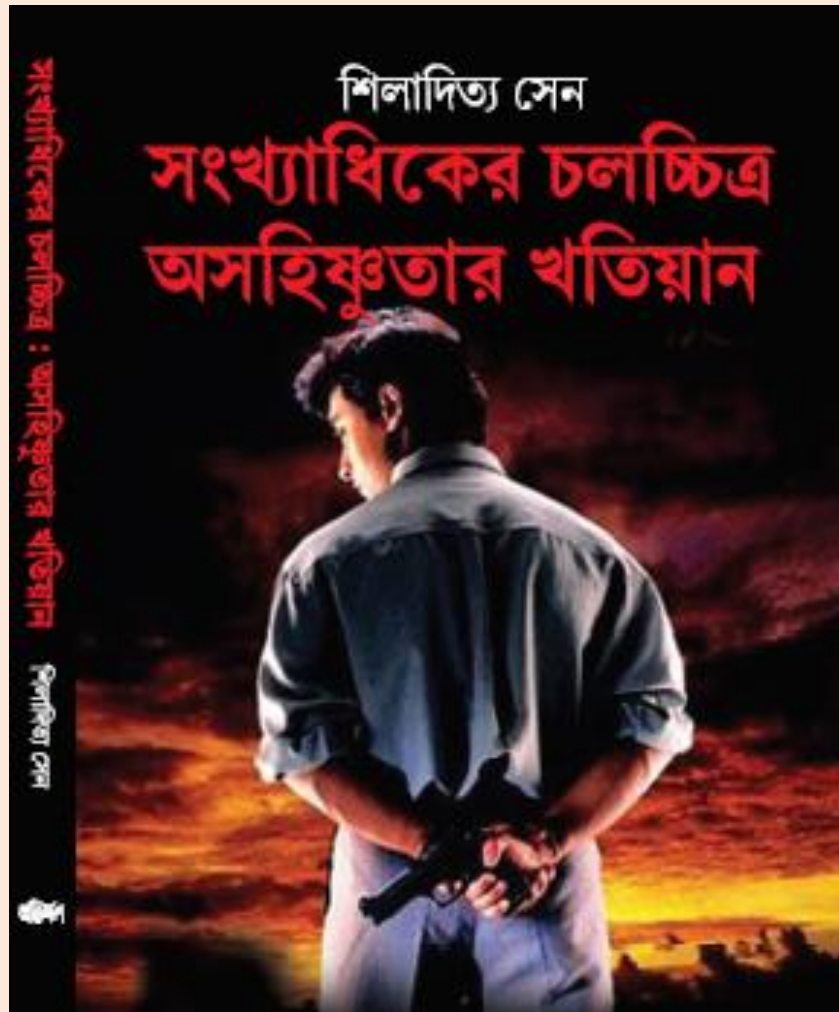


Guest Column/Book Review

Chinmoy Guha

Cinema and the Politics of Seduction



Siladitya Sen's recent book *Sankhyadhiker Chalochhitra: Ashohishnutar Khotiyan* is a collection of his thoughtful articles on the politics of popular cinema written in newspapers and journals in the last two decades. These are more than mere articles: riddled with queries, they are part of a larger humanitarian quest. The questions he raises are closely related to our lives, to the men and women around us, to our daily existence.

Suffused with pain, Sen's book is an ardent appeal to the celluloid for life.

His incisive analysis of the politics of seduction in Hollywood and Bollywood, and its backyard games, is doubly important because this is quite different from the self-conscious erudite discourse of the departments of Film Studies. This is passionate and sincere. This is warm and readable. Siladitya Sen is after all one of the disciples of Mrinal Sen, the uncompromising maverick of Indian cinema.

We are reminded of T S Eliot's line in *The Rock*: 'Where is the Life we have lost in living?' Sen has investigated the cleverly planned mechanism of mainstream cinema, the hideousness behind its enchanting outward appearance, and the concerted attempt to manufacture a point of view. Siladitya asks a pertinent question that all filmmakers and viewers of cinema must ask: 'আমরা কি যে যার মতো হয়ে উঠতে পারি না?' (Can't we become ourselves again?) It seems to be a cry of anguish and an appeal for honesty and integrity on the celluloid.

The subject of this book is the sociology of the cinema meant for the majority of the filmgoers, the mass. Divided into three parts, it deals with Hollywood and the continuing hegemony of the American State; the deceptive veils of Bollywood and the unholy influence of state politics on its multifaceted discourse. Siladitya explains with clarity how the diverse characteristics of these films do not emanate from themselves, but are often imposed from outside. The psychology of the State, the concepts of national integration, communalism, electoral politics are part of the study.

To quote the author:

It is true that mainstream cinema speaks about our good and bad, pretends to connect us and our families with the State. The integration of State Nationalism with family is nowadays an usual part of mainstream cinema, which is inextricably linked

with the various uses of the capital. It manipulates and plays with information, and arranges it in such a manner that everything seems to fit our eyes perfectly. And we shall begin to gradually forget all the other incongruities.

I am aware of the extensive work done on popular cinema by the academics, but I must admit that Siladitya's study of some 'iconic' popular films of our country and the West has enriched my film sense, and filled my nerves with a deep humane sensibility.

The last section of the book ('The Arsenal of Art: Cosmopolitan Kolkata') on Bengali Cinema shakes us out of our complacency, and forces us to reevaluate the discourse and offer alternative choices. Siladitya Sen, we all know, is well-known for his important book on Mrinal Sen, along with numerous thought-provoking essays on so-called parallel cinema. His analysis the politics of the cinema of majority and its 'new morality' is therefore a significant contribution to film appreciation.

The anguish of the individual and the communities has spread like wildfire all over the planet. The howl of the State affects the non-residents of the US, sometimes its world-wide hegemony affects small countries. In our country too, the domination of the majority continues, minorities of religion, race and communities are constantly under attack. Helpless individuals are threatened by the Nationalists.

Even if intolerance is the order of the day, the terrorist mindset of the majority is nothing new. Siladitya Sen has shown this in his analysis of films made twenty-five years ago. He has attempted to show how the whole question of power comes into play in the so-called 'popular films' of Hollywood and Bollywood and seeps into our social and individual life.

Hollywood films have always tried to present to the audience in some form or other the cultural face of the capital in order to survive and

continue to do business all over the world. It is this cultural philosophy that has created an endless series of villains, who had to be conquered by the heroes in order to declare the crucial victory of the capital and the capitalist system. At the same time, any war which was part of its selfish concerns has been cleverly transformed into a humanitarian discourse. Siladitya Sen has shown how Hollywood has endlessly fuelled and nurtured the popularity of violence and war across the world with its films whenever it needed that. Globalisation has helped its cause in a big way.

Bollywood too has done the same thing in the last decade of the last century during the demolition of Babri Masjid. Siladitya ruthlessly examines how development and Hinduism are surreptitiously tied in the same knot to fabricate a new modernism. Doesn't capital want it that way?

Sen has never been just a film scholar. Known for the simplicity of his style, he has always been a perceptive and passionate commentator of the social psychology of cinema. This makes him a leading scholar of cultural studies. His passion helped him transcend the obvious limitations of academic jargon and touch a chord in the common readers' heart. This is indeed his forte.

In today's suffocating world, Siladitya Sen opens new windows. We badly need such sincere souls in film criticism.

Sankhadhiker Chalochhitra: Ashohishnutar Khotiyan
Siladitya Sen
Pratikshan Publication, Rs 700.

Chinmoy Guha is a noted academician and essayist.