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Film Review: *Sonata*—A Confluence of Diverse “Female” Sensibilities

Reviewed by Avishek Deb¹ and Pinak Sankar Bhattacharya²

Film Information:

Title: *Sonata*

Director: Aparna Sen

Release year: 2017

Length in minutes: 99 minutes

Genre: Drama (play adaptation)

Original language: English (subtitles also available)

The twenty-first century saw many countries, including India, evolve into the next level of capitalism, creating a wider gap between the working class and the bourgeoisie. India saw a double split on the basis of class and on the basis of geographical positioning. “Metrosexual,” “cosmopolitan,” and “YOLO” became new identities, mantras, and philosophies of individuals dwelling in their towering ten-storeyed buildings of Tier 1 metro cities. “India Shining” was a government advertisement tolling the bells of this geo-economic divide between two faces of the same country: *Bharat* and its virtual metro reality “India.” The latter is an apathetic epistemological identity conjured by the State, and a postmodern identity construct to denote self-absorbed, de-cultured, aspiring upper-middle-class individuals for whom sociological, cultural, and gender issues become merely a discursive behavior for cozy drawing room conversation fueled by wine. This identity construct leads to a detachment from one’s ontological existential self. In such a postmodern world, happiness becomes a temporary state and an occurrence that is not taken too seriously. One’s stance regarding ideological assertions is not permanent, and one becomes insecure about permanence itself.

Though the first two decades of this century have seen the rise of middle-class women into employment and entrepreneurship, they have not necessarily benefitted from the new simulation of “India Shining” represented by the current governmental slogan “*Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas*” (“Together we stand, together we shall develop”). Indian cinema over these years has tried to sketch the new problems that have risen on the corporate front due to greater inclusion of women in the labor force: problems like sexual harassment (reflected in movies like *Inkaar*), gender discrimination related to salary hikes (for example, *Corporate*), issues of incompetency due to women’s identity (for example, *Page 3*), and firing female employees due to social stigma (reflected in *Phir Milenge*). The movie we intend to review is *Sonata* (2017), directed by Aparna Sen and an adaptation of Mahesh Elkunchwar’s play. The movie explores a depth of human experiences: friendship, love, taboos and social stigmas, pleasure, betrayal, opportunism, and utilitarianism. Indian cinema has numerous examples of male friendship as

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the object of investigation, but *Sonata* is perhaps the first serious inquiry into urban female relationships.

It presents a one-night story of two friends, Aruna and Dolan, in their cozy drawing room in an apartment in Mumbai, chatting about various matters. Aruna Chaturvedi is a teacher of Ancient Indian History and a vocational writer, while Dolan, a Bengali, is a banker. Aruna hails from Uttar Pradesh. They are later joined by a third friend, Subhadra Parikh, who is a journalist by profession. Aruna represents a serious persona while Dolan is a bohemian soul. The latter shares a similarity in this aspect with Subhadra. Through their conversation and gossip, we come to know of their fourth friend Meera who has undergone gender reassignment surgery. The movie primarily points out three major points related to women-centric existential realities. The first is creating a female definition of happiness according to their own criteria, the second is that women's identities are continuously being revised or in flux, and the third aspect is about existing as binary opposites in a symbiotic relationship.

Aparna Sen, as a woman director, depicts these characters as seemingly independent, strong women, which Elaine Showalter would call a "female" phase of breaking away from the stereotypical "feminine." However, her representation of the characters is much more complex in reality. The three friends are apparently strong and independent. Dolan and Aruna are happy in their own lives, living together and not thirsting for a heterosexual romantic relationship. Aruna is content in her "ten by ten feet cocoon" doing her research on Sutras and enjoying her teaching profession while receiving compliments from her students; Dolan is happily adorning herself with new dresses and perfumes. Subhadra is euphoric when she is amongst her friends, boozing and swearing. While drinking expensive wine, they laugh and giggle and admit, "What awful creatures we are – no commitment, no aim, no ideology, we are not even feminists!" They have created a definition of their happiness that is postmodern in nature.

However, there are cracks in this facade of happiness. Subhadra is beaten by her husband, and she also was fired from her job that evening, yet she still announces that she is happy with her two friends. Aruna is recovering from a broken relationship with her ex-boyfriend Avinash. She is sometimes disturbed by the bohemian nature of her friend Dolan, but she likes to watch the latter in a saree or listen to her *Rabindrasangeet* (Bengali songs). Dolan is confined to her artificial life working in a bank. Dolan also surrendered physically to Avinash in a weak moment after Aruna's breakup with him. But she finds pleasure in enticing Aruna with almonds by asking: "Kaju khaabi?" (roughly translated as "Would you fancy having some almonds?"). The three friends are living in a compromised reality and thus trying to find solace in whatever they can accumulate.

Meera (a minor character in the movie) changes her gender identity from male to female and even ends up having a relationship with a man. Her gender reassignment surgery symbolically represents the psychological reassignment and flux of the three women's identities. Subhadra's continual switch from grief to happiness is an example of such revision of oneself. Aruna suffers from a loss of roots living in Mumbai, so she yearns to visit Dolan's *baari* someday. She objects to Dolan's new dress and asks her to appear in a saree. On the other hand, Dolan does not like to talk about her professional life but loves to criticize others living the same monotonous life as hers. Meera's death symbolically delineates the failure of the reassignment processes of the three friends. While Subhadra leaves the other two and gladly embraces her disturbed conjugal life, Dolan and Aruna both expose their baggage of guilt and opportunistic objectification respectively.

Dolan and Aruna are sharing a symbiotic space living together, yet they appear to be binary opposites. While Dolan openly flouts the "settler instinct" of Aruna by pointing out her prudery, she needs Aruna's judgment while wearing garments. Aruna on the other hand doesn't approve of Dolan's loudness but accompanies her in tomfooleries. But when delving more

deeply into their characters, it is revealed that apart from their binary existence, they continually conceal their inner shades from each other. In the climax of the movie, it is revealed that though they share a relationship that seems almost like a live-in heterosexual pairing, they are not particularly content with each other’s company given their baggage and betrayal of each other. Aruna objectifies Dolan in her fiction-writing, which is a form of unconscious payback for Dolan's past deceptions.

In this postmodern era, the characters of Aparna Sen’s film seem to be examples of Showalter’s “female phase” of independent, strong women who reject governance by the patriarchy. But a harsh truth comes out of the analysis of their inner thoughts and behaviors. In spite of their agency, affluence, and independence, they surrender to the norms and parameters of the patriarchy just like the characters portrayed in Showalter’s “feminine” phase of women’s representation in literature. Subhadra’s return to her abusive husband, rather than sparking her rebellious ego, reduces her to acceptance and surrender when she normalizes the abuse she is suffering by calling it just a “man-woman thing.” Dolan’s physical surrender to her friend’s lover and Aruna’s romantic narration of her accidental encounter with her ex-lover after many years reflect that, in the end, both have given in to the patriarchal structure that dictates stereotypical feminine desires. Herein lies the masterstroke of the director—she depicts a harsh reality where the “female” and the “feminine” exist not in black and white opposition but in a gray zone.

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