

Actress Vanessa Kirby packs a punch as 'Pieces of a Woman' shows grief at its most raw



CHENNAI: Lauded Hungarian director Kornel Mundruczo's first English-language film, "Pieces of a Woman," now on Netflix, explores the effects of the death of a child on a relationship.



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Backed by strong acting performances, Mundruczo also reveals how the arrival of a baby, even the very thought of it in the months preceding the birth, can be fraught with tension, and shows the sense of elation associated with creation.

A young Boston couple, Martha (Vanessa Kirby, “The Crown”) and Sean (Shia LaBeouf), wait for the arrival of their baby, planning every little detail, including their plans for a homebirth.

In one of the most memorable scenes, we watch a 24-minute single-shot take of the labor, with ups and downs that keep the audience on edge. A foreshadowing of the tragedy comes early on — the couple’s chosen midwife is suddenly unavailable and she sends Eva (Molly Parker).

Tension is written across Eva’s face as the baby’s heartbeat fades, setting in motion the events of the film.

The tragedy causes bitterness to creep into the couple’s relationship. Sean is a construction worker, and he has been pushing his teammates to finish a bridge across a river so that his child, a girl, would be the first to cross it. Martha, a corporate executive, has her own hurdles to face at home, with class tensions coming into play.

The divide is heightened by Martha’s domineering mother, Elizabeth (Ellen Burstyn), who remains an invasive presence in the couple’s life and pushes them to hold the midwife accountable by legal means.

The movie competed at the Venice Film Festival in 2020, with Kirby winning the best actress award. And what a performance it is, combining joy and angst in a very restrained way. Martha needed the baby to cement her ties with Sean, while he felt that the birth of the child would keep him away from addiction. The audience sees, in shattering detail, how despair can cause lives to spiral out of control.

While most of the narrative is brilliantly authentic, there is a lapse in the final courtroom proceedings. Also, very little attempt is made to take us deeper into the couple’s professional lives.

Regardless, “Pieces of a Woman” may well be remembered for showing one of the most detailed depictions of child birth — and Kirby’s masterly portrayal will be long admired.

