Suman Ghosh on the feminism and humanism in Aparna Sen’s cinema

Rituparno Ghosh had made a comment about current Bengali films that ‘nowadays people want to become filmmakers but not make films’.

I definitely think there is much truth to that statement, particularly when one juxtaposes that sentiment against a filmmaker like Aparna Sen. With the generation of filmmakers of that era we are losing out on directors who are responsive to the socio-political environment and there is almost a visceral need of reacting to the surroundings through their films.

It is exemplified in the cinema of Aparna Sen. Whether it is about the disturbing communal environ during the early part of the last decade, or the issue of women’s identity or environmental degradation — the gamut of her subject matter in her body of films is commendable. She is a true humanist in the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray and Amartya Sen. Hence the topics she delves into are always under the aegis of humanism and thus do not seem like espousing a cause.

That is what makes her work aesthetically so subtle. Her style of storytelling blends with that general philosophy quite seamlessly. Take the example of women’s identity. I think there is no other director who has represented Indian women of different strata so convincingly — whether it is the Anglo-Indian portrayal by Jennifer Kapoor in 36 Chowringhee Lane, the Tamil Brahmin portrayed by Konkona Sensharma in Mr and Mrs Iyer or the character of a north Calcutta housewife portrayed by herself in Paromitar Ekdin.

Yes, all of these stories portray different aspects of their lives such that we identify with them at a personal level but her feminism is part of her humanism. I know of generations of Bengali women who have found life inspiration from her movies.

Another noteworthy thing in her films is the portrayal of the male characters. Along with the above mentioned female characters, her films have portrayed very strong and significant male characters.

Rahul Bose’s character in The Japanese Wife or Rajesh Sharma’s in Paromitar Ekdin or more recently Koushik Sen’s in Iti Mrinalini are memorable male characters.

The point that I want to hone in is that it is not necessary to portray the other sex in a lesser light or depth in order to espouse woman’s identity. Again, her humanism always takes the front seat in her stories.

She has explored love in different forms through her films — illicit love in 36 Chowringhee Lane, extramarital love in Paroma, platonic love in The Japanese Wife, love in the time of riots in Mr and Mrs Iyer or the daughter and mother-in-law love in Paromitar Ekdin. And her exploration of different forms of love, however against convention, is never judgemental.

In terms of directorial style, she is the perfect amalgam of the visual and the verbal. There are some directors whom one will love for the impeccable incisive dialogues, and some for their stupendous visual imagery — but for Aparna Sen, the two are enmeshed to make
Suman Ghosh on the feminism and humanism in Aparna Sen’s cinema.

DO YOU AGREE WITH SUMAN’S VIEWS ON APARNA’S FILMS? TELL t2@abp.in