

“The Real Reality: Depiction of a Mentally Disabled Woman in Aparna Sen’s *15 Park Avenue*”

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Abstract

Women in our society have to face a lot of discrimination based on gender and it becomes even more severe for women with disabilities. Their disabilities make it much more difficult for them to have agency over their own lives, and thus more valuable to exploitations of which they are unable to communicate effectively. As far as Indian cinema is concerned, now that the industry has commenced to showcase women’s issues, women with disabilities have still not been able to get a lead role as protagonist on reel. One exception to this scenario is ace filmmaker *Aparna Sen’s* National Film Award winning movie *15 Park Avenue*. The present paper studies the aforementioned film to explore the treatment by the filmmaker, of the character of a woman disabled due to schizophrenia. It furthermore examines the main theme of the film which is ‘Reality vs. Illusion’ or do reality and illusion often coalesce and overlap.

Keywords: Characterisation; Connotative meaning; Denotative meaning; Narrative; Symbolism; Theme

Introduction

Fraser (2016) emphasises on the importance of the study of cinema from diverse cultures in order to establish a better understanding of disability as “cultural- specific and geopolitically defined corporeal condition”.

Indian cinema has always been interested in showcasing mental illness through its characters. In the past the concept was mostly used as a comic relief to break the monotony of the otherwise intense story. People with mental disability served as minor characters and were rarely present in the timelines of the films. Sometimes they would be portrayed as a hysterical creature or a crazy villain who needed to be defeated by the hands of the ‘Hero’, majority of times killed to stop the havoc he created whilst medical help wouldn’t even be considered. Seldom would they get to perform as one

of the main characters or even the protagonists, in which case their disabilities would miraculously be cured towards the conclusion of the story in order to give it the ideal happy ending. The situation of cinema of the present times does not differ much either. When it comes to the realistic representation of mental disabilities and overall mental health, Indian mainstream cinema seems to lack competence and appears to be unjust with the portrayal of a very serious issue. This repetitive superficial treatment of the subject of mental health has resulted in prejudice amongst the mindsets of the society towards people with mental disabilities. The scenario furthermore prevents the conduction of a normal dialogue concerning the issue within the society whilst creating a stigma towards the concept and the people suffering from it, secluding them from the social structure all together.

Cinema is a medium of higher representational significance which acts as “a reective mirror, a productive expression or theoretical ground for the integration of perceptions and concepts that informs our socially negotiated understanding of disability” (Fraser, 2016). Thus it becomes really essential for filmmakers to understand their responsibility and handle such issues with utmost sensibility. In contrary to this, the representation of mental disability in Indian cinema is backed by severe lack of scientific understanding and mere ignorance of the reality of people living with mental illness and even that of the caregivers and their struggles. The media, arguably being the most influential entity of culture has created hard to change stereotypes of mentally disabled people as incompetent and highly hazardous beings which reduces them to nothing but “the most exaggerated, caricaturized versions of their diagnoses” (Beachum, 2010). Moreover, cinema generally puts all sorts of mental disabilities on the same yardstick with generalised treatment, most commonly of which is shock therapy conducted in a mental asylum. In addition, no efforts are taken to distinguish between mental disorders and genetic defects causing mental disability.

In spite of major mishandling of the issue of mental health since ages, certain filmmakers in the recent past have been able to portray their characters with mental disability rather sensibly and responsibly. However, from a scientific view there still might seem some medical inaccuracies in the narratives of such films; but it needs to be taken in account that cinema is a medium of entertainment thus a fictional story is often told with a little exaggeration. The present paper focuses on the portrayal of mental disability and what seems to her as the reality in Aparna Sen’s 15 Park Avenue which is amongst the few films dealing with the issue in a realistic and sensible manner.

Review of Literature

Kalathil (2006) observes that *15 Park Avenue* attempts to investigate the different realities intertwined in a story through the lives of two half sisters, a schizophrenic woman and her caregiver elder sister. She states that the quest to find a more acceptable reality is the basic theme of the film. She perceives the idea of core reality which apparently everyone is searching for yet unable to find just like the schizophrenic character Meethi in the film. Sengupta (2018) notes that a person's disability often induces discrimination against them which is worse in the case of females as compared to males. She observes that whilst disabled men earn the observers' sympathy and pity, disabled women on the other hand, are subjected to shame and are held as liabilities to their families. Sharma, et al (2013) observe that the film is relatively useful in educating Psychology students watching it for study purposes, about the functioning of a family with a mentally disabled member. They furthermore explore the notion of caregiver's burden with the context of the film. Parekh (2008) cites the gender roles of men and women set by the society to be the culprit of the additional discrimination against disabled women. She notes that the imaginary address of 15 Park Avenue in the film is a space of desires and possibilities formed by a mentally disabled woman Meethi.

Research Methods

The present study is in the form of a qualitative research. The concerned film is analysed and discussed in the form of descriptive research conducted through content analysis. One film namely, *15 Park Avenue* directed by Aparna Sen in year 2005 serves as the primary source of study for the analysis of the context. The analysis of the text of the film is done through narrative method. The study analyses and examines the film stylistically and thematically to collect data, keeping in mind of some parameters. The secondary sources include books, journals, internet and published studies earlier conducted by researchers in the field.

Parameters

The parameters taken up for the study are connotative and denotative meaning of the image, vision, symbolism, themes, mise-en-scène and narrative structure and technique of the film.

Key Terms

- **Characterisation:** The description of the individual features of a person, information about his nature as how represented in a narrative.
- **Connotative meaning:** The suggestive meaning of something be it a word or a visual. In cinematic universe, the manner in which a scene is shot sometimes evokes a certain emotion or feeling in the audience which doesn't necessarily align with the direct message of the sound or the image. The interpretation which the audience make of that scene in their minds is its connotative meaning.
- **Denotative meaning:** The direct and explicit meaning of something be it a word or a visual.
- **Narrative:** A story told in written or spoken words and in terms cinema told in the form of audio-visual recital of interconnected events. It is the process of presenting the story making the audience believing in the unfolding events of the fictitious setting to be real.
- **Symbolism:** A representation of an idea or a thought through the use of symbols.
- **Theme:** The subject of the film. It is an idea that pervades throughout the storyline and recurs at several places in the timeline. It brings together the plot and the characters of a script to make a story whilst providing various layers of complexity that makes the film interesting to view.

Analysis and Discussion

Aparna Sen's film *15 Park Avenue* maps the journey of a schizophrenic woman Meethi, in quest of finding an imaginary address that she claims to be her home. She has got an illusionary world of her own where she is a member of a happy family with a husband and five children which is far from her reality. She is constantly trying to find her imaginary house where her imaginary family lives and is waiting for her to join. She doesn't rest till she reaches her utopian world at the end of the film when she reunites with her imaginary family at the imaginary address she had been looking for throughout the story. The film at several intervals cuts into flashbacks telling the story of Meethi before her schizophrenia triggered. These flashbacks set the background for her present severe condition and help in understanding the character of Meethi with further depth. Meethi's psychiatrist establishes that the mental disorder was genetically always present, yet she seemed to be a normal person earlier only because it was triggered at a later point. The reason for the traits of schizophrenia to take over could be any slightest of an incident but for Meethi it was a horrendous experience that she had in

her destiny. She fell victim to the heinous act of gang rape by some political goons at a small hotel she was staying at for a work related assignment. The trauma from this incident and desertion by her fiancé as an aftermath caused the eruption of the traits of schizophrenia in her. As a result Meethi started to live in her delusory world where everything was as she wanted it to be in her life prior to the incident. Her world of illusions seems like an alternate reality with a story that could have been if the incident of gang rape hadn't taken place, Meethi would never have become mentally disabled.

Characterisation

- **Meethi (Mitali)**

The protagonist of the film, Meethi is schizophrenic woman who lives in the world of her delusions. She is also epileptic and has suicidal tendencies. Being disabled she is left at the mercy of those around her. She thinks everybody is against her, feels as if she is in a prison. She is in a constant search for '15 Park Avenue', an imaginary address which she believes to be her home where she lives with her husband Jojo and five children.

- **Anu (Anjali)**

Meethi's elder half-sister, Anu is the primary caregiver to the mentally disabled Meethi. She is a Professor of Physics at a university. She is very head strong and has a confident personality which seems to intimidate some people at times. She lives in constant guilt blaming herself for Meethi's condition. She is also a divorcee who is in a relationship with her fellow Professor Sanjeev. Later in the film she develops an interest Dr. Kunal.

- **Joydeep**

Meethi's ex-fiancé who breaks off their engagement as an aftermath of her being gang raped. He is now a family-man who is settled abroad with his wife and two children.

- **Dr. Kunal**

Meethi's psychiatrist, Kunal is a married man who finds inclination towards Anu whilst educating her about Meethi's condition.

- **Lakshmi**

Joydeep's wife, she is a devoted mother and a loving wife who feels extremely jealous towards Meethi, Joydeep's past visiting again after years. She can't help obsessing about their past relationship.

- **Sanjeev**

Anu's colleague and love interest who is constantly annoyed with her for not having enough time for him and being too much involved in caring for Meethi and her mother. He also serves as a helping hand for the household.

- **Mahesh**

Anu's younger brother and Meethi's elder half-brother, Mahesh bears or shoulders no responsibility of the household and lives separately with his wife and children. He is of a notion that Meethi shouldn't be kept at home and rather should be sent to an asylum.

- **The Mother**

She is a widow now dependant on her eldest daughter Anu whom she gave birth to with his first husband. Years after of her first husband's death she married his friend, from whom was born meethi. She is quite fearful of Anu and quite intimidated by her. She lives in a constant fear that Anu might ultimately get tired of all the responsibilities and leave her with Meethi on God's mercy.

- **Charu**

Meethi's paid caretaker and domestic help of the household. She believes in superstitions whilst negating the capability of medical science of being any help in Meethi's situation and of those alike, because of her lack of proper education. She is easily frustrated with Meethi at the same time quite manipulative which aids her to conceal her negative deeds.

Theme

Mental Illness

Mental health is one subject amongst others like disability and death which cinema tends to sentimentalise and often even romanticise. 15 Park Avenue as a film based on mental illness seems to steer away the audiences from the attached stereotypes quite effectively (Das, 2005). The film portrays two mentally disabled characters: Meethi the protagonist and the other one is an anonymous woman living on the streets just outside Meethi's residence. Generally Indian cinema showcases mentally ill people to be destructive in nature and as a result people around to be scared of them but in this film neither Meethi nor the woman are displayed to be destructive behaviourally.

The film begins with the sounds of a bustling street which is subsequently projected with the visuals of the same where Meethi is trying to find her

imaginary home with Anu's help who is driving her in a car. When they get home after a failed attempt, Meethi's eyes through the car's window finds the woman on street. She tries to greet Meethi with a nod but she seems uncomfortable by her gaze. Similar encounter has been displayed just once more time in the narrative later when Anu brings Meethi back home after therapy. The woman gets up and starts walking from the usual place where she sits on the street with two bundles of cloth whilst the cab with Anu and Meethi inside stops at their house's gate. Once again the woman greets Meethi through a car's window but this time she is looking at her from much closer, as if she is bidding adieu before leaving. Noticing the eyes on her, Meethi leans towards Anu, who then covers her sister's face with her hand in protection as soon as she catches a glimpse of the woman staring at Meethi. As the cab moves inside the gates, the woman continues walking away from her place on the streets and towards the camera. The audio of Kunal as the psychiatrist of Meethi, asking Anu " *Has she (Meethi) always been suicidal?*" (Sen, 2005), is morphed into the visual. Anu begins to tell Kunal the story from where she thinks it all started, simultaneously in the visual when the woman is close enough to the camera so that we see an extreme close up of her face. It seems as if the woman is a representation of Meethi's future after she vanishes at the end of the film, as without the care of her family and medical treatment her condition could turn out to be the same.

It is never established in the film that the woman on the streets is mentally ill but the audiences get the picture by a look at her shabby appearance and abnormal behaviour. It's a notion that people with mental disorders do not tend to their physical appearance. Whilst discussing Meethi with her psychiatrist Kunal, Anu says that in the past Meethi seemed to be a normal person who wasn't dysfunctional and cared about her appearance" " *...She was pretty presentable... she cared about the way she dressed... she had her hair done... got herself manicures and pedicures regularly....*" (Sen, 2005). Listening to this, Kunal asserts" " *... grooming is an essential part of relating to others around us....*" (Sen, 2005).

Meethi, unlike the unknown woman, is recognised as a diagnosed schizophrenic right from the beginning. The film portrays her mental disability in a realistic manner rather than in a stereotypical way done by most of the films based on the similar topic. In doing this, it tries to eliminate the stigma attached with mentally disabled people prevalent amongst the cinema audiences associate with. This stigma denies people with mental disabilities to be a part of the society in a healthy manner and it furthermore restricts the sane people to understand their condition making them not to make a move to mingle with them, creating a sense of fear and thus rejection.

Though steering clear from being stereotypical in the portrayal of mental disability, the narrative still features the stereotypes surfaced in the society and how it affects the lives of all people. One such stereotype concerns women getting married at right age, bear children and tend to the needs of the family; this is considered to be the only perfect way to lead a fulfilling life. In a sequence Meethi's mother tries to cure her with the help of a 'Tantrik', an occultist or a witch doctor, on their maid Charu's advice. Witnessing her daughter in so much distress because of the 'tantrik' beating her profusely, Rewa seems disturbed and can't help crying. It is then that Charu tries to console her stating that it's for Meethi's good itself "I told you about the girl in my village... her plight was worse than Meethi... now look at her, she is married, has children... and she is leading a normal life..." (Sen, 2005).

The particular stereotype seems to be the root of Meethi's delusional world as well. A disabled woman is seen to be imperfect; consequently she isn't under the obligation to adhere to the particular standards of femininity formulated by patriarchy (Addlakha, 2013). Society perceives them to be asexual and they are reckoned as incapable of performing duties and responsibilities which are associated with 'normal' women (Addlakha, 2013). However, Meethi's psychological condition doesn't allow her to be conscious about other people's perception of her. She produces an alternate reality for herself where she is a devoted wife and a diligent mother of five children having a beautiful house with pets to complete her 'well-settled' life. Meethi subconsciously conquers the stigma associated with her socially rejected mentally disabled and sexually abused body, by reconstructing her reality with a delusional but satisfying world.

Parallel Theme

Reality versus Illusion

The theme of 'reality versus illusion' has been explored through the life of schizophrenic Meethi and the people around her in the film. The narrative tries to distinguish between Meethi's illusions which she considers to be the reality and what the sane people consider to be real; posing a question: whose reality is more real and who gets to decide it? The people who are considered to be completely sane even sometimes find themselves in a situation where they are unable to reckon with the reality; where dreams seem like reality and reality seems like a dream. "Human beings are caught between illusion and reality, as the mind dwells in the subjective world of ideas and concepts, but physically one exists in the world of objective reality that cannot be directly experienced or fully understood." (Yakobi, 2013) The illusions which a sane brain considers to be true can range from any

little situation in life to a relationship they think they share with someone which can turn out to entirely different from reality. The mental reality of an individual only exists in their minds and has no extension to the outside world in the similar manner; its existence completely depends on the observer (Yakobi, 2013). Each one's reality is nothing but what they perceive it to be. Likewise, a schizophrenic person creates a world of delusions for him/her, which, in the eyes of the sane is illusion. The protagonist of the film Meethi too lives in such a world of delusions which she created in order to make meaning out of her life. Life she always yearned for is now her reality in her mind yet it is nothing but an illusion for the people surrounding her.

Discomfort arises when an individual's reality doesn't align with that of the majority's. Similar is the situation of Meethi. The sequence where her mother tries to cure her with the help of a 'Tantrik', is a showcase of superstition versus science where Anu is taking a class of Quantum Physics at her college whilst at home the 'tantrik' is performing his rites in order to free Meethi from the supposed possession of a spirit causing all the troubles. The sounds and noises of both the ambiances morph into the visuals of each other. Whilst science, especially quantum physics deal with studying a subject matter in depth, at home Meethi's matter is been treated superficially. The two opposite schools of thought, progressive and conservative is been shown simultaneously, indicating that both go hand in hand in our society. The same issue has been dealt with in the film at other times as well like when later in the film during a house party a lady is telling stories of the glory of a 'baba' (godman) who hear voices and help others with their troubles replying to which the psychiatrist indicates that 'baba' might have a mental disorder causing him to hear voices, denying the ability of a human to possess any miraculous powers. The dramatization indicates the reality of our society where people shall keep on believing in such stuff which is not backed up by science no matter how well they are educated or how modern their approach to life may be. When people don't find an explanation for a phenomenon, instead of looking for it in depth, they tend to dust it off as the doings of some invisible power. At the same time it depicts the hypocrisy of the sane people where they consider such 'godmen' hearing voices and talking to invisible spirits completely normal and idolise them, whilst individuals like Meethi are condemned for their similar behaviour and are treated as outcasts.

Later to the happenings of the 'tantrik' incident, Anu on arriving home from her lecture is confronted by Meethi about the day's events with a mix of her own interpretations with the reality. Even though Meethi says, "*There was a man who came and beat me*" (Sen, 2005), Anu rejects it as another illusionary story of hers. While struggling later in evening to complete an article she is

visited in her room by Meethi. She states that she need to discuss an important issue but Anu dismisses her as she was really busy and didn't have time for her stories. This leads them to have an argument about the 'tantrik' incident once again"

Meethi: *"Didi I told you that this afternoon, Charu got someone to come and beat me up and (Pause) they do it when you are not there and even mumma didn't say anything...."* (Sen, 2005)

Anu: (Furious) *"Meethi will you stop making things up?! Just go to bed and let me finish my article in peace. Please."* (Sen, 2005)

Meethi: *"But I am not making it up did, Charu sent someone to beat me up today. (Pause) I don't know why no one ever believes what I am saying. (Pause) (Irritated) How would you like it if I told you are not a professor and you are only imagining it?"* (Sen, 2005)

Anu is stunned by her sister's question in a way challenging her reality like what she always do to her, but before she could say anything further or think about it in depth, she is distracted by Sanjeev's phone call she receives on her mobile.

Moments later, downhearted by Anu's dismissal to believe and help her, Meethi tries to take her life by slitting her wrist. She is immediately taken to the hospital where their mother confronts Anu about the 'tantrik' incident" *"Anu I have done something very terrible"* (Sen, 2005). The visual then shifts to that of Meethi been moved on stretcher after blood transfusion indicating that the mother has told the whole story to Anu. In the following visual Anu is seen perplexed by what she hears" *"Oh my God, so that's what she was trying to tell me..... and I didn't believe her... I thought she was being (Pause) delusional..."* (Sen, 2005). Yet again she is distracted by Sanjeev informing her" *"They've put her (Meethi) in a cabin; we'll be able to see her now"* (Sen, 2005).

In the next sequence Anu with worry and sympathy is looking through a glass window at Meethi getting the MRI scan. The glass window serves as a symbol for mental barrier between the sane Anu and insane Meethi, looking at each other trying to convey their emotions to each other but are unable to do so. Anu stands leaning to the glass with her hands on it as if she is trying to reach Meethi but the glass is restraining her. People with mental disorders and those around them are separated by this glass wall of sanity which allows them to see each other but restrict them from understanding each other's reality; they can't get to the other side of the glass and live the other person's reality. Nonetheless Anu next engulfs herself into understanding

the world of Meethi, taking help from her psychiatrist Dr. Kunal. In a conversation she enquires Kunal" *"Her delusional world is as real to her as ours is to us"* (Sen, 2005), to which he agrees. She further enquires this time probably to herself" *"Then what right do we have to take away the happiness she gets from her imaginary world... from her house in 15 Park Avenue... from her husband and children..... what makes her reality less real than ours"* (Sen, 2005). Dr. Kunal tries to explain her that each one's reality is restricted to what mentally project in their minds. When he asks her about what was kept on the table behind her in the restaurant they were seated in, she immediately looks behind to check and state that it's a vase with a flower in it as that is what she could see. Kunal gives her a look of disagreement and investigates" *"Suppose everybody in this restaurant swore that it was a table lamp, would you still see a vase? So then whose reality is more real... yours or theirs?"* (Sen, 2005)

The film as it proceeds begins to seem like a journey in the search of happiness. The hypothetical happiness elusive to many individuals does not exist at all, just like Meethi's 15 Park Avenue (Das, 2005). On a particular evening in Bhutan during a conversation with Kunal, Anu expresses her irritation over Meethi's behaviour" *"She (Meethi) doesn't seem to be interested in anything... all she wants is to be left in peace and indulge in her delusions or whatever... it really frustrates you sometimes..."* (Sen, 2005). Kunal then tries to state the similarity between the people of both the sane and the insane world in their quest to find happiness" *"Don't be too harsh on her.... we all have our delusions..."* (Sen, 2005). Similar kind of notion have been tried to be drawn later with Joydeep's monologue whilst he is coming back to his real family after meeting Meethi"

"It's so unreal.....these two worlds.... you know I have a wife and children whom I love dearly... yet there is this other woman (Meethi) who really believes I am her husband... I feel like my life was being played out all this time by someone else and I have no say in it... its eerie.... like I've suddenly stepped into someone else's reality..." (Sen, 2005)

Furthermore, when Joydeep communicates his sympathy towards Meethi whilst talking to his wife" *"Poor child... She's (Meethi) looking for something she can never find..."* (Sen, 2005), she expresses" *"Aren't we all...."* (Sen, 2005) yet again trying to establish the same notion.

The illusionary world of Meethi is as real to her as the reality of each individual in which they live, in which they dwell. Throughout the film she is trying to convince everyone around to believe and help her find the home existing in her reality, which she finally obtains with a little help of Joydeep. She eventually reaches '15 Park Avenue' to get reunited with her husband

and children, and as soon as she enters into her reality, she disappears from the reality of others, marking the end of her quest as well as the film. An earlier incident from the film serves as an exemplar to better understand this scenario of Meethi, where a boy is shown to be finding his lost pup, calling out its name. This sequence can easily be seen in relation with the last sequence of the film where Meethi just vanishes and her sister is trying to find her calling out her name but she is nowhere to be found. The pup and Meethi both have vanished from the realities of those they were with but they still exist somewhere may be in a reality of their own.

Sub-Themes

- **Guilt**

There is a constant sense of guilt in two of the major characters propelling their actions during the narrative of the film. Anu blames herself for Meethi's condition, as she feels guilty for letting her go at a place with political unrest all alone which resulted in her having to face sexual abuse, whilst Joydeep holds himself guilty for abandoning her at a time when the going gets rough.

The theme of guilt enters the narrative soon after the episode of failed suicide attempt made by Meethi as a consequence of receiving dismissal from Anu. Upon hearing her mother's confession about the 'tantrik' incident that took place earlier that day, a sense of guilt strikes Anu for not believing Meethi and brushing her off thinking she was being delusional yet again. Later, when Anu discusses Meethi's case with Kunal who took over the case after the doctor treating Meethi moved to Bangalore, it is revealed that Anu has been experiencing guilt and self-blame for a long in her life's timeline. "*It started after... it's all my fault....*" (Sen, 2005), Anu, on Kunal's inquiry, begins to narrate the incident which made Meethi become suicidal. Through flashback, the happenings of eleven years prior are shown, the time when Meethi's didn't start to display any severe symptoms of her mental illness. One particular day, Meethi visits Anu at the University where she taught, informing her about an assignment allotted to her by her workplace requiring her as a journalist to travel to a small town on the border of Bengal and Bihar to cover the post-poll violence. She was nervous and wanted Anu to accompany her there. Anu has prior commitments to her work, thus pardons herself and asks Meethi to "*chuck the job*" as it was too dangerous to take on the assignment. Meethi, though adamant to prove herself to her fiancé, doesn't pay much heed to Anu's advise and goes on to the small town she was required to in order to keep her job. It was there that

she becomes the victim of the gang rape. The trauma turns her into a mental case. Anu now takes the whole blame on herself" *"I should have followed her..... maybe she shouldn't have been allowed to work..."* (Sen, 2005).

"I know it was natural to feel guilt in a situation like this... but let me make something very clear... her disease could not have been caused by that one incident... believe me schizophrenia is organic in nature... meaning that the trauma of something like rape can trigger it off, but not unless there is a propensity to it..... a person has to be genetically prone to the disease, for something to trigger it off..... her condition could be triggered off by something far less traumatic than rape..... we all go through some trauma at some time in our lives, but that doesn't mean we all turn schizophrenic..." (Sen, 2005)

Kunal assures Anu explaining that it wasn't her fault and that she shouldn't take the blame on herself unnecessarily. He further suggests her to ease up and take a break as she needed one.

Adhering to Kunal's advice, Anu travels to Bhutan with her family, where coincidentally Joydeep catches a glimpse of his past, discovering Meethi wandering by the banks whilst he was there on a vacation with his wife and children. Anu takes Meethi back to their cottage, whilst Joydeep follows them all the way. In the process, he recalls his deeds, his act of rejecting Meethi from being a part of his life, leaving her devastated by betrayal. All the memories evoke a sense of guilt making him feel obligated to apologise to Meethi and her family. On a chance meeting with Anu, he informs about Meethi's condition and her imaginary world she lives in.

Joydeep: "She's married?" (Sen, 2005)

Anu: "Married?! I suppose you can say that! She thinks she is." (Sen, 2005)

Joydeep: "to whom?" (Sen, 2005)

Anu: "to you! She thinks she is Mrs. Joydeep Roy." (Sen, 2005) The conversation fills Joydeep with extreme guilt, which further invokes in him a sense of responsibility towards Meethi. Hence he is adamant to assist her in finding her imaginary home after being asked to help by Meethi. *"...if I don't help her, I will be letting her down again... I'll be betraying her trust for a second time.... I can't...."* (Sen, 2005), Joydeep's guilt colours her decision, which he tries to assuage by diligently helping Meethi till she finally attains her happiness.

- **Caregiver Burden**

Anu's guilt and a sense of motherly emotions towards Meethi, influence her to play the role of primary caregiver for her eighteen-year younger

half-sister. Whilst fulfilling responsibilities towards her a mentally disabled sister and an elderly mother, Anu seems to have put her personal life on a hold. She stakes her romantic relationship with Sanjeev who thinks of her to be too much indulgent in caring for her family; she is ready to take the damage on her love life rather than leaving her responsibilities towards her sister and mother. Her refusal to Sanjeev's offer of travelling with him to spend some much desired alone time together, fetches from him an annoyed reaction " *You've been looking after her (Meethi) all these years... You've put your life on hold, Anu. Don't you owe yourself something too? Why must you ALWAYS, ALWAYS put your happiness last?*" (Sen, 2005). During their dialogue over the phone, Sanjeev's background showcases the hustle bustle of city life, with lights and the sound of cars honking on the road whilst Anu's background is just the walls of her own room. Sanjeev wants to take her out of those walls to the world, in a way relieving her of all the responsibilities she has taken upon herself but Anu resists. The resistance later in the narrative costs her the relationship, which fills her with immense pain, yet she can't overlook her duty towards her family. " *I waited for you Anu, (pause) but how long? and it isn't as though our relationship was going anywhere... one has to move on, I guess..... you have your priorities and I have mine...*" (Sen, 2005), Sanjeev bids goodbye to Anu, leaving her all to her responsibilities.

Much earlier to this episode, the effects of the burden of Meethi's responsibility on Anu's life can be traced through the play of colours captured by the camera. Whilst Anu and her mother are waiting at the hospital, after Meethi's failed attempt to suicide, they are shown wearing white clothes with the background being bright in colour. This might be symbolic of their grief over Meethi's condition. All the colourless clothing in front of a bright coloured background also separates their lives with that of others around them. The bright coloured background is the life they could lead but they are rather living a colourless life under the burden of providing care to a mentally disabled person.

It is worth noting that schizophrenia being a chronic disease making the patient disabled as a result leaving them at the mercy of care given by others, adversely affects not only the patient but the care giver as well (Yazici et al., 2016). The care giver experiences a lot of burden on the self which evokes in them a considerable amount of annoyance and frustration. Similar is the case of Anu, who is otherwise much empathetic and sensitive towards sister, has her jiffs of frustrations now and then taken out verbally. " *....you can see I am trying my best... I am not a superhuman you know...*" (Sen, 2005), Anu bursts out at her mother as she bombards

her with several questions concerning Meethi's condition, after she is lay in an unconscious state of an epileptic seizure. Anu is also frustrated because her mother doesn't understand the dynamics of her relationship with Sanjeev and keep on nagging her wanting him at their disposal to help them with Meethi. The situation further worsens after the episode of her break-up with Sanjeev. *"I feel so old, too ugly maa.... nothing more to look forward to..."* (Sen, 2005), Anu is heartbroken and devastated, crying inconsolably. She loses her patience when the mother begins to nag her yet again about Sanjeev. For the first time in the narrative, Anu reacting to her mother's insensitivity blames her and Meethi for her break-up and her lost opportunities in life. Although she catches her cool almost immediately, she is quite vocal about the burden she single-handedly bears on her life because of her responsibility towards the family"

"...he (Sanjeev) asked me to go with him and I said no... you want to know why... BECAUSE OF YOU, BECAUSE OF YOU AND MEETHI... AND YOUR SON... because neither your son nor your daughter can be bothered... and I am the only one who has taken your responsibility in this family..." (Sen, 2005).

Anu is finally freed of her burden at the ending of the film which suggests the permanent disappearance of Meethi. It's an indication of freedom for both the sisters who can now continue with their realities as they please. However, Anu seems so much attached to her caregiver's burden which has been so much engraved on her life that when she is finally free, she is in a state of refusal and adamant at having her sister back. It is then that Kunal directs her away probably towards a new reality.

Conclusion

15 Park Avenue is an insightful film which helps in understanding the intricacies of the lives of those suffering from mental illness. Whilst debunking all the stereotypes associated with schizophrenia established in the society by other films, this film attempts at portraying the illness as pragmatically as possible without any sensationalism. It institutes the importance of being informed and educated about mental disability, at the same time it provides a great account of the essentiality of a establishing a good relationship between the patient and the caregiver. Instead of depicting the caregiver with the lens of heroism, it portrays the character in a realistic manner. The film isn't merely a journey of a mentally disabled woman finding an address; it rather stresses on her search for an identity, for happiness, for her reality. The narrative of *15 Park Avenue* concludes quite beautifully ending Meethi's long and exhausting journey as she finally

meets her destination; and before fading out into the black screen denoting the end of the film, it offers a wider- angle view leaving the interpretation to the imagination of the audiences maintaining the ambiguity persistent in the narrative throughout. In conclusion, it's noteworthy that cinema has a huge impact on the society, thus filmmakers need to own to their responsibility towards portraying serious issues like mental health more sensibly and accurately. Cinema has the power to change public perceptions and this film is a brilliant source which could aid in the job towards mental disability.

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