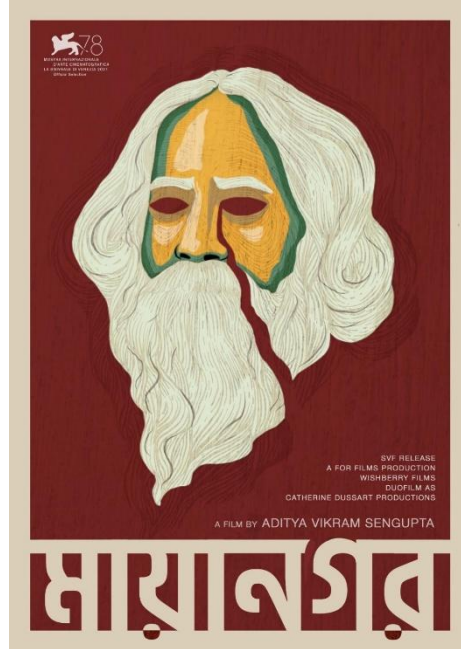


6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025: Certificate of Merit

Mayukh Mondal

Mayanagar: The City of Illusions



Aditya Vikram Sengupta stands as a nonconformist against the prevailing trends of films being manufactured by the ‘culture industry’. He has proved his distinctive quality as a filmmaker through *Asha Jaoar Majhe* (2014) and *Jonaki* (2018), which, I assume, were his personal films which proved his finesse. But, his third feature film *Mayanagar (Once Upon a Time in Calcutta)* is certainly an impersonal film, an objective depiction of our times, offering a cynical panoramic view of our souls.

Theatrically released in 2025, *Mayanagar* is the most truthful portrayal of a city (Kolkata) which is caught in memory, dilemma and illusions. The first frame of the film is a burning pyre, which is shockingly courageous, especially when we are expecting *maya* (magic) to be rained upon Kolkata. The burning pyre alludes to the dead state of the city, where no hope can be seeded. The film begins from the second frame, the burning

pyre goes off, and the story commences through ashes. We see Shishir immersing his daughter’s remains into the river, Ela, the protagonist, stands at a distance in grief. As they return home, Ela’s cold silence to Shishir’s ‘*I’ll make some rice porridge*’, and their parted rooms with contrasting lights portray their broken marriage; Shishir sits in a harsh white light with his pale existence and Ela in warm lights with relatively more expression. While the title screen may portray Kolkata as a transforming concrete jungle where the construction workers are the catalysts, it also has a signature of the auteur by a background track of *Shehnai*, which is reminiscent to *Labour of Love* (2014).

Before grasping much of Ela, although weeps with a glass of whisky at Tushi’s (daughter) death, after a deep-cleansing bath, she quite unremorsefully jumps into the scene of her life. She gets rid of her daughter’s clothes and braces, with the

introduction of Raja and Pinky, Ela gets her nails and brows done up and quickly progresses towards separation with Shishir. Being met with 'Bhashkar Da', she sets her hair up inside the loo and visibly flirts with him in ease. She approaches a bank to grant herself a home loan; rejected, she asks Raja to convince Bubu (her stepbrother) to bring down the inactive theatre, so that a high-rise can be constructed and as a descendant, Ela can have a roof for herself. Knowing, Bubu holds a grudge against her and suffers psychological disorders after his mother's death by suicide due to his father's extra-marital affair with Ela's mother, a regular performer at the theatre at that time. She does not hesitate to evoke this proposal knowing this may instigate hysteria in him. Looking at this urgency to attain leisure immediately after her daughter's death, a question comes — has she always dreamt of this freedom?

Ela works at *Kalpataru* group, a fraud chit fund company which also runs a phoney astrology show and finances housing projects. She also helped Raja become one of the agents of the chit fund. In a scene, at a yearly celebration of *Kalpataru* we are introduced to Pradipta, the owner. The stage holds Pradipta (and his secretary), a religious sage, a local politician, a goon, the manager of the chit fund, and Ela. This ensemble is a perfect representation of the scammers we see around in our society. They never operate alone, they are run by — a charismatic speaker (Pradipta), a sage to capitalise on this blind faith of the middle-class that whatever is religious is genuine, a local politician to get the support of the authority, a goon to ensure safety, a financial head (the chit-fund manager), and a face of appeal to lure more customers (Ela). Here, Ela is contented to be an objectified advertised face at *Kalpataru*,

because, an unfulfilled desire always lingered in her to be in the entertainment industry with its glamour & glitz like her mother, who was once a symbol of beauty and desire in Bangla theatre. It is not difficult to understand the socio-economic class the filmmaker is referring to. In this age of Late Capitalism, when the middle class has become highly materialistic, embracing the consumerist culture, always striving for social status, it is the very middle class who suffers, who gets silently exploited by the capitalists. Yet, the middle-class could not escape this cycle of exploitation. They are easily convinced by glittering advertisements and fake monetary schemes who offer quick and big returns, ultimately losing all their surplus. Which actually happens in the film to the investors of the chit fund, including Pinky's family. It is even more tragic that the fraudulent happens to Pinky's poverty-stricken family through her very lover Raja, whom she trusts and sees her future with. Mentioning, Raja also gets busted by the investors and Pinky parts her ways with him. Although, Sengupta had hinted at their futile destiny much before, when Pinky and Raja spent their date in front of a fake *Taj Mahal*, where soap bubbles were flying in air depicted how their dreams were just illusions. Later, Pinky's father, along with the other investors who belong to the same impoverished class protest outside the *Kalpataru* office helplessly. This scene justly composed by Sengupta is not merely a story, it is an unfortunate picture of our country where the poor gets exploited, they protest helplessly and die, and the capitalists/ministers just keep exploiting endlessly.

The equations of every relationships in this film are immensely hopeless. From the very first scene Sengupta has made the

distance between Ela & Shishir visible. After returning from the last rites of Tushi, we see Shishir caressing his dog Elsa (female) instead of consoling his wife Ela, which speaks of their bisected relationship. We see him spending more time with Elsa than Ela. In a scene, Shishir was seen plucking out ticks (a parasite) out of Elsa's fur, and scrubbing her while giving a bath. She runs away, Shishir jokingly says : "*Come back. If you don't clean yourself up people will call you a dirty girl*". Firstly, we do not address animals as a girl/boy, it is a humanistic addressal. He could have said '*... people will call you dirty*'. But, the filmmaker has deliberately uses this humanistic addressal ('girl') to etch out their relationship more distinctively. Thus, to Shishir, Elsa is more than a pet dog, she has become a significant other. Even the naming of the dog as 'Elsa' closely resembles his wife's name 'Ela', symbolises how Shishir has tried to create an alternative of his wife. Eventually, Shishir cleans out Elsa's feces from the terrace without any disgust. Here this love becomes a condition called Zoophilia, where humans create a sexual (non-penetrative) and emotional relationship with animals. This may cause due to absence of space for sexual expression, which is true for Shishir. Although, Shishir is not entirely hopeless with Ela. He tries to make small efforts to revive their relationship. He was seen bringing a bottle of whisky for her. But, Ela continues her cold behaviour. Meanwhile, Ela was developing an endearing relationship with Bhashkar. They could be seen in dingy restaurants, amusement rides, cinemas, even texting each other frequently. But, Shishir stays patient, even when Ela leaves their home to live separately, he approaches for a hug, Ela hugs back. Although, she rejects him by saying '*Not needed*' when Shishir insists

to give her a see off. At the end, Ela returns to Shishir, he silently accepts her arrival.

Ela's correspondence with Pradipta (her boss) is the defining factor of the film. Chronologically, Pradipta rewarded Ela with a 'special' perfume at the yearly celebration of *Kalpataru* which according to him would smell differently at each skin types, and expressed his regret for not being able to help with the home loan. And asked her "*Am I really that ugly?*", directly asking if he qualifies as a sexual companion for her. Then leaves, saying he might be 'useful' to her. Ela was aware of Pradipta's intentions, she calmly refused him until in their second interaction, he hands over a brochure of their new housing project '*Kalpataru Heights*' and offers her an apartment in exchange of a sexual favour. Now, the question is, will she accept his offer? Ela is now in a huge moral dilemma. Sengupta, to answer this question, composes a sequence in the most magical (*mayabi*) way, which is an irony in itself — We see Ela strolling around, possibly in a dilemma. Then she enters the room and slams the glass of whisky on the brochure. Cuts to a gym, Pradipta is pulling weights when his phone rings, receiving, he realises it is Ela. For the first time, Ela in a flirtatious way tells about using the perfume he gifted but she is not sure how it smells. Alluding, some other person should smell it of her body. This comment becomes an acceptance to Pradipta's offer. Cuts, the background track plays, we see Ela's face covered in a black coloured beauty mask, mentioning she was seen using white masks before. This change in colour of the beauty mask, becomes an allegory to Ela's situation. Where white masks symbolises a wise person, and a black mask symbolises a morally corrupted person. The camera cuts again, the background music

intensifies triggering a tragic feeling. A municipality worker enters their house with a machine, blowing smoke (pesticide for mosquitos) into the courtyard. Ela dressed up gracefully walks down the stairs within the smoke, flipping her hair, exits. In that exact moment, 'Baby Da' (Dog breeder) enters the courtyard with a new dog to breed Elsa. Cuts, Elsa and the other dog are smelling each other, which means they are about to copulate. Ela too, enters Pradipta's hotel room in a visible guilt. The door closes in slow motion. Without showing Pradipta and Ela in the act, the filmmaker uses the 'dog breeding' allegory to show what happened inside. Ela chose to sacrifice the ideals. This becomes the pivotal moment of the film where she becomes symbolic to our civilization. Does ethics and ideals really exist in our world, or is it totally irrelevant in a perverted consumerist society? Where we sacrifice every principles and morals to consume more and more, where sex is perverted and material is the ultimate goal. Here, Marx and Freud become relevant again.

Ela holds on to her mother's dress in her memory, termites on the wall spread around the clock, shows how lonely she feels. Her affair with Bhashkar does not turn out to be fruitful either. After spending a few days with Ela, Bhashkar seems to be erupting with guilt and visible disgust for this correspondence. When Bhashkar visits Ela's new home, they drink and were seen naked on bed (possibly had intercourse). Sengupta has included an additional frame, which is ruthlessly put in between the two frames — while they sleep on the bed, Tushi's picture with her pristine smile could be seen on the wall, depicting a total loss of morals, utter perversion and decadence. This is the world we live in, here the lawyer, a defender of law,

molests Ela as well as his daughter, to quote T.S. Eliot : '*I think we are in rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones.*' (*The Waste Land*, 1922). At the end, Ela realises Bhashkar had lied, he was married. Within a few minutes of this realisation, Ela gets evicted by police as the apartment was illegally produced by *Kalpataru*. Ela has now lost everything, her daughter, her old home, her apartment and her friend Bhashkar.

Bubu as the psychotic owner of the abandoned theatre is symbolic to Kolkata and its fallen glory of art & culture. This city was once an adobe for Tagore, Jibanananda, Shishir Bhaduri, Shambhu Mitra, Badal Sircar, the trio of Ray, Sen & Ghatak and more, has now fallen abysmally. Raja argues with his father Ananta over the theatre : "*Why stay on in like this in this haunted house?*", Ananta replies : "*Haunted house? Do you even know what all this house has seen?*", Raja : "*That's all history. Now there are just ghosts here.*". Raja speaks of our generation's perception of Kolkata, and Ananta still stuck in the glory of past. Bratya Basu, playing Bubu, is a prolific playwright, stage director and the education minister of West Bengal has been one of the major contributors of 21st century Bangla theatre. But, since his involvement in politics, his participation in theatre has been gradually low. His last directed play was in 2018. Thus, Bubu's story becomes a metanarrative when it is acted by Basu, where the line between reality (history) and fiction blurs. When Raja asks Bubu, if he is willing to sell the property to promoters, he replies : "*Will they repair the stage?... Then the theatre can open.*". His response transcends the boundaries of his fictional character to his real identity. Eventually, at the end Bubu sits inside the control room of the theatre after becoming entirely alone,

losing his sanity, later his dead body was found rotten inside. Is this the death of Art against Capitalism? There is no scope to deny, looking at the rapidly closing single screens and theatre houses, where shopping malls & multiplexes are being constructed. In the film, the Dinosaur sculpture, which sort of protected the city was taken down to construct a bridge, speaks of how modernity and industrialization has failed us.

The satirical remix of a *Rabindra-sangeet* – “*Alokerei jharna dharay dhuiye dao*” is a harsh mockery of Calcuttans, who are immensely proud of their art and culture without understanding anything. Their understanding of art is equivalent to this song’s likeliness of being a *Rabindra-sangeet*. This song, the busts of Tagore, and the scene where Bhashkar’s daughter dresses as Rabindranath are used to portray how to us Tagore is merely an effigy to worship, we do not possess any wisdom that he has left.

Bhashkar in compulsion agrees to use the low quality materials provided by the

local syndicate after they beat up his assistant, which results in the collapse of the bridge. He gets jailed as the engineer. Pradipta dies under the bridge, his blood gushes out of the eyes of a Tagore bust in a chilling scene. The original Tagore song plays : “*Purify my soul in your stream of light*”. Sengupta serves retribution as the ultimate ‘purification’ to these over-ambitious characters. Pradipta gets death. Bhashkar gets jailed. Ela loses everything. Raja loses his career and Pinky. Remembering Ray’s *Seemabaddha* (1971), where Shyamalendu was warned by Mr. Ramalingam about his ambition by quoting Joseph Conrad : “*All ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind.*” At the final scene, Ela looks at her mother’s picture at the old theatre, the brilliant background track composed by Minco Eggersman plays as she walks on to the stage. The stage supernaturally goes up, Ela ascends to be not seen again. Is this her metaphorical death? Is this a nemesis?

Citations

Conrad, Joseph. *Some Reminiscences* (1912; in USA entitled “A Personal Record”) p. 19
 Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. Edited by Michael North, WW Norton, 2001.

Mayukh Mondal is pursuing masters in English literature from Jadavpur University.