

Critique

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The Rapist: Aparna Sen's Maverick Film



Aparna Sen's *The Rapist* premiered and was awarded the Kim Jiseok Award at the Busan International Film Festival in 2021, which is an achievement. This is Aparna's 16th work in succession. The film revolves around the life of a rape survivor and how her life mutates after that scabrous incident. Like her previous films, Aparna has smartly invested in a plot line revealing complex wheels within wheels. She intends to present a sensitive linear topic sparking off more bizarre cones and nooks aiming to demand support from the viewers without any cunning corridor.

Konkona Sensharma portrays a complex character as the role of the rape survivor is a severe subject. It attracts rigorous IPC canon for rapists. While tackling the turmoil, one goes through such ghastly and unwanted circumstances. Arjun Rampal plays the victim's husband. His complicated chemistry with Konkona is evident when the inner public calumny is pinned. Such a rape event in the public eye triggers mental and familial strains, both

psychological and social, and is likely to break married life and social standing with gusto.

Naina, a criminal psychology professor, is married to Aftab, a professor and an activist against the death penalty. The two of them enjoy a cosy upper-middle-class life, whose sole issue is that they do not have any problems! Once on a fateful night, however, Naina is sexually assaulted in a slum she visits to help the daughter of a school custodian embroiled in a case of domestic violence and infanticide. The attack leaves her colleague dead and Naina seriously injured, which does not deter the police chief from grilling her for what happened, even to the point of asking her if she were a prostitute for being at such a place during the night. However, showing extreme courage and with the support of her husband, Naina testifies in court, eventually leading the rapist-murderer to a death sentence. This is a natural movement of the film as the plot is ripped open.

Unfortunately, Naina discovers that she is pregnant, to the horror of both her and Aftab.

Eventually, she decides to keep the baby and starts talking with her imprisoned rapist to understand the reasons behind her actions better; this enrages Aftab. But, as always, Naina's dogged decision pitches them into a confrontation with her husband. Nearly on the verge of tenacious matters that puzzle both Naina and Aftab. We must note that this is an anathema and blasphemy in general circumstances.

The interviews Naina conducts with her rapist and his mother highlight that Prasad is a product of his environment since he learned from childhood to associate sex with violence. However, his last behaviour completely demolishes any sympathy or mercy the viewers might have gained for him, with Aparna stating that there is no excuse for such actions and that repentance may never actually transpire. Here is a snag that Aparna sets as a point of polemics. In the social milieu, such adjustment is absurd. Our society is orthodox in that it would not approve of the idea Aparna has executed in her film with a personal choice; it has nothing to do with every day or actual reality. But Aparna nearly manipulates the character Naina to keep the child as she is childless and has gone against all social conventions to prove that reality follows art.

We have an anti-thesis; according to a critic: "This antithetical, (self) contradictory approach, with Aparna building a concept only to demolish it eventually, is the main element of the narrative." If so, this is a big aberration and out of tune. Usually, no raped woman, whatever the compulsion, does not meet the "rapist" to confab with a criminal issue standing above all norms of our society. The director forcefully makes this to oblige her fads or wild-cat ideas. Aftab is against the death penalty, but he finds himself in a critical, stilted and remote situation. The director contrives Aftab; Aftab, a Muslim (more religiously orthodox), agrees to Naina's ultimate will! This is out of tune, socially and judicially. Then how come Naina was permitted to talk to the "rapist", which is against the Judicial canon?

When we see the cops, and in general the judicial system, seems to hold a distinct prejudice

against women who get raped; but in the end, the perpetrator is tactfully put on trial and receives the maximum penalty, a concept that states that, at some level, the judicial system works. This is nothing but the irrational trappings of the director who jumps above "rape violence" in our country. I don't think Aparna could have used the OTT to end the film metaphorically.

I think *The Rapist* is more of a fictive film rather than a physical even though Richard Kuipers of *Variety* magazine, praising the direction of Aparna Sen, wrote, "*The Rapist* is a deeply affecting portrait of personal trauma and an intelligent examination of social and cultural factors fuelling the horrifying prevalence of sexual violence in India." Criticising visuals of the film, he said, "The only real imperfections to the film are visual, with some scenes being drained of most colour for no immediately apparent reason." One feels appreciation goes above the board.

According to another critic: "While the social commentary is rather rich and excellently presented, the family drama aspect is on a lower level, with the way it unfolds eventually reminding of something of a soap opera, with the happy ending adding to this sense."

However, I crab the attitude of KIFF 2022 premiere view: "Aparna Sen's latest is an overburdened social drama. Despite touching hardly explored territories in Indian films concerning sexual offences, the film lacks teeth. It doesn't hit hard as it intends to.

The film's first half stinks of immature filmmaking, with distracting jump cuts that fail to establish the characters as a whole. It becomes incredibly predictable as it progresses, and the second half improves the narrative by highlighting the characters who get some insight which engages us for a while. The film also turns out to be quite interesting in the second half for a small amount of time but outstays its welcome. It drags, overdramatises, and nags like a sore thumb.