

Tribute To Mrinal Sen: Died On 30th Dec.2019

Mrinal Sen's *Khandhar* Honoured At Cannes And Mami

Pradip Biswas.

Mrinal Sen: 1923-2018

'*For us it is both 'Mrinal Sen' and 'Khandhar' (The Ruins) being showcased at 63rd Cannes Festival and MAMI that, as also the film portrays, not only redefine the journey amidst all binarities of life but recollect all ruins also toward making of an ideology. Noted film theorist Pradip Biswas rediscovers the mosaic of 'The Ruins'.*

The Cannes Classic and MAMI showcase Mrinal Sen's *Khandhar* (The Ruins) at the 63rd edition of Cannes Film Festival, and MAMI, 2010. Incidentally, the film has been restored by **Reliance Media Works** with the support of the **National Film Archive of India (NFAI)**. The film has the pride to be presented in its *digitized format*, never experienced before. *Khandhar* was made in 1983 followed by the prestigious screening on **14th May, the birth day of Mrinal Sen, in 1984 at the same venue**. The film is being revisited with strident optimism at *Cannes Classic* which puts him in league with Luchino Visconti, John Huston, Luis Bunuel, Jean Renoir, Akira Kurosawa, Rene Clement, Hitchcock, Schlöndorff etc each of whose restored classic is on view. **A very special tribute has been paid to Mrinal Sen and his film *Khandhar* by MAMI, 2010 with somber dignity.**

To be precise, *Khandhar*, according to Mrinal Sen, the parent of the work, is nothing but "an account of a journey, of a brief encounter and consequently of complex relationship, of betrayal and fidelity, escape and involvement inextricably entwined, of ruthlessness and compassion, all amidst the ruins replete with sensuality. And that is life we see and breathe even in *Khandhar*, the ruins."

The journey of three city-slickers such as Dipu, Subhas and Anil into the countryside, a rural realm, takes an interesting twist when confronted with a reality, emerging out of seedy ruins, alien to them. Based on the story of *Telenapota Abishkar* by Premendra Mitra, *Khandhar* has a dreamlike, ethereal quality. Watching the film tends to tuck up a quaint question: Does the place exist? It seems *Khandhar* has a close resemblance with the film *Last Year at Marienbad* directed by Alain Resnais in 1961. We ask us the same question even now: Does *Marienbad* as a place exist? Similarly, we question ourselves: Does *Khandhar* exist? We live with this cryptic curiosity even after the film

was made twenty seven years ago. The impact of the films is so powerful that the elliptical question still continues to haunt us. Given the touch of ellipses the film has, I strongly feel, it is marked by the minor revolution in the conventions of the film language prompting us to take a plunge into storytelling and fantasy on the screen.

Let us discover what happens in the final destination when three friends reach Dipu's ancestral mansion, sunk in all ruins and times of decadence. One wing of the archaeology and the crumbling *gothic* structure shelters Dipu's cousin Jamini (Shabana Azmi) and her blind, paralytic mother (Gita Sen), exuding mildewed smell of decomposition. For Subhas, the dapper photographer, appears as a panoramic place with a streak of pristine grandeur only to be found in such proverbial *gothic* mansion and in its surrounding. Subhas is shoved a little ahead in growing interest on Jamini, the elegant girl, with a suave nature, holder of pristine pulchritude.

Mrinal Sen, I think, has placed his male characters in the film with no frills in order to offer them a tad of ordinary reality, quotidian and yet significant. Dipu, and his two pals Subhas, a professional photographer, and Anil, a writer, if seen in self introspection, look strayed human beings with little passion for retrieving wounds, likely to heal. In a delicate revelation, Jamini's mother takes Subhas for Niranjan, a man who promised to marry Jamini and liberate the family from the utter ruins. Little hope is triggered to flicker when Subhas is swayed to pacify the decrepit mother, out on a limb, with *Yes* to a question of marriage shortly. At the end of the holiday and hard-edged interlude, three friends go back to the city, leaving behind Jamini and her sick mother in the ruins. We are compelled to share the grief and trauma left behind gradually engulfing the ruins. Yet optimism bobs up as life continues to throb and tick amidst the ruins. This is powerfully pulsating. And it is my strong perception that there is no *liturgic* end in *Khandhar* whichever way you go smart to interpret as life, till the coda, is portrayed pulsating.



shabana azmi

Before adapting the story of *Telenapota* into the film, Mrinal Sen thought twice; or maybe many times since perpetual browsing on literary subject has

remained an enigma for him. How much space he would allow to the original story sketched in words into the visual medium is always under scrutiny. We are aware of tremendous conflicts between the new and the old, a conflict of souls, of art, of existence. On the issue of plot, Mrinal Sen has a valid point to defend. Everyone is clamouring for stories that are alive, that are real. Regarding such a debate Mrinal Sen has to say: “That the plot is terribly important is true. But that is not all. A story needs to be shown on the screen with due attention paid to its various elements and nuances. Therefore just as there is paramount need for good storylines, there is an equally urgent need to weigh each of the elements of the cinematic art and then use it skillfully and adeptly. And the one element that needs special attention, an element which has already been noted by many filmmakers of today, is that of establishing atmosphere”.

Specially, I like to refer to the above perception of Mrinal Sen as I crave for his idea and notion in terms of grafting a strong literary plot into a film called *Khandhar*. Let us offer our keen attention to what Mrinal Sen says about the story from the point of view of the writer. Reads Mrinal Sen about the essence of *Khandhar* taken out of *Telenapota* : “*Telenapota* will have become a vague, indistinct dream, like the memory of a fallen star. Was there ever such a place as *Telenapota*? You will not be sure. That grave, austere face, and the eyes that were far away and sad – were they real? Or, was she, like the shadow of *Telenapota*’s ruins, just another unreal, misty dream dreamt in a moment of weakness...?”

In *Khandhar*, Mrinal Sen seems to identify the “middle class liberal” bent on observing and recording but finally *escaping the involvement*. There is a trenchant critique at the typical middle class romantics who, when caught in crisis, manage to survive through escape routes. Subhas, Anil, maybe we, too, are made of with such stuff. The message is clear and is barreled down our throats. Besides, the film, we have a feeling, has the present tense ruling. The spoken language is employed to reveal in what temporal context the image is to be viewed. *Khandhar*, it may please be mentioned, is aesthetically grounded in the new syntax. And it will not be out of place to say that it’s the basic premise for the film. The composed sequences, filtered through imaginative shots, are enriched by more of images than verbal exercise of words. Besides, I want to remind our readers/participants that any particular shot, as it is structured in the film, can just be read as either present tense, past tense, conditional and subjunctive or a pure fantasy. It is apparent from the treatment of the film that this too is realism but of different kind from the *brown* prosaic.

The more we probe and progress with an analysis of *Khandhar*, we seem to be taken by Mrinal Sen, the *artist explorer*, into a realm strapped by tenebrous corridors, sonorous halls, frail galleries of another century, enormous, luxurious,

baroque and lugubrious. More we tread we are led through the mysterious, *gothic* mansion loaded with woodwork, stucco mouldings, pale marbles, half-shaded mirror, dark paintings, grotesque columns and mute whistling of wind which give the work an immaculate authenticity. Though the male characters are never shown as *patriarchs* of the dark, ironical drama, they indirectly signpost some kind of domination over *subaltern* women characters. And it goes without saying that the *droll irony* is not only redoubled in the images strewn in frames, but throughout the space of the film. In other words, the entire film as a matter of fact is the story of persuasion. It is clear that the film deals with a reality, often harsh and lyrical, which the *ensemble* characters create of their own vision. And if their moods and mental deliberation, marked by hidden frailty, tend to prevail, they do so being laced in a cunning labyrinth of false trails, variants, *kiddology* and self-deceptions.

Anyway, all said and done, Mrinal Sen maintains: “..*Khandhar* made an impact on the audience. And those who spoke to us after the show, quite a crowd, so to say, loved the film. Many of them wanted to know when it would have general release. The producer sounded confident as he said that he would wait and see how it would turn out in a bigger festival abroad. I felt that would be the right approach. Interestingly enough, this is the one film, which bagged the largest number of international awards”. **Incidentally, in Montreal, *Khandhar* bagged the second best prize and a month later, it got the best prize, Gold, in Chicago. It is said while Minal Sen was present in **Montreal** to receive the award, **Kunal, his son, collected it in his absence in Chicago.****

The eminent critic **Peter Cowie** of the *International Film Guide*, has hailed *Khandhar* thus: “Mrinal Sen’s exquisite film stands closer in fact to the contemplative cinema of Ozu, in which domestic relationships, and the rhythm of the everyday, form the essence of the drama.” Peter Cowie is so much impressed by the *form and structure* of the film that he came out with a strong comment saying: “*The Ruins* is directed with masterly understatement by Sen. The dialogue is sparse, and the space between the sentences pregnant with longing and disappointment. The environment not only reflects the failure of the old mother’s life, it is also integrated into *mise-en-scene* with no trace of ostentatiousness. In the pervasive lethargy of this ancient setting stuns any promise of emotional growth between man and woman. To this extent, *The Ruins* is depressing, yet to experience, and to feel, it is a rare delight”.