the trap of providing the ingredients of a “successful” film and makes no attempt to impose suspense, elaborate plot, humour, song or dance. The music is that which is the background to most of our lives— All India Radio; the lights are those of Calcutta's streets and homes, only too often plunged into darkness by power breakdowns. She shows that a woman's “uneventful” life is worth recording in detail, that her emotions can tell us as much about our hearts and lives, as those of an Orsino or a Lear.

In refreshing contrast to the glamorous sets of most films, Aparna Sen creates the interior of Violet Stoneham's flat with the same careful attention to detail and nuance that goes into revealing the mental interiors of various characters. Every object in the flat from the writing desk to the flannel bag in the bathroom speaks eloquently of its owner's character. So too, the unhurried pace of the film is like that of Violet Stoneham's existence. The camera follows her toiling up the stairs, her



Aparna Sen—first film a historic event

work in the kitchen and the schoolroom, recognizing the importance of her daily life and struggle. There is no skimming over these ordinary details to get to the “real story.” Understatement is the idiom of this film. Perhaps that is why the nightmare sequence jarred on one as a somewhat unnecessary attempt to schematically “explain” Stoneham's singleness. Was it really necessary to show her as the bizarrely coy bride of fantasy, whose fiancée was killed in the war, and to juxtapose her piercing screams and torn wedding veil with the schoolroom and the injustice of the principal— as if she was forced to work as a teacher only because her fiancée died?

Jennifer Kendal in this film is so far beyond all stereotyped notions of the beautiful, as to have infused new meaning into the word. Emotional changes are reflected on her face like the play of light on water; her movements are so utterly effortless that she forgets herself completely in the character she portrays.

Thematically too, the film charts new territory. It focuses on a woman not as wife, mother or mistress, not in relation to men alone, but in relation to herself and to the world; a woman attempting to live with dignity and human warmth in an increasingly dehumanized world. It is not an idealized portrait. Violet Stoneham has her prejudices and blind spots, but what comes through it all is her strength which does not build itself on selfish exclusion of others, her flexibility and openness to ideas and ways of life which are entirely new to her, above all, her love of and joy in living, though society wants to push her

into despair, condemn her to lonely oblivion.

She survives it all—poverty, misunderstanding, betrayal, insult and humiliation. And at the end, we see her walking down the open road, moving onwards, refusing to stagnate or be encaged. It was wonderful to see at last a film dedicated to a woman's physical and emotional survival, rather than her suffering or suicide, or clinging to conventional relationships.

This is a film all of us need to see, not just to strengthen ourselves, but because it is a beginning. It begins to illuminate what Virginia Woolf calls, "all those infinitely obscure lives" the neglect of which has so impoverished art. It begins "that elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman."

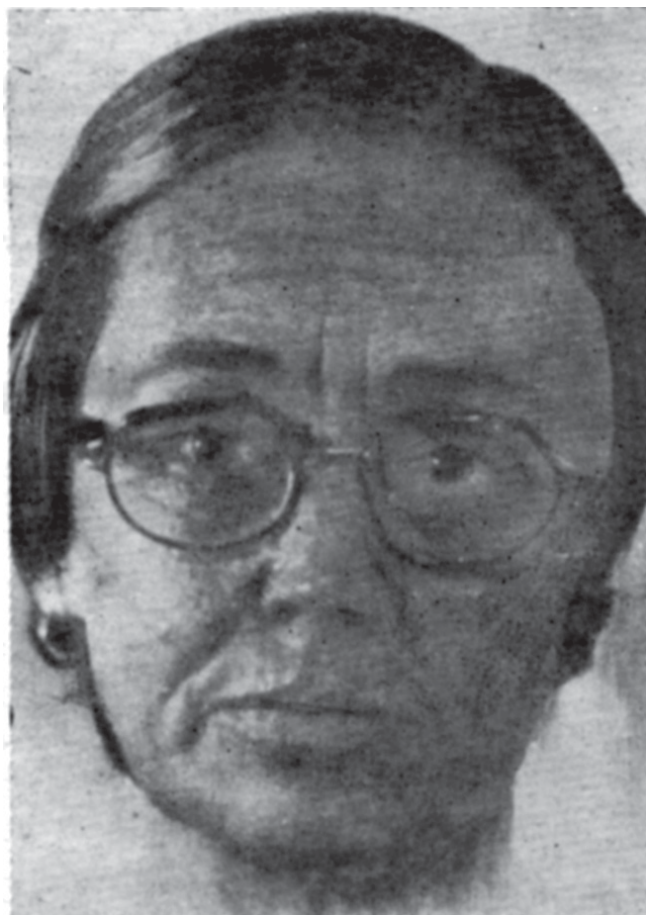
The Kapoor family certainly has a lot to answer for, in having deprived the Indian screen of such a magnificent actress as Jennifer, who in one performance has dwarfed all the male "giants" of cinema that family has produced. We hope Aparna Sen will continue her pioneering work and so inspire many more women to make many more such films.

—Ruth, Madhu

CHAKRA—Realism Or Decadence?

This film has won international acclaim as a realistic depiction of slum life. But the violence it does to women's reality has passed unnoticed.

What does it mean to a woman to live in a Bombay slum ?



Jennifer Kendal—a breathtakingly beautiful performance. Hope we see much more of Aparna and Jennifer together.

First and foremost, she has to face a great deal of sexual violence, in an open and blatant form. There have been numerous agitations by Bombay slum women against cases of rape, molestation, wife-beating and murder of women. However, this supposedly realistic film conveniently reverses the power relations to show women as the aggressors—beating up their husbands and sons, who never even raise a hand in retaliation.

Secondly, the film reinforces the middle class man's notion that all poor women are easily available—every woman in the film is shown and referred to, as a prostitute. The film uses the term "*randi*" as a synonym for "woman." Not a single woman is shown doing any work to earn her living. They are all shown keeping house while the men go out to work. One wonders where Bombay's women fish vendors, domestic servants and factory workers live, if not in these slums ?

As for the male characters, they are all "made up" to suit men's fantasies of their own heroic qualities. There is Smita's ex-husband, an idyllic protector figure. There is her young son, a perfect angel in spite of all his exposure to vice. There are her two lovers—one a truck driver who conducts himself like a medieval courtly lover, unremittingly gentle and courteous, the other a knife-wielding tough who provides emotional security to Smita, and even arranges her son's marriage. When the two lovers come to know of each other's existence, do they turn violent towards Smita or towards one another? Not at all. They make way for each, other in the most gentlemanly manner possible, hiding their hurt feelings. So who is left feeling guilty and appearing small in the eyes of the audience ? Smita, of course.

On the one hand is this seemingly liberal notion of sexuality, on the other is an optimum exploitation of Smita's body—in the unnecessary bathing scene, for example, which is there only to sell the film. And to top it all, the film ends up portraying middle class morality as the longed-for ideal which the slum dwellers are unable to attain. Thus Smita stands at the doorstep, waiting for her prince charming to come and transform her life for her: "*Main baat johti.*" The truck driver is ready to marry her when she starts expecting his child. He then provides her with a dream house, complete with *tulsi* in the backyard. And when she gets her son married, it is to a minor girl, whose tender years ensure her virginity, and who is made to touch her would-be husband's feet, in true filmi style. This wedding is romanticized by the film maker; the camera dwells on the little girl's "innocent" face and unformed figure. On the other hand, though Luka regrets having driven another young girl into prostitution by abandoning her when she was expecting his child, not for a moment is she considered a prospective bride for any man.

The film's variety of socialism is hardly different from Amitabh's "angry young man" brand, which glorifies an individual hero. Luka, the stereotyped tough with imported jacket and pocket knife, is every adolescent boy's dream of heroic manhood. He has, of course, the added glamour of "progressivism." Thefts and violence committed by him are

glorified as social protest but there is no suggestion of collective struggle — though Bombay's slums have been the site of some very militant agitations over the last decade.

Throughout, the film dwells with relish on sordid ugliness and degradation—unilluminated by human endeavour, tenderness or struggle. Its nauseating texture can be gauged from its punch line: “*Duniya mein sirf do chakkar hain, ek pet ka aur ek pet ke neechey ka.*” A film inspired by so profound a philosophy may be revealing the reality of the film maker's mind and imagination but sheds little light on any other reality.

—Madhu, Ruth

ITNI SI BAAT— it turns out to be much more than that

Raja works as a stenographer. Asha is “merely a housewife.” She wakes up early, gets the two children ready for school, prepares breakfast, makes his tea, dusts the house, washes clothes, cooks lunch over a wood-burning stove which takes much huffing and puffing to get going (the household savings go into buying a scooter for him, since a gas stove which would benefit Asha, is considered a low priority item), sends lunch to his office, irons the clothes, cooks dinner, supervises the children's homework, and warms his bed at night. This is on crisis-free days.

But crises erupt at nineteen to a dozen. The sugar runs out, so his morning tea is unsweetened. Who is responsible? Asha, of course. As she is cooking dinner, her son hurts himself. She dashes to the doctor, while the meal gets burnt. She cooks another and has it rushed to Raja's office. Response: “Is this the kind of meal a man expects for a long day's work?” Hoping for a promotion, Raja invites his boss to dinner. Asha cooks an elaborate meal but a crisis is again brewing in the pot. Her son is seen gambling in the park. She rushes to stop him, and a stray dog eats the meal. Raja gets a demotion. Who is responsible? Asha, of course.

How is it, wonders Raja, that the peon in his office has a feast at lunchtime, and a colleague who earns less than he does, has a new sofa set, television, refrigerator? Because their thrifty wives run the household so efficiently, and manage to save as well, they reply. Why is it that his house has no modern amenities, broods Raja. Who is responsible? Asha's mismanagement of his hard-earned income. Of course. QED. Asha may be “only a housewife” but she is by no means a passive one. Women are just as capable of earning a living as men are, she asserts, and points to their woman neighbour, who earns Rs 2,000 a month, compared to Raja's three-figure salary. Raja suggests that roles be reversed—he will take over the housework and she can earn a living.

So Asha finds a job as a shop assistant. While she puts up with passes from customers and the boss' unfair cutting of her wages, Raja learns what being “merely a housewife” really involves, as meals get burnt and the children are penalized in school for wearing unironed uniforms. Comes the end of the month and the inevitable crisis. Raja, having already spent the

month's earnings (whenever he burns a meal, he buys food from a hotel), has nothing left with which to pay the children's fees. He tries to take a loan from his colleagues and in the process discovers that their claims to better-managed homes are false. The household amenities in one colleague's home, for instance, were obtained on hire.

On the other hand, Asha looks for supplementary employment to make up the difference between what she earns and what Raja used to take home. She seeks out the woman who had once offered to help her get a job, only to learn that hers is a call girl den. And who does she meet there? Her four-figure-salaried woman neighbour, of course. “My husband pushed me into this”, pleads the latter. “You should have shot your husband” storms our self-righteous heroine. (This is a change from the usual film dialogue where the heroine would say: “You should have committed suicide instead”). “A woman is born to be a mother, a sister and a wife. Don't let your shadow fall on me”, Asha is made to say. Penitent that she had held up a “fallen woman” as an example of self-sufficient womanhood, she rushes off to find Raja.

As lightning strikes and thunder rolls, Asha falls at Raja's feet, begging forgiveness. Raja manfully responds: “Both of us are at fault.” And their daughter reads out the moral from her notebook (in case you missed the point): “Woman's place is in the home, man's in the office. We must recognize that both are important. *Bus, itni si baat hai!*”

This film is showing to full houses. Every sarcasm of the husband, directed at the wife, brought gleeful laughter from the men in the audience. “If women step out of the four walls of home, they must leave behind their self-respect and sensitivity. Only then can they survive in the work-place”, notes Asha's woman colleague. The poignancy of this statement lies in the fact that this is true for many of the low-status jobs available to women, where sexual and economic exploitation co-exist. But the message of the film is not to question such exploitation but to make women “adjust” to the conditions of male society and stay within their well-defined roles.

This continues to be the message conveyed by all those Hindi films which in recent years have sought to explore problems within marital relationships. Consider the closing dialogue of Basu Bhattacharya's *Aavishkar*. Amar the husband says: “Women are inferior to men in all respects but one. They can be mothers which men can never be.” Manasi the wife replies: “Amar, what noble thoughts you have!” Oh for Hindi films which don't make women look at themselves through the eyes of men!

- Bina Aggarwal

