Moral Dilemmas and Values of the Middle Class in Mrinal Sen's Films: A Study of *Ek Din Pratidin* and *Kharij*

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Introduction

Cinema is a compositional art form where all other art forms co-exist. Fundamental artistic elements such as dance, music, drama, and painting are inherently present in cinema. The relationship between cinema and poetry is profoundly intimate. In cinema, the role of dialogue is secondary; it is the image or the visual that plays the primary role. When shots are taken one by one with a camera, they carry no complete meaning in isolation. It is only through the combination of multiple shots that a complete cinematic language emerges—just as a poem takes shape through the stringing together of words (Rhodes, 2011).

In early Indian cinema, filmmakers primarily adapted mythological, social, historical narratives, or stories based on literature. However, Mrinal Sen deviated from this tradition by deconstructing literary narratives and reconstructing them with his own interpretation. He offered a personal reading of these narratives, often minimizing the emphasis on plot events. Rather than focusing on grand occurrences, Sen highlighted the seemingly trivial incidents from our daily lives—events we often ignore or fail to notice. Through the lens of his camera, he invested these small occurrences with layered meanings, presenting them with powerful interrogative undertones (Chakravarty, 1993; Ghosh, 2015).

Backdrop of Mrinal Sen's Films and the Middle Class

Mrinal Sen was the filmmaker who elevated Bengali cinema to the global stage, yet at heart, he remained a lifelong Bengali. His films spoke for the masses—the oppressed, the poor, the hungry, the struggling—and conveyed the ultimate realities of life. He broke the conventional grammar of filmmaking and created a distinct cinematic idiom of his own. In doing so, he elevated Bengali cinema into a realm of serious art (Sen, 2002).

Mrinal Sen was not merely a filmmaker; his films were more than just cinema. He was a torchbearer of cultural and social movements, using film as a powerful medium for political and social commentary. For him, cinema served as a document of society, politics, and culture, embodying the voices of the common people (Ghosh, 2013).

The most compelling aspect of Mrinal Sen’s cinema lies in the realism of his stories. There was no space for fantasy. The stories of ordinary people, their surroundings, the country’s socio-political climate, and the struggles of daily life were central to his narrative. His films were created for the sake of art itself, not for personal gain. As a true artist, he sought to develop the art form rather than merely advancing his own career (Mukherjee, 2017).

Revolution, protest, and inquiry were recurring themes in his work. This ideological underpinning rooted him in Marxist philosophy, and his association with the Communist Party’s cultural wing and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) reflected these beliefs. However, Mrinal Sen cannot be pigeonholed with other Marxist filmmakers. Some critics refer to him as a dialectical materialist analyst, as his characters often become symbols of existential pain and resistance. In *Interview* (1971), the protagonist’s inability to obtain a Western suit for a job interview awakens his consciousness and transforms him into a rebel. In *Akash Kusum* (1965), the middle-class protagonist eventually realizes that success in life isn’t easy, and love cannot be gained by hiding one's class identity behind a facade (Chakrabarty, 2015).

Mrinal Sen himself came from a middle-class background, which explains his persistent focus on the middle class in his films. His deep and personal understanding of the middle class shaped his cinematic representations. Unlike Satyajit Ray or Ritwik Ghatak, Sen examined the

vulnerabilities and contradictions of the middle class with greater intensity, making his voice unique and significant among this demographic (Dutta, 2020).

From the kitchen stoves to everyday utensils of lower-middle and middle-class families, Sen brought all into his cinematic frame. No other director had observed the middle class so closely. Yet, he had no sympathy or romanticism for this urban class. As Sen once stated, "This class is manipulative, ready to compromise with injustice at any cost, and tends to flee in times of crisis" (Sen, 1982). This sentiment is visible in *Akaler Sandhane* (1980), where the young director halts shooting and escapes. Similarly, in *Khandhar* (1984), the photographer deceives a helpless woman and her ailing mother.

In *Kharij* (1982), the protagonist fails to grasp the depth of his guilt when the death of a child laborer occurs under his watch. The middle class tries to suppress the truth by bribing the father of the deceased boy. In *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), when a young woman does not return home one night, the surrounding middle-class neighbors show intrusive and nearly obscene curiosity. In this collective awakening, Mrinal Sen also saw himself. Through such portrayals, we understand that the Bengali middle class is expanding, but it is also decaying.

Throughout his life, Sen observed the silent bleeding of the middle class. He knew that the middle class is not suited to be a villain. To become a true antagonist, one needs a spine—perhaps something that the Partition had broken. This essay mainly discusses *Ek Din Pratidin* and *Kharij*, focusing on how Mrinal Sen critically portrays the contradictions and moral ambiguity of the middle class (Banerjee, 2022).

Ek Din Pratidin: Surveillance, Shame, and the Female Body

Mrinal Sen's *Ek Din Pratidin* (*And Quiet Rolls the Dawn*) offers a poignant exploration of middle-class life in late 1970s and early 1980s Kolkata. Through the microcosm of a single household in a dilapidated tenement of North Kolkata, Sen Paints a vivid portrait of economic hardship, gender-based hypocrisy, and the fragility of societal values under pressure.

Set in a conservative neighborhood, the film revolves around a seven-member middle-class family surviving on the modest pension of its patriarch, Rishikesh Babu, and the salary of the eldest daughter, Chinu—a bank employee and the sole breadwinner. The setting—a crumbling, century-old building shared by numerous families—is not merely a backdrop, but a symbolic extension of their precarious existence, embodying the decay of traditional values and the burden of economic struggle.

The central crisis of the film unfolds one evening when Chinu fails to return home at her usual time. What initially begins as mere concern gradually descends into panic, speculation, and, ultimately, societal judgment. This simple delay becomes a narrative device through which Mrinal Sen exposes the deep-seated contradictions within the Bengali middle class—particularly its conservative, patriarchal attitudes towards working women.

Rather than genuine concern for Chinu's safety, the family's foremost anxiety revolves around the potential damage to their social reputation. The neighbors, instead of offering comfort, intrude upon the family's private anguish, feeding off the uncertainty with relentless gossip and unsolicited advice. This lack of personal space and the performative morality of the community highlight the claustrophobic nature of middle-class life, where every action is dictated by fear of public perception.

As the family desperately searches for Chinu—visiting police stations, hospitals, and even a morgue—the film starkly confronts the vulnerability of women in urban India. Despite being a working professional, Chinu is not exempt from the pervasive social policing that continues to dictate the boundaries of female autonomy.

Sen masterfully uses dialogue and silence to expose the duplicity of societal norms. The family's emotional responses—the helplessness of the parents, the brother's frustration, and the sister's quiet reflection—offer a nuanced portrait of a household caught between economic necessity and moral conservatism. Their muted suffering reflects the quiet resilience of the Bengali middle class, constantly struggling to balance survival with a crumbling value system.

Chinu's eventual return does not bring closure; instead, it confronts the family with the weight of their own prejudice. A fault in the telephone lines had prevented her from informing them—a banal, technical mishap that triggered a storm of character judgment. Yet, upon her return, she is met not with relief, but with suspicious silence. They ask her nothing—perhaps out of fear of the answers, or perhaps in recognition of their own unspoken guilt. This silence is not comforting; it is deeply unsettling. It speaks volumes about their unease with the idea of women's independence and freedom.

By choosing not to interrogate Chinu, the family inadvertently reveals their internal conflict. They have already judged her in their minds—questioning where she went, with whom, and why. But when she appears composed and unharmed, their imagined narratives collapse, leaving them speechless. This moment of restrained silence becomes a hallmark of Mrinal Sen's cinematic language. He does not deliver overt messages; instead, he allows silence to carry the weight of critique. These "unspoken words" disturb the audience, prompting reflection—thus revealing the true power of his cinema.

Yet Chinu's return is not a return to safety or belonging. Instead of comfort, she encounters suspicion. Her late arrival becomes an unspoken indictment, and her composure is met with scorn rather than empathy. In a powerful moment of emotional honesty, she expresses the tragic irony of her situation: that her safe return has caused more shame than if she had met with an accident. The daughter who financially sustains the family becomes, in a matter of hours, a moral liability. Her autonomy is considered a threat—not only to familial structure, but to societal honor.

The cruelty of this social order is further underscored through the intimate conversations between Chinu's siblings. Amidst the oppressive silence of the elders, their dialogue becomes a

subtle act of resistance—a voice of moral clarity amid the surrounding hypocrisy. Through their perspective, Sen injects a glimmer of protest against patriarchal values and rigid societal norms.

Ek Din Pratidin lays bare the alarming curtailment of women's rights even in so-called modern times. Chinu, despite being educated and self-reliant, cannot exercise freedom over her time, her finances, or her personal choices without being subjected to scrutiny. The omnipresent fear of "what people will say" dictates the terms of her existence. In this world, middle-class morality is less about ethics and more about public performance.

Sen also captures the emotional paradox of the middle-class family: the tension between parental love and social fear. In moments of crisis, the need to maintain social respectability often supersedes the impulse for compassion. Layer by layer, the film unravels the moral decay, economic anxiety, and emotional fragility of a class desperately clinging to its outdated ideals.

In the end, *Ek Din Pratidin* is not simply a story about a missing woman—it is an indictment of the structures that police women's behavior and a mirror held up to a society that fears change more than injustice. Through minimalism, silence, and symbolic mise-en-scène, Mrinal Sen crafts a powerful, introspective narrative that lingers well beyond its final frame. The true crisis is not Chinu's delay, but the social order that allows such a delay to become catastrophic.

Class and Death in *Kharij*

The social crisis of the middle-class family has always been a central theme in Mrinal Sen's films. This leftist filmmaker has consistently tried to portray the struggles of the so-called lower classes and marginalized sections of society. At the same time, his camera has documented the moral and social decay within the middle class. In this context, *Kharij* (1982), based on the novel by Ramapada Chowdhury, is particularly noteworthy.

The plot of *Kharij* revolves around the death of a boy named Palan. Palan worked as a domestic help in a middle-class household in Kolkata, where he also resided. He used to sleep in the kitchen. On a bitterly cold winter night, in need of a little warmth, a small fire was lit using charcoal in the enclosed kitchen space. Palan died in his sleep from carbon monoxide poisoning

due to the lack of ventilation. His death leaves us with the question: who is responsible for Palan's death? Whose negligence led to this tragic end of a young life?

It is undeniable that institutions do not kill directly. However, be it through suffocation or other forms of neglect, the institution bears an indirect responsibility in such unnatural deaths. Take Palan's case, for instance. Coming from a drought-affected, impoverished agricultural family in Bankura, Palan had to take up domestic work in a middle-class family in Kolkata to survive. In truth, it was extreme poverty and lack of food that forced him into child labor. *Kharij*, in its portrayal of middle-class dilemmas, also touches upon the issue of child labor.

Palan, who should have been attending school, was instead working in a household as a child laborer due to his family's destitution. Child labor is illegal under Article 24 of the Indian Constitution. Ironically, while one child in the middle-class household grows up with safety, care, and opportunities, another child—the domestic help—loses his childhood and ultimately, his life. Palan's role in that household was reduced to that of a mechanical relief from domestic chores. His basic human needs were neither acknowledged nor addressed, and ultimately, he was neglected to a fatal extent. In depicting Palan's death, the director clearly shows the audience that the family continued employing him for child labor, fully aware of the injustice.

Thus, the crisis of the middle class is revealed as a moral one—a decay of social values. The reactions of the family where Palan worked, the doctor, the landlord, and the neighbors all reflect not genuine grief over the sudden death of a child, but rather anxiety about the potential consequences and a relentless effort to avoid them. This effort often crosses into shamelessness, exposing the moral bankruptcy of the middle class.

Only two people appear genuinely grief-stricken over Palan's death—one is the family's own child, Tukai, who used to play with Palan, and the other is Palan's father, a man defeated at every level by the institutional power structures.

Compared to Mrinal Sen's earlier politically charged films like *Padatik* (1973) or *Chorus* (1974), *Kharij* may seem to operate at a relatively softer political pitch. While class conflict has always been a notable theme in Sen's leftist cinema, in *Kharij* the conflict is more psychological than overtly political. The crisis of the middle class and its decaying values seem to pierce the

conscience of the employer's family. Following Palan's death, through their psychological turmoil and internal tension, the true face of the middle class emerges from behind its polished mask.

The autopsy of Palan's body becomes symbolic of the autopsy of middle-class moral values. At some point, the family seems to realize that, although they didn't physically abuse Palan, what they did was still inhuman. Understanding this inner crisis becomes the hidden strength of the film.

Their offer of financial compensation to Palan's grief-stricken and shattered father is an inadequate attempt to escape their overwhelming sense of guilt. But this also exposes the selfishness and hypocrisy of the middle class. In a capitalist society, where everything—including human life—has a monetary value, this harsh truth is laid bare. However, Palan's father refuses the money, and in doing so, his silent and dignified rejection strips away the rotting mask of the middle class's decaying values.

His rejection reveals how institutional frameworks dehumanize the poor and invalidate their very humanity. And this is precisely where *Kharij* succeeds so powerfully—as a critique not only of one family, but of an entire social structure that 'dismisses' the humanity of the marginalized.

A Cinema of Ethical Interrogation: Mrinal Sen and the Bengali Middle Class

Mrinal Sen's films *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979) and *Kharij* (1982) stand as profound cinematic explorations of moral ambiguity, class contradictions, and social complicity. Rather than dispensing moral verdicts or offering solutions, Sen engages in what may be termed a "cinema of ethical interrogation." Through quiet realism and evocative silences, he invites viewers to examine not only the characters on screen but also themselves. In this way, Sen's work becomes a mirror to the ethical discomforts of the urban Bengali middle class—a class often celebrated as the custodian of morality and culture in post-Independence India.

In *Ek Din Pratidin*, the disappearance of a young working woman, who is the sole breadwinner of her family, triggers not only panic but also the unraveling of middle-class pretensions. The family's anxious attempts to hide her absence from neighbors, while avoiding questions about her profession, expose their underlying hypocrisy and fear of social judgment. Sen masterfully refrains from melodrama, instead focusing on everyday gestures—anxious glances, unfinished conversations, silences—that convey the emotional and moral breakdown of the household (Chakravarty, 1993). This restraint is central to Sen's approach; it transforms the domestic into a site of political interrogation.

Similarly, *Kharij* centers on the death of a child domestic worker in a middle-class home. The employer family, seemingly "good people," responds not with overt cruelty but with a combination of detachment, bureaucratic appeasement, and shallow regret. The film avoids spectacle; instead, it exposes the normalized violence embedded in structures of class and privilege. The boy's death is not just a personal tragedy—it is a societal indictment. Sen foregrounds the failure of moral introspection and the ease with which responsibility is deflected. As Banerjee (2008) notes, *Kharij* dismantles "the illusion of innocence" that the middle class constructs around itself.

What is striking in both films is Sen's refusal to caricature his middle-class protagonists. They are not villains; rather, they are complex, often well-meaning individuals ensnared by the very system they benefit from. This nuanced portrayal makes the viewer's confrontation with ethical complicity all the more unsettling. Sen challenges the assumption that good intentions suffice in the face of structural injustice. His cinema insists that morality without justice is performative—a mere social script enacted to maintain hegemony and privilege.

Furthermore, Sen interrogates the gendered dimensions of middle-class life. In *Ek Din Pratidin*, the family's control over the daughter's autonomy reflects broader patterns of surveillance and patriarchal containment. Her economic role does not grant her liberation but deepens the burden of respectability and fear of scandal. Meanwhile, *Kharij* subtly points to the erasure of working-class voices, especially those of domestic workers and children, from mainstream moral discourse. The middle class, in Sen's vision, sustains itself through mechanisms of exclusion and selective empathy (Ghosh, 2002).

Ultimately, Mrinal Sen's cinema is less about moral resolution and more about the uncomfortable questions that remain unanswered. His ethical realism resists closure and calls for sustained introspection. In revealing the performative nature of middle-class virtue, Sen reorients the cinematic gaze—from spectacle to subtlety, from judgment to interrogation.

Conclusion

Identifying a crisis is the first step toward its resolution. In society, the struggles of the upper and lower classes are often starkly visible and, in many cases, solutions to their problems appear relatively direct. However, the crises of the middle class are far more ambiguous—neither clearly articulated nor easily resolvable. This class is plagued by a constant internal conflict, oscillating between aspiration and limitation, modernity and tradition, freedom and social conformity. Such ambivalence gives rise to a state of chronic indecision, which becomes a defining characteristic of the middle-class psyche.

In the films of Mrinal Sen, this existential dilemma is poignantly portrayed through the fractured relationships, trust deficits, and moral uncertainties that haunt middle-class families. His cinematic narrative refuses to offer comforting illusions. Instead, he compels the audience to confront uncomfortable truths. Sen's approach was not to romanticize or mystify everyday life, but to expose its contradictions and unresolved tensions. His realism was not of the passive, observational kind, but one that actively dissected the sociopolitical undercurrents of urban, middle-class existence in post-independence India.

As Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen note in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, Mrinal Sen's work is part of a radical tradition that critiques the social order by “foregrounding structures of class, gender, and ideology” (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999, p. 314). Films like *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979) and *Kharij* (1982) exemplify this critical gaze. In *Ek Din Pratidin*, the disappearance of a working woman from a middle-class family triggers a crisis that exposes latent patriarchal biases and the fragility of moral posturing. Similarly, in *Kharij*, the accidental death of a servant boy in a middle-class household unravels the complacency and quiet cruelty

embedded in class privilege. These films are not merely stories; they are cinematic case studies of societal contradictions.

Sen believed that in a world divided by class and economic disparities, sweet tales of romantic love risk leading the viewer into false consciousness. As he once said, “Cinema must disturb. It must provoke thought, not pacify” (Sen, 2002). He was not interested in escapism. His realism was sharp-edged, critical, and ideologically charged. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sen did not use cinema as a medium of comfort but as a tool for ideological confrontation. His commitment to Marxist humanism and Brechtian aesthetics enabled him to use cinema as a form of social inquiry.

Thus, in the context of South Asian cinema, Mrinal Sen emerges as one of the most courageous and candid filmmakers. His unflinching critique of the middle class—its hypocrisies, moral dilemmas, and internal dissonances—set him apart as a filmmaker who refused to pander to either popular sentiment or elite ideologies. He dissected the Indian middle class with surgical precision, refusing to let his audience settle into comfort. As the Indian subcontinent continues to wrestle with old hierarchies and new anxieties, Sen’s cinema remains profoundly relevant—serving both as a mirror and a warning.

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