

cinema



✱ Aparna Sen.



✱ A still from Iti Mrinalini.

Sen's Unfinished Letter

Aparna-di's autobiographical offering was a delight at the

Mumbai Film Festival. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Often, writers and filmmakers tend to begin their debuts with autobiographies. But Aparna Sen made eight movies over three decades before scripting — and acting out — reportedly her own life in *Iti Mrinalini*. The film, whose literal translation is “Yours Mrinalini”, is titled in English as *The Unfinished Letter*.

The movie is indeed about a letter Sen's Mrinalini Mitra starts to pen on a lonely night, the dark shadows darkening her life beyond, what she feels, deliverance. A bottle of sleeping pills ready to push her into eternal slumber, she destroys old photographs and letters to erase a past she is not proud of. Perhaps, even to keep them away from the paparazzi. As the night passes and the first rays of the sun herald a new day, Mrinalini's suicide note remains unfinished. Will the emerging dawn add a dash of new hope to her sagging story?

What is it in any case? It is about an ageing actress hounded by the media and shabbily treated by the man in her life, Siddhartha Sarkar (Rajat Kapoor). Married with a couple of children, Sarkar's relationship with Mitra traverses the usual path that many extra-marital affairs tend to do. They have a child who finds love in the arms of foster parents, because Mitra and Sarkar cannot unwrap their own lives.

In some ways, *Iti Mrinalini*, engaged me. Some performances were superb. Konkana Sen Sharma, as the young Mitra, enjoys considerable screen time in a role that is emotionally more challenging than Sen's, who portrays the older Mitra. Sharma's natural ease with which she conveys her character's pain and turmoil, and Sen's remarkably understated fortitude are some of the scoring points of the work that premiered at the recent Mumbai Film Festival. One of Sen's better movies after *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Japanese Wife*,

her latest picture is wonderfully mounted as well.

However, a sketchy story (credited to Sen and Ranjan Ghosh) and some miscasting may not exactly endear it to the arthouse crowd. Koushik Sen as Chintan Nair, who provides an emotional prop to Mitra in her later years, seems terribly ill at ease essaying a man from Kerala, and the unconvincing physical resemblance between Sen and Sharma, despite them being mother and daughter off screen, does not help either. But Sen's diehard fans and admirers may just about overlook these.

Aparna-di (di means elder sister in the Bengali language) is much revered, especially in her home state. Daughter of the renowned movie critic and author, Chidananda Dasgupta, Sen was barely 16 when India's cinema icon, Satyajit Ray, cast her in *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters, 1961). Later, she worked with him in several films, switching with considerable ease between small, intimate art cinema and big, commercial productions. Her association with Merchant Ivory led to movies like *The Guru* and *Bombay Talkie*.

Years later, precisely two decades after essaying Mrinmoyee in *Teen Kanya*, Sen stepped behind the camera to create *36 Chowringhee Lane*, a haunting tale of an old Anglo-India teacher. Forsaken and forlorn on a cold Christmas night in what was then Calcutta, Jennifer Kendal's Violet Stoneham breaks down to the melancholic tune of *Holy Night*, *Silent Night* in one of the movie's last scenes. What a remarkable piece of work that was.

Sen did not make anything as touching as that for a long time, till she came with *The Japanese Wife* (2010), an unusually poignant romance between a Japanese girl and a poor schoolteacher living in a remote, tiger-infested region in Bengal.

Written by Kunal Basu, the short story

may seem incredible in today's age of quick communication. But Sundarbans where Snehmoy (played with a touch of brilliance by Rahul Bose) lives is a place that is still buried in the past, and the man who falls in love with his Japanese penpal has to rely on snail mail and trunk telephone to talk to his sweetheart.

They never meet, for years they do not, and yet remain loyal to each other, and hopelessly in love. Chigusu Takaku plays the Japanese woman, Miyage, and Raima Sen a young widow with an eye on the teacher.

Sen at 65 still has enough pluck to produce films as exquisite as *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Japanese Wife*. One awaits them, but of course.

To Dubai

The star-driven and highly acclaimed *The King's Speech* will open the 7th Dubai International Film Festival on December 12. Helmed by Tom Hooper (with *Red Dust* and *The Damned United* behind him), the movie recently clinched eight British Independent Film Awards, including those for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Actor.

Starring Colin Firth (last seen in *A Single Man*), Geoffrey Rush (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) and Helena Bonham Carter (*Fight Club*) among others, *The King's Speech* narrates the true story of King George VI, Queen Elizabeth's father. Firth plays the king, who reluctantly steps on the throne after his father dies and brother Edward VIII abdicates in 1936, choosing to marry a

commoner, Mrs Simpson, rather than rule England. George VI, who was deemed unfit to rule a nation on the brink of war, because of impaired speech, hires a therapist.

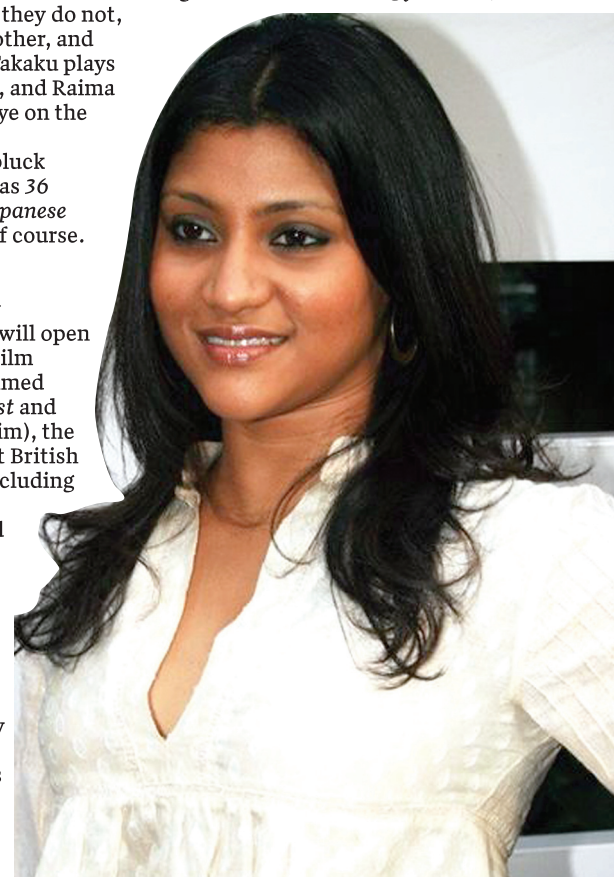
The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw writes: “Tom Hooper's richly enjoyable and handsomely produced movie about George VI's struggle to cure his stammer is a massively confident crowd-pleaser. What looks at first like a conventional Brit period drama about royals is actually a witty and elegant new perspective on the abdication crisis and on the dysfunctional quiver at the heart of the Windsors and of prewar Britain. It suggests there was a time when a member of the royal household experimented with psychoanalysis — disguised as speech therapy...The film is a clever anti-Pygmalion. Where Henry Higgins had to get Eliza Doolittle to smarten up and talk proper, the therapist finds his pupil has gone too far in the other direction...”

The Festival Chairman, Abdulhamid Juma, said: “We are delighted to host the movie and its considerable talent in Dubai. The Festival has always sought to bring the best cinema of the world to Dubai and the greater Middle East, and *The King's Speech* certainly fits that bill. It has scooped up the People's Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival and earned rare standing ovations wherever it has been seen. We are excited to begin our programming on such a high note.”

Last year, the Dubai Festival got James Cameron's 3D epic, *Avatar* and the musical, *Nine*, before they opened in America. Dubai has also been an early screening stage for works such as *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Paradise Now* that went on to garner big international kudos.

The Festival will run till December 19.

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✱ Konkona Sen Sharma.