CHAPTER SEVEN

WOMEN AS HUMAN BEINGS

As we have seen in the last chapter that it is hardly possible for women to participate in public sphere in substantive manner as her feminine qualities do not have much significance there. Therefore we need to change the understanding of public domain to ensure more meaningful participation of women. But for that we have to intervene with a greater and broader conceptual understanding of human being. Now, to proceed with the notion of human being to change the concept of public sphere we have to deal with several aspects. First, how the received understanding of human rights have defined the notion of human being. Second, how far such understanding addresses the private domain or represents only public world. Third, to what extent the notion of human being is appropriate to represent Bengali middle class women as portrayed in Bengali films. When the trio, Mukti, Maya and Alo, in the film ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ visited a bank with their loan application to start their business, the officer suggests that business is not the domain of women and another person supported him by saying, that in ‘foreign’ a scientist is trying to prove the fact that women are sub-human beings. Whatever that bank officer maintained rather remained the common belief about women in society. As we know that in the human rights discourse, all human beings are equal in terms of their rights and self-dignity.\(^1\) If women are not held as human beings, the whole discourse of human rights would become a discourse of men’s rights where women’s entitlements have no place and are excluded from the discourse. Even in one of the most radical events in the course of history, the French Revolution, the slogan was ‘all men are equal’ which actually suggests that women are not part of it. It is quite clear that this notion of equality was conferred only on the male members within society, not men and women, in eighteenth century France. The legacy of treating women as sub-human beings, as we find in the film ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ prompts us to find out whether women were

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adequately covered in the existing human rights discourse which claims equal status for men and women, irrespective of their gender. This question is also closely connected with our findings on the status of the middle class women as human beings within the Bengali *Bhadralok* discourse from nineteenth century Bengal.

**WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE AND NATURE OF WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS**

In the Hindi movie, ‘*GANGAJAL*’ we see that to stop crime the police use all kinds of violent measures which are the most horrific examples of human rights violations. The District Police Superintendent initially opposed the strong arm tactics of his personnel, but realizing the gravity of the situation of his area he lets them take any measure which might grossly violate the basic human rights of the people including those of criminals.  

Back to Bengali films, in ‘*ANU*’ we find Sugato who is a political activist suffer mental and physical torture in police custody after his arrest. This is again a clear violation of human rights of an individual. It would of course be wrong to say that before the adoption of the ‘*Universal Declaration Of Human Rights*’ there was no notion of human rights. They have their origin in the fact of human conditions, so that they are fundamental and inalienable and they are not simply conferred by constitutions, conventions or governments. Human Rights were born not of humans, but with humans.

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2 It is the story of an IPS officer who has been posted as the district superintendent of police at Tejpur. The district is part of a disturbed areas in the state where the rule of law is yet to exist. Amit Verma, the S.P. had tried his best to bring back law and order in his area but to doing it he found that the police personnel are deeply mobilized along their caste affiliations. Officers performed their duties not for people but for Sadhu Yadav, the most influential man of that region who also represents the dominating caste of Tejpur. The S.P. starts to motivate his officers but in every occasion he failed because people dared not speak against them. Though Amit Verma wanted to drive his force according to the rule of law, but ultimately allowed them to take extreme steps with sheer ruthlessness to maintain law and order in the district. In this situation some hooligans belongs to Sadhu Yadav were arrested and at night they have been tortured at custody. As a result an officer has been murdered by Sadhu Yadav. So now there is no other way but to unleash his force against him. A serious violation of law has been charged against S. P. Amit Verma which he accepted but when people became violent to punish a culprit he saved him from the people by saying that our culture does not approve such acts. It proves that he basically a law abiding person who does not want to violate it and respecting individual human rights.

3 P.N Bhagwati (1997) ‘Creating A Judicial Culture To promote The Enforcement Of Women’s Human Rights’ in Byrnes, Andrew, Connors, Jane & Bik, Lum (Edited) *Advancing The Human Rights Of*
From this logic state or police cannot violate these rights, as we find in both this films, because every person should enjoy these rights from their birth. In ‘ANU’, Sugato who suffers torture in police custody as a political activist, could claim the benefits of rights only against police or state, not from other people, as part of justice. In general, the objects of human rights are those fundamental claims from other people, and from social institutions. Any failure to provide such benefits, or acting to take away such benefits, is considered as rights violations.\(^4\) In case of Sugoto, the state does not provide him fundamental benefits of individual rights; on the contrary police violates his basic rights as human being. Actually human rights, like any other right is not a property, rather it is a reason to treat persons in certain respectful ways, which tell us how we should treat our fellow human beings.\(^5\)

![Figure 18](image)

Figure no: 18

Torturing in police custody is a usual form of human rights violation. (ANU)


\(^5\) Ibid. P. 19
Raping a woman is not a violation of her human dignity but the violation of her sanctity as woman. (ANU)

One could ask why human rights are so sacred that it cannot be violated? The distinctiveness of the idea of human rights is the belief that all human beings have, or hold human rights; it is actually a bold and substantive moral claim.\(^6\) The moral claim of human rights lay in the values like humanism, rationalism and individualism. Persons like Sugato in this sense – because of his political activities – have been denied not only his individual rights, but also the moral claim as an individual human being. This kind of torture by the police also violates the modern notion that as human beings we all share a basic level of equal moral worth in some significant respect. A human right then is a general moral right that every human being has which need not necessarily be written into actual legal codes. In relying on reason as a foundation or justification, human rights make an appeal to universality that transcends traditional values and beliefs. Everywhere vicious human rights violators often claim that those whose human rights they violate are

\(^6\) Ibid. P. 15
not at all human and so are not entitled to claim human rights. The first step to mass human rights violations is, invariably, to denigrate the humanity of the persons targeted.\textsuperscript{7} This indicates that in contemporary human rights discourse there are some limitations to the definition of a human being which might encourage violators to infringe individual rights by defining them as lesser human beings. Like the concept of justice which has no universally accepted definition and meant different things to different people, in different societies, at different times, the notion of human being also is different in terms of societies, regions and even groups. Indeed, it is very difficult to have a consensual definition of human being.\textsuperscript{8} A social morality is a widely believed and practiced code of conduct in a given society.\textsuperscript{9} Human rights discourse, as embodied in the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ failed to accommodate the differences in terms of class, group, region and gender, as a result a large section of people have been denied from their rights as human beings.

Now, talking about the limitations of the current human rights discourse, it is necessary to examine how this discourse has conceived the nature of the human being. In ‘DAHAN’, we see that Romita (Rituparna Sengupta) while returning home after shopping with her husband Palash (Abhishek Chatterji) gets molested by some eve-teasers on the road. Her husband was beaten up by them and Romita was hospitalized; but the charge of molestation is not a charge of her human rights violation. Though human rights are common to men and women, there is a large category of human rights inhering in women which are unfortunately not recognized as human rights.\textsuperscript{10} It also suggests that women are not part of the notion of human being, they belong to a different category and rights are formulated exclusively for men and women are not included within human rights discourse. Actually, for a long time, a person was considered as a right-holder only if he possessed certain selected characteristics, like being an able-bodied, land-owning adult

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. P. 16


\textsuperscript{9} Brain Orend (2002) Human Rights : Concept And Context, P. 24

\textsuperscript{10} P. N Bhagwati (1997) ‘Creating A Judicial Culture To promote The Enforcement Of Women’s Human Rights’ P. 22
That legacy persists even today as the human rights discourse is not able to include women because of its male-centric notion of human being. We can cite another example of how an incident like rape is considered as part of women’s issue and excluded from broader arena of human rights discourse. In the film ‘ADALAT O EKTI MEYE’ a lady teacher ‘Urmila’ is raped by four men while spending holidays with her friends at Gopalpur. Everyone, from her relatives to her school authority and even the court considered this rape as the violation of women’s physical sanctity, but not as the violation of her human dignity. Her relatives and her school authority did not overcome the traditional mind set and saw her just as a woman who herself was responsible for her own protection before appearing in the public sphere. No doubt that such an understanding of women within a broader social consensus considers them as other than human being even in public sphere and public institutions such as courts fail to appreciate women’s point of view though they are no less entitled to seek justice. In the court when Urmila appears in the witness-box she confronts interrogation by the defence lawyer who represents the rapists. But the way he interrogates Urmila further undermines her dignity as human being. In other words, to get justice in the court she has to face another kind of humiliation and it happens just because she is a woman who has been raped. When the public prosecutor asks the court and the defence council to be more dignified in interrogating Urmila the plea is rejected. Because according to the defence counsel he has the legal right to interrogate her to protect his clients according to the law of the land which cannot be different for men and women. But what he asks Urmila ultimately violates her privacy and raises doubts about her moral character before the public. Here, her legal right does not prove to be helpful to get justice; rather it constitutes a further assault on her dignity. The problem lies not in legal rights but in treating men and women in the same legal yardstick. In place of Urmila if any man was physically tortured by a gang of robbers that would have been considered as a violation of his dignity as human being and the criminals would be prosecuted in that manner, where the state itself may not be involved in it.

This kind of limitations within standard notion of human rights created the ground for the emergence of the movement of women’s human rights. According to Justice Bhagwati, to insist that women are not truly human and unlike true human are not sacred is to say that some human beings are sacred. However, with the feminist intervention and the emergence of the women’s rights movement, attempts have been made to include other social rights especially for women and other minority groups within the broader definition of human rights in subsequent years. No doubt, incorporating such rights are to be the part of the claim for women and other groups to have a legal status in protecting their human dignity without any discrimination. Now the question is whether group rights adequately protect person’s human dignity. As part of the human rights discourse group rights while protecting the interests of the individual in public sphere, in many cases violate the sanctity of his individual claim. More important is, within the domain of public sphere women and other group rights have been understood as special category to address some special requirements for them. Earlier women and group rights constituted a different category outside the human rights discourse. They remain still today as they were, with the only difference is that now these rights are part of the broader framework of human rights regime to ensure their moral claim in public sphere. But at the same time whatever rights women and other marginal groups enjoy do not offer much else beyond the traditional understanding of public ethics and morality.

Traditional human rights violation standards are categorized in such a way that it excludes women, eliding critical issues.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, molestation or rape against Romita and Urmila in ‘DAHAN’ and ‘ADALAT O EKTI MEYE’ respectively do not include as a normal human rights violation but the violation of different kind of rights of women. Here, Charlotte Bunch points out that a significant portion of the world’s population are routinely subject to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation, mutilation and even murder simply because they are females. Crimes such as these against any group other than women would be recognized as a civil and political emergency as well as a gross

violation of the victim’s humanity.\textsuperscript{13} True, the United Nations’ \textit{Universal Declaration of Human Rights}, adopted in 1948, defines human rights broadly and symbolizes a world vision of respect for the humanity of all people and many violations of women’s rights such as rape and battering can readily be interpreted as forbidden under the existing clauses, such as ‘No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’. Little elaboration of these rights, however, has been made from the point of view of women. Thus the dominant definitions of human rights tend to exclude much of women’s experiences.\textsuperscript{14} Even women’s rights and other group rights have failed in protecting their humanity as the received understanding of these rights based on the division of the social world into public and private spheres. Consequently the formal sanction of a person’s human rights along with other group rights are not able to secure human dignity of women and other marginal sections in public sphere. What is theoretically recognized and granted for women seems to be unrealizable in practice. Like \textit{Urmila} and \textit{Romita}, in many cases women are deprived from getting justice despite the existence of such rights for them because the public ethics like neutrality and the apparently neutral position of the human rights discourse cannot do justice to women. In courts, we find that the \textit{Goddess of Justice} is blindfolded which symbolizes neutrality and impartiality. In the human rights discourse, the Goddess of Justice should keep her eyes wide open to see the injustice and inequality from which women suffer.\textsuperscript{15} That is why victims like \textit{Romita} do not get justice because the neutrality and impartiality basically reflect the male notion of justice but cannot accommodate the women’s experience and even cannot understand her silence. The understanding of humanity here is such that it represents only men as human beings.

What is important is that those western-educated propertied men who first advanced the cause of human rights most feared the violation of their civil and political

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid. P. 03
\item \textsuperscript{15} P. N. Bhagwati (1997) ‘Creating A Judicial Culture To promote The Enforcement Of Women’s Human Rights’ P. 26
\end{itemize}
rights in the public sphere; hence this kind of violation has been privileged in human rights work. They did not fear, however, violations in the private sphere of the home because they were the masters of that territory.\textsuperscript{16} Certainly, women were not propertied; they were themselves properties.\textsuperscript{17} Women remained marginalized, though no formal restriction was imposed on them to enjoy their rights from the traditional human rights perspective. However, somehow within the limitations of the formal and neutral attitude of rights as it is existed in the public sphere, Romita and Urmila are able to claim justice against those persons who violated their sanctity and assaulted them physically.\textsuperscript{18} But when Romita is raped by her own husband, for that she cannot claim any justice or remedy from anybody because this incident belongs to the private sphere of family, separated from the public domain; it is beyond the sphere of individual rights. Traditionally, the private sphere of the home is the sphere where men are the masters and can practice violence, including rape within familial relationships but that is not considered as violation of one’s individual human rights. The distinction between private and public is a dichotomy largely used to justify female subordination and to exclude human rights abuses in the home from public scrutiny.\textsuperscript{19} Universal human rights are also interpreted as applying to regulate the public sphere – like the traditional notion of rights – but the violation of human rights in the private sphere of the family remains outside the periphery of the human rights regime.\textsuperscript{20} What is increasingly visible is that the violations of woman’s rights are often perpetrated by ‘private agents and not the governmental

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Charlotte Bunch (1995) ‘Transforming Human Rights From A Feminist perspective’ P. 13
\item \textsuperscript{17} Diana, G Zoelle (2000) Globalization Concern For Women’s Human Rights : The Failure Of American Model, St. Martin press, New York. P. 117
\item \textsuperscript{18} ‘ADALAT O EKTI MEYE’ is a sympathetic portrayal of a woman school teacher who was the victim of gang rape. The most important aspect of the film is the attitude of the people who instead of supporting, socially ostracized her. Her school authority does not allow her to join as some guardians put objection. Her boyfriend left her after this event, her relatives has began to criticize her as she is not following the usual course of life which other women do. According to them her free movement in different places is most responsible factor behind this incident. She only got the support of her father and under his inspiration Urmilla faced the trail which culminated in the punishment of those culprits. It is also the initiatives of her father by which the managing committee brings back her into the school job.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Charlotte Bunch (1995) ‘Transforming Human Rights From A Feminist perspective’ Pp. 13-14
\item \textsuperscript{20} Andrew Byrnes; Jane Connors & Lum Bik (1997) (Introduction) in Byrnes, Andrew et al (Edited) Advancing The Human Rights Of Women : Using International Human Rights Standards In Domestic Litigation, P. 03
\end{itemize}
agents’ who are generally targeted by human rights law.\textsuperscript{21} Although, the state is not directly found to be involved in violation of women’s rights in the private sphere, it often supports an exploitative family structure through various laws and rules of behaviour which legitimize the authority of the male over the lives of the female members of the family and fails to act to protect women from private violations; in some cases it encourage a structure where in private violations occur too frequently.\textsuperscript{22}

When women are denied their rights in private sphere, their rights in the public sphere also suffer because what occurs in ‘private’ shapes their ability or image to participate fully in the public arena.\textsuperscript{23} This indicates that if every human being holds certain rights for being human then women certainly do not belong to that category when they are denied enjoyment of those rights. Whatever rights she enjoys in the public sphere primarily represents the male notion of rights, so in that way man represents himself as a proper human being but women’s appearance in the public sphere in this sense is a representation of a different category or no representation at all. The distinction between public and private is rooted in the age old division of labour where women took the role of the caregiver of the family and the public sphere was the domain of men’s activities. Following Engels and later socialist feminists, it could be said that the productive role is performed by men that corresponds to the public sphere and the reproductive role is for women which is performed within the private sphere. That is why women in the private sphere are considered in terms of their role as wife or mother which is a part of their reproductive duties. It is hardly difficult to see that women in the private sphere are not conceived as proper human beings. In ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ the character Aditi wishes to participate in the public sphere beyond her domesticity, through her writing talents but her husband does not allow her as it will affect her role as housewife.

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and mother. He fails to see that his wife after all is a human being beyond her role as the wife and the mother of his two sons. If Aditi does not get full recognition as a human being within her own family, it is not possible for her to get that same kind of recognition in the public sphere. As we have seen that the idea of individuality is possible only in the sphere of the public; in the private sphere one’s identity suffers from other familial roles but the question of women’s own identity in public is again affected by the male bias because it is the domain of male domination. Hence it is important to proceed towards a more comprehensive notion of human rights which could encompass men and women alike. For decades, women have struggled for equality, but equality has been measured by the traditional, male standards. Consequently women’s entry into the public space means, adopting the male characteristics and qualities as the only legitimate values of the system. 24 This is also true in case of human rights and its definition of human being as it primarily focuses on the male dominated public sphere and the male centric concept of human being. To change the received understanding of human rights and its notion of human, there is a need to ensure the formal and substantive equality for women which will represent both the public and the private domain of family. From the above example of ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ we can now proceed towards a closer observation of how in Bengali cinema the notion of humanity of middle class women has been represented within the Bhadralok cultural paradigm.

**WOMEN’S HUMANITY IN BHADRALOK DISCOURSE**

The film ‘PARAMA’ opens with her lighting the brass ‘panchapradeep’ (lamp) in front of the ‘Durga’ icon. 25 It is the occasion of Durga puja of Chowdhury family and Parama as daughter-in-law performs all sorts of responsibilities. How she is important in such a family festival is brought out in the scenes when someone asks her where she should keep the items of the bhoga and Parama shows her the place for it. 26 The


26 Ibid.
background of Durga puja just in the beginning of the film is quite significant. It reveals the fact that we consider a married girl in her in-laws’ house like a Goddess – obviously the popular image of the daughter-in-law in the Indian family is the image of ‘Lakshmi’ – and one day she is immersed by her family members. A woman in a Bengali family must maintain herself in terms of this image of the Goddess. Any deviation from those qualities could lead her towards being dubbed a sub-human being which is nonetheless an inferior status vis-à-vis the status of man as human. Before she develops a relationship with Rahul, Parama had enjoyed the status of ‘Lakshmi’ in her family who looks after all familial responsibilities, but when her family members become aware of her affair with him she is ostracized by them as if she is no longer a human being. Even her husband accuses her as a ‘whore’ which amounts to relegating her to the status of sub-human creature. In essence, a woman either has to live up to the image of a goddess or accept her status as a sub-human, like a whore. As we have seen, in the middle class discourse and in the construction of the notion of Bhadramahila, women of the Bengali middle class were imagined primarily in terms of Goddess-like images that became more prominent in the nationalist era of the late nineteenth century Bengal.27

In the novel ‘Natun Diner Alo’ of Bimal Pratibha Debi there is a conversation between a man and a woman which brings out that the identity of a middle class woman is defined primarily as a wife and mother, not as a complete human being:

*Man:* Every society wants woman to be wife, mother; if they want to be human, social peace will be disturbed.

*Woman:* If it is a society of humans, it would want all men and women to become human – it won’t try to keep a section of it as maid servants, in the name of becoming a mother or Goddess.

*Man:* But women become human only by being mothers or wives.

*Woman:* No, everybody is losing that way. Rather we

This novel was published in 1933 and it has been quite clear for us that, now, women writers could visualize women’s identity as human beyond all other socially constructed values in their own writings. Barring some attempts made by some women writers, the notable Bengali authors in general did not address the question of humanity of women. Most of the writers wished to consider women in terms of mother or wife, and did not want to see them beyond these identities. Rabindranath himself in his article in ‘PANCHABHOOT’ writes that although men are involved in various activities in various forms women constantly maintains themselves only as wife and mother without any kind of interruption, like social change or revolution. What is significant is that he does not mention that just like women, men also could be considered primarily as being husbands or fathers. What Rabidranath suggests that is also evident in our daily experiences where men are primarily thought of in terms of their identity in public sphere, their familial roles as fathers and husbands remain to be less significant. For women also, to accept the primacy of men’s role as father and husband seem to be hesitating. Such attitude of men and women in society is clear in ‘MAHANAGAR’ where we find that after losing his job Subrato gradually became frustrated. The reason lies in the fact that his identity in the public sphere gets affected as he has lost his job. His wife Arati was now the only earning member for the family, but she does not want to assert her identity which she achieved by doing a job outside the family. On the contrary she tries to convince her husband all the time that she remains the same person that she was – housewife and the mother of her son. For Arati, her identity as wife and mother remains primary whereas for Subrato his identity in the public sphere is the primary concern, not his identity as father and husband. Even women writers who otherwise represent radical views in their writings, could not overcome such limitations of the traditional understanding in portraying man-


29 Ibid.
woman relationship in Bengali society. Women’s writings of the late nineteenth and the first half of twentieth century suggest that in their literary approach women did not have the status of being human, vis-à-vis their relation with men, and men alone constituted the category of human. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’ we find that Asha, after being married, is primarily concerned with her role as the wife of Mahendra. We see that she satisfies Mahendra’s passionate desires as she knows that as a wife it is her duty; but is completely ignorant of the fact that she is also a human being having some desires, expectations, purely of her own, like those of her husband. When she learns from her husband that they are going to complete their first marriage anniversary, she feels sorry because she does not have any child even after being married for a year. This is the clear example of the primacy of wifehood and motherhood in the lives of middle class women at least in nineteenth century Bengal, far away from being considered as human. Instead of lamenting, had Asha tried to educate herself or had her husband Mahendra taken an active interest in educating his wife, celebration of their marriage anniversary would have been more meaningful. If it was happened Asha would be more enriched as an human being. She would not be confined within the stereotype notions of mother and wife.

Again, in the film ‘STREER PATRA’, Mrinal, the younger daughter-in-law of the family is being blessed by her aunt-in-law (pishima) who was absent at the time of her marriage. What is significant is that her aunt-in-law blessed her by saying that she should be like ‘Satilakshmi’ who brings prosperity to the family. This imposition of Goddess-like qualities on women who alone can bring prosperity to the whole family is a daily practice in Bengali families which put forth a serious question about the nature of the modernisation process which was begun in early nineteenth century Bengal with the aim of liberating and improving the conditions of women in general - middle class women in particular - but which failed to include women in the category of human beings. The basic construction of womanhood in nineteenth century Bengal portrayed the figure of an asexual, moral, forthright female for whom conjugality or mothering is less a pleasure than a duty. The Victorian womanhood, the chief inspiration behind the

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construction of ‘Bhadramahila’ puts emphasis on aspects like ‘feminine’ sensibility combined with refinement and sentimental predilections. Following this image of Victorian womanhood, the educational proposal allowed women to receive education to that extent which satisfied the making of the Goddess-like image of an ideal wife – who will always remain loyal to her husband; and as a mother – who will sacrifice everything she has to raise her son. Thus Goddess-like image within the private space of the middle class family is inextricably related with her duty as the homemaker and mother. Interestingly the educational proposals which could have made women able to become a complete human being and to participate in the public sphere, just like their male counterparts, unabashedly curtailed such scope to keep them confined in the domestic world. On the other hand if a woman, even today, is not able to perform her duties satisfactorily as a wife or mother, she would be called as ‘Daini’ (Witch), one who destroys the sanctity of the family, instead of maintaining it. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’, Asha wakes up late in the morning and is not very serious about doing household activities. Her mother-in-law, noticing her daughter-in-law’s attitude, does not hesitate to call her a witch who has not only polluted her home but also exerted her evil influence over her son, Mahendra. Here, it is to be noted that whom she calls a witch was welcomed by her just a year ago as ‘Gharer Laksmi’. Witch or ‘Daini’ is a non-human category and if Asha would have been an ideal wife and daughter-in-law in true sense of the term, the situation for her could have been different. In that situation she would have been the perfect manifestation of ‘Lakshmi’ of the home. Significantly, in the notion of Goddess or Witch there is nothing of the qualities of a human being. Because when a woman is identified with the almighty Goddess this in a way place her above the human category whereas to brand her as Witch is an attempt to consider a woman as less than a human being.

To what extent was the Victorian image of womanhood similar to the image of Goddess that is maintained within the Bengali middle class family? In other words, how wifehood and motherhood were celebrated as part of Goddess like qualities in middle class family? For an answer, we could look at Charu and her status in the family vis-à-vis her relationship with her liberal-minded husband Bhupati. According to the
notion of Victorian womanhood, Charu in her appearance possesses refinement, gentleness and other feminine qualities. She is educated and blessed with the talent of creative writing. She is also aware of public affairs and politics with which her husband is deeply involved. What is striking is that despite being a wife of a highly educated upper-middle class family, she minutely looks after all household activities even though there are many servants present in the household. So in an actual sense her status is not more than that of the most respected servant of the home. When Charu attends Bhupati at dinner, it suggests that a wife is the most obedient servant of her husband and it is the hallmark of the ideal wife. Unfortunately in the nineteenth century reforms movement, even the progressive Brahmo section of the society put emphasis on the central notions of family, the home and motherhood, so that domesticated, aestheticized version of Goddess-like image was invented as part of the construction of womanhood in the nineteenth century context.  

When a person is not able to take decisions about her own life she is actually reflecting the slave morality of a servant whatever is her social status. By portraying the Goddess-like image of middle class women – the status of Bhadramahila within the family – the question of her self could easily be ignored. Confining their women as domesticated refined maids was an attempt by the middle class intelligentsia to treat them as subjects for whom (a limited form of) education as well as other feminine qualities were necessary. Here lies the limitation of the liberal reformers who were not able to conceive of a woman who could take her own decisions like any other human being. If a woman seeks to exercise autonomy, the subject-master relation or the convergence of the images of Goddess-maid servant are explicitly asserted. In ‘STREER PATRA’, when Mrinal had decided to stand in support of an orphan girl Bindu, she was displaced from her glorified status of ‘Chhoto Bou’ (the younger daughter-in-law). After that she was treated as not more than a maid servant of the family. As a punishment for her behaviour she was deprived by the in-laws, including her husband, even of that little money for her own expenditure. Despite her sacrifices she does not succeed in saving that orphan girl

32 Ibid. P. 167
and with her death she realises that in the family women do not have any recognition or status, because she is no longer considered as a full-fledged human being at all.\textsuperscript{33}

Let us look at the film ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ which represents the nationalist age and reflects the conflict between the liberal views of Nikhilesh with its nationalist counterpart. In the age of nationalism, the nation was symbolized in terms of the heroic vision of the mother Goddess.\textsuperscript{34} So when Sandip calls Bimala ‘Makshi Rani’, it seemed to follow the mythical Aryan version of mother Goddess which had been imagined for nationalist politics. But calling Bimala ‘Makshi Rani’ what Sandip suggests that in a beehive the Queen bee occupies the central position and workers provide their services for her. On the other hand drones are by nature idle, like any other parasite they depend on workers to live in a beehive. But socially the term Makshi Rani refers to a particular section of women who provide physical company to men as part their profession. To attract men as their customers they need to pick up qualities like singing, dancing along with education. In nineteenth century Bengal these women were known as Tawaef or Baiji who provide company to mainly wealthy ‘Babus’ (bhadralok) to earn their livelihood. In twentieth first century the term represents for high society escort who maintain good quality of life, earning high income through their profession. In nineteenth century Bengal the social understanding of Makshi Rani took a different form in the nationalist version which Sandip vehemently advocated. But like a parasite drone he seduced Bimala to satisfy his self interest. In the film, in respect of Bimala’s image of Makshi Rani, Amulya – the young dedicated Swadeshi activist – represents the nature of worker in a beehive. Because while carrying out her all instructions, he also made her aware about the real intention of Sandip. The dominant middle class discourse coeval with the era of nationalism placed spirituality as the essence of national identity residing in the private sphere of family. Women through her image of Goddess and spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity must protect and preserve

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\textsuperscript{33} Sumit Sarkar (2002) \textit{Beyond Nationalist Frame}, P. 140

\textsuperscript{34} Himani Bannerji (2001) \textit{Inventing Subjects : Studies In patriarchy, Hegemony And Colonialism}, P. 167
our spiritual national identity outside the domain of colonial public sphere. This was the nationalist version of the Goddess which followed the traditional Indian understanding about women. The mythical presence of Goddess in the public political sphere did not free middle class women from her image of Goddess/servant of the family; rather it imagined the nation in a manner which could virtually rule out their possible activities in the public sphere. The only space – the public, where women could be represented as human beings, beyond her family and familial identities, was denied with the emergence of nationalism in Bengal though her place in the family remained unchanged. In ‘GHARE-BAIRE’, Bimala, the ‘Makshi Rani’ for the Swadeshi activists, does not reflect the true devotion of a wife for her husband which nationalism vehemently propagated. However Nikhilesh, Bimala’s husband believes in true autonomy of women; that is why he does not put any objection to Bimala’s attachment towards national sentiments, despite the fact that he was not going to accept the form of nationalism which developed in early twentieth century Bengal. Though Nikhilesh allows Bimala to take her own decision, militant nationalism and leaders like Sandip did not allow this space for women. In the film Bimala becomes the prey of Sandip’s passion and she was exploited not for the nation but for his own narrow self-interest. In this sense of the liberal view of womanhood, developed in early nineteenth century could lead women towards being full-fledged human beings, instead of constructing them as mythical Aryan Goddess of the nationalist age. As we know that the thrust of the liberal view in nineteenth century Bengal was laid on the question of women’s liberty and her autonomy but the nationalist understanding focused on the women’s qualities like chastity, benevolence, self-sacrifice. Since Sandip, while representing the nationalist era, does not hesitate to exploit Bimala for his own reasons, nationalism rather than liberating women from her actual position of a ‘maid’ in the family, glorified her status as part of national essence. In the film when Bimala decided to go into the public and meet Sandip frequently once Nikhilesh had taken the initiative, we find that she gradually became reluctant to attend her husband in evening in his room which she did earlier. Moreover, she stopped to share light moments with her sister-in-law who happened to be a child-widow. Obviously, sudden changes in

her behaviour affected her relation with husband and other family members. ‘GHARE-BAIRE in another way, perhaps wants to show us that women should not been allowed to take their own decision just like men because that could disturb the peace and sanctity of the family. Women should be placed within the private sphere of home just as Bimala used to live as Sati Lakshmi before her appearance in the public to meet Sandip, the fire-brand nationalist leader.

Beyond liberal and nationalist views of womanhood, some writers attempted to address the question of women’s humanity in a different manner. Writers like Krishnabhabini Das of late nineteenth century, in her writing in ‘STREE SWADHINATA’ (‘Women’s Liberation’) introduced the concept of ‘women’s freedom’ in which economic freedom was an integral part of humanisation. It is quite understood that economic freedom in a sense paves the way for women to appear in the public space, because in modern economy the public, not the family, is the sphere of production. The increasing rate of production requires that same amount of reproductive labour and the private sphere of family is the place for it where women should play the main role as wife or mother.\(^{36}\) To maintain this reproductive system, emphasis was given on how women could become more feminine so that they could perform her reproductive functions effectively. Women writers like Sushmita Debi in her article ‘MEYEDER MEYELITWA’ (‘Femininity of Women’) pointed out how womanhood and femininity had been constructed in early twentieth century Bengali literature. Sushmita Debi, argues that in our country in most of families a separate space is constructed for women and it is expected that every woman should maintain herself within that particular space. It makes her feminine, not allowing her to become a human like other human beings.\(^{37}\) In a patriarchal set up, only men constituted the full species without women, because they belonged to a separate category.\(^{38}\) Before their economic freedom and participation in public domain, they need to be liberated from the notion of womanhood. The problem is, if a woman wants to be a human through her appearance in public life then it will be the


\(^{38}\) Mallika Sengupta (1994) Streelingo Nirman, P. 95
acceptance of the male code of conduct that becomes a condition for her since the public sphere is traditionally male dominated.

In post-independence India, when women had to come out from their home to the public sphere in search of jobs to support their families following the pressures of the Partition, it was noticed that even in the public arena, they did not get that equal respect which men enjoy. In the film ‘MAHANAGAR’, when the boss denigratingly refers to Arati’s colleague, a Christian girl, as ‘Mlechho Meyeta’, it means that he does not consider her as human. The reason may be that the boss did not count her as an equal to men, so how could they claim the status of human beings? In her family also, when Arati tells her husband that her boss says that she is doing good job, it is quite hard for him to accept because before joining work Arati was a housewife and mother, maintained her image of Goddess Lakshmi, and that simple woman is now doing good work, just like any other man, so much so that her boss praises her! Her husband might have thought that his wife would be exposed to her boss’s lust and lose her sanctity because in the public world there are people, like Sandip in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ who by virtue of his position exploited the sentiments of a housewife for satisfying his narrow self-interests and passions. It is a common belief in our society about those women who attain success that its achievement is not due to their talents or efficiency, but has something to do with securing favour of some influential men in return for satisfying the latter’s sexual passions and the loss of the former’s sanctity. This kind of question does not arise in case of men: we find exploitation, misbehaviour but these are not as important concerns as the loss of women’s sanctity, especially in the middle class family. Arati’s husband Subrata’s anxiety is clear as Arati earlier did maintain the identity of his family through her Goddess like image under the exclusive authority of men, which should not be disturbed. Out of such fear Subrata asks Arati to quit her job, though it was not possible as Subrata himself had lost his job.

In Ashapurna Debi’s ‘SUBARNALATA’, we see an important remark, made by Subarna herself to her brother-in-law, a freedom fighter, that their all attempts to free the country was bound to end up in failure because half of the society’s population was suffering from degradation. She further commented that unless women got the recognition from the society as human, there would be no hope for liberation as it was not
possible.\textsuperscript{39} Subarna talks about the condition of women in our Bengali family who are not any better than servants. Representing the early twentieth century Bengali society, Ashalata in the film ‘CHOKHER BALI’, is often criticised by her mother-in-law for not being sincere in housework and maintain her family. But the most important is that she is not allowed to visit her paternal home whereas their maid servant has the opportunity to visit her ancestral home frequently. In other words, like Asha women’s status was just like another maid servant of the family, even worse of them and still for women, there was no other way but to believe that the beyond the sphere of family there was no place for them. Even in the 80’s this kind of belief in the Bengali middle class family did not seem to change. We notice it in ‘PARAMA’, while commenting on her friend Sheila’s divorce she makes it clear that her friend should go with her husband to Bombay, despite of her deep involvement with her spastic school. When Parama’s daughter asks why Sheila’s husband is shifting to Bombay instead of it he should stay in Calcutta, Parama replies that after all he is a man and he has his own world and an active life. Actually, this kind of belief is quite obvious for women like Parama, who always think that women’s ultimate destiny lies within the family either as wife or mother. So that when Sheila leaves her status of wifehood for her commitment towards her spastic school, that violates Bengali women’s fixed image, and thus cannot be acceptable for Parama. One should not think that her believing the stereotype image of Bengali women is the true expression of her views since we are all being socialized by some way or other. Due to the socialization in a typical middle class background, Parama cannot think about any other identities except as someone’s wife or mother. Sheila belongs to the category of those few women who developed a bond with her public commitment (in this case, her spastic school) beyond women’s familial identities. Sabitri Roy in the 50’s, much before the ‘PARAMA’ was made, portrayed through her writings women like Sheila who want to become human, transcending the status and roles of wife and mother. That woman, like Sheila does not mind to form a new relationships and new roles. Like Parama she was not confined within the fixed notion of wife and mother in Bengali middle class family.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Sudakshina Ghosh (2008) \textit{Meyeder Upanyase Meyeder Katha}, P. 95

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. Pp. 97-98
Actually the identity of one’s wife or mother does not exhibit one’s potentialities as an individual being. On the other hand wifehood or motherhood is a familial identity based on familial relations. The qualities of good mother and good wife is arguably not relevant in public sphere, they are important only in private domain of family. But the contemporary understanding of human being does not represent familial identities, found in private domain.

Unless women look beyond her familial identities and roles, it is hard to develop her consciousness and humanity. Ultimately Parama falls in love with Rahul, that may be an extra-marital affair which violates the sanctity of a Bengali woman but this affair reflects her autonomy as a human being by transcending her image of one’s wife or daughter-in-law. To what extent Parama realizes her own self as human; to that extent this ‘extra marital’ relationship played the most positive role in her life. It is positive because every man and woman should identify themselves as human beings before any other familial identity. But Parama before her affair with Rahul seemed to be happy by performing her role as mother and wife. Even Parama was not bothered whether she was considered as a human being in her family. The affair with Rahul made her conscious about her identity of individual human being which was unknown to herself till then. After her suicide attempt when the doctor tells her that she needs to consult a psychiatrist who would help her to clear up her sense of guilt due to her adultery she refuses it by saying that she does not need to consult psychiatrist because she has no sense of guilt. But her suicide attempt had a different context. Since Rahul was missing while doing photo shoot in a remote area, she thought that there was no one in this world to whom she could depend. As a result out of frustration she made such attempt. It does not have anything with her sense of guilt for her extra marital affair with Rahul. Here we find a kind of similarity between the radical image of Parama with that of Paromita in the director’s later film ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’. In that film also, Paromita, who is the wife of Biresh, allows another person Rajeev in her life and pursues adultery. She is not much bothered about moral values which are integral parts of existence of Bengali women. The image of Paromita is the image of Bengali middle class women of the 90’s who could choose her own man, leaving husband and family. In that respect Parama is much ahead of the time because in the 80’s, the Bengali middle class
was yet to be ready to accept the question of adultery by their women which might be related with their quest to become human. No doubt, Parama as the image and the ‘PARAMA’ as the film was the unique attempt to mould the values of middle class bhadralok. But the world of Bengali middle class women are not consisted with women like Paromita or Parama. Most of the Bengali women are not prepare to accept the role of another man in their life outside of marriage and family in order to find her autonomous self. Parama and Paromita could be ideal for those who want to live her life as individual human being, not as one’s mother or wife.

If women are bound to go beyond their families to become human, Parama’s experience and her extra marital relationship with Rahul in that sense is quite natural. There is no one except Rahul in her limited space in family who could help her towards attaining humanity which had been subsumed under familial relations. Parama’s situation stands in stark contrast with that of her husband Bhaskar Chowdhury, who apart from being a husband and father enjoys his identity as the individual human being. Because ‘Bhaskar Chowdhury’ is not an identity which is based on his familial roles, rather it is an identity that could exist without his marital status and other relations. In fact it is his individual identity which he achieved through his successful career as a high rank executive officer in his company and that has been recognised in the public sphere. It is not only true for him but for almost every man. For Parama, only Rahul brings the whiff of fresh air and the spirit of liberation too. We can recall the scene at top of the Vidyasagar Setu from where she looks with Rahul at the city. Suddenly she recalls a poem of Premendra Mitra and starts to recite that. For a moment we find that she is behaving like any other normal human being, not confined within given roles in family.\footnote{Shoma, A Chatterji (2002) \textit{Parama And Other Outsiders : The Cinema Of Aparna Sen}, P. 97} Her journey towards humanity, begins with Rahul and does not stop even after his exit from Parama’s life; rather it becomes more prominent when she says that she is getting an across-the-counter sales job at the Khadi Gramodyog. The role which Rahul had played in Parama’s life exhibited the importance of other relations outside the family ties because of what Rahul did as a stranger that transformed Parama’s personality in such a manner that she could alone find her own individuality as human being.
When Parama says that she is going to do an across-the-counter sales job, it reminds us that in ‘MAHANAGAR’ Arati also was a sales girl. These kinds of jobs are part of that limited space, provided for women in male dominated public domain where women can participate with their own feminine virtues. The saddest part of it that like the film of the 60’s (‘MAHANAGAR’), the film of the 80’s (‘PARAMA’) women find out their own emancipation as individual human beings in those small spaces which cannot affect or change the overall male hegemony in the public sphere. Even director Aparna Sen who presented Parama very boldly especially in portraying her relationship with Rahul - friend of her nephew and therefore much younger to her, could not escape this grim reality. But in the film neither Parama leaves her family nor her participation in the public world is substantive as she ultimately becomes the part of that limited, unchanged space for women. This limited space cannot be regarded as an ideal domain to fulfil women’s aspiration to be human because it is part of that same strategy where a space has been provided to retain women within the fold of their stereotypical gender identity to continue masculine domination without rejecting her claim to participate in public domain.

How will be the situation if women try to participate in the basically masculine sphere of public life? The answer lies in the day to day experience which Sujata undergoes in her office at Eastern Railway. In ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, Sujata is a friend of Aditi who was once a lawyer but after her marriage she had to stop her practice for the sake of her family life. We have to keep in mind that it is a film of the 90’s, based on the story of contemporary popular writer Suchitra Bhattacharya. Sujata’s story suggests that family gets priority over one’s public / professional life, a continuation of an idea born in late nineteenth century Bengal. However later she gets the job at Eastern Railway but there too, she faces criticism from her male colleagues as being negligent. May be she is not competent enough in terms of the masculine code of efficiency, but the shortfall was to be attributed perhaps to her family commitments for which she sacrificed her law career. It happens with most women who have to carry on their jobs while performing full responsibilities in their family, but in terms of her sacrifice, she hardly gets that same kind of respect which she deserves in her family?
To follow the words of Sanaka, any amount of sacrifice by her is insufficient to raise a woman’s position from her real status as the servant of the family. There is no need to change it because she is the Goddess of the family and all her sacrifices are just the manifestation of that same Goddess like virtues. Sanaka is the mother-in-law in ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ who feels that after her marriage she has become just a servant of the family; however before marriage she was the most ‘caring’ sister of her brothers. But even her brothers attitude towards her does not seem to be human. They treated her not as a normal human being but something like a precious ornament which will be handed over to someone else after a certain point of time. If her brothers did not treat Sanaka as less than human but failed to consider her as an individual who has her own desires and expectations like any other man. In that case she may find Manida in her life whom she loved instead of marring other person who virtually treated her like maid servant. A person who had spent her whole life in this manner cannot realize the importance of her daughter-in-law’s growing relationship with a third person, Rajeev Srivastava, especially when she is still the wife of her son Biresh. From Paromita’s point of view, this relation paves the way towards humanity by making her conscious about her autonomous individual self, so that she could participate in public domain beyond her familial relations. Unable to understand the importance, she becomes furious and expresses her agony by calling her ‘Nastta Bajjat Meyechele’ after becoming aware of their relationship. Because any decent woman cannot talk about her relationship with a third person before her mother-in-law as it is considered a matter of shame. We cannot criticize Sanaka as she uses such degrading words which reduces a woman to the level of a sub-human category. Actually she has been made to learn from the very beginning that women should maintain themselves as dutiful wife and mother, in any circumstances she should not leave her home and husband even if she is unhappy with her in-laws. How, could such a lady accept her daughter-in-law’s decision to leave the home and get separated with her husband to marry someone else? However, in her own life she waited for a long time for Manida to whom she loved; she was even ready to go out with him had he been able to make the proposal to her; she would not have thought for a second time but left everything – her home, her husband, her children – for a new life. Perhaps he thought that after Sanaka became the wife and mother of several children it was better
for both of them to keep silent. To put it differently, Manida belongs to the same group who hold the belief of the sanctity of marriage. Since Manida was unable to do that, Sanaka spent her life just as a wife and mother; in her own words, as a maid servant of the family. These instances from two different contemporary Bengali films suggest our theoretical argument that feminine qualities should be the part of public ethic to make the public more human and this process should start from the family itself. At first it is in the family where women’s own feminine qualities should be considered as the qualities of a full-fledged human being. If is it not done within the family, it will be foolish to expect the same dignity accorded to her in the male dominated public sphere. Perhaps herein lies the real significance of women’s human rights movement.

Sulekha Sanyal, one of the famous women writers of Bengal shows in her novel ‘Nabankur’ that a girl in the family who gets lesser amount of food, compared to her brothers only because she is a girl. It pains her mother but she could do nothing to stop it. So that from the very beginning of their life, women are taught that they are inferior than men, as if they are sub-human, they are only ‘Meyechhele’ (female being). In a recent article, published on the eve of 8th March – ‘The International Women’s Day’, the writer argues that if women claim to be human they should not keep away from other marginal groups who are still treated in most inhuman manner. Women should identify themselves with these groups in their struggle toward achieving the status of human. From this article we get to know that though women physically constituting half the population, they are still marginal. The way women wish to live is yet to be recognized by our society, even in the 21st century. Of course, it could be argued that now especially after the 90’s women are more involved in such professions which were traditionally held as improper in respect of the position of the middle class in society. Such professions are modelling, acting, media anchoring where girls are coming in good numbers. But in professions like teachers, doctors and administrators we find some peculiar pictures. In

42 Sudakshina Ghosh (2008) Meyeder Upnyase Meyeder Katha, P. 100

43 This is the article, published in ‘The Anandabazar patrika’ on 8th March, 2009. The article was written by Sanchari Mukhopadhayay.

teaching women are penetrating mainly in primary and secondary levels. The numbers are much less in higher education institutions like college and university. In case of doctors we find more women M.B.B.S than few surgeons. In offices women constituting the lower and middle rank posts whether it is government or private. Hence, in these kind of professions where men were traditionally dominating women are confined to a particular space so that men’s supremacy are not disturbed. Notwithstanding, the extent to which women are getting involved in ever greater numbers, to that extent it is expected that the ‘famous’ middle class values towards their women will fade out. If we compare such changes in Bengali women’s life with their image in 60’s, there was hardly any scope even to consider joining these professions without undermining the middle class values. Indeed, these professions were considered somehow akin to prostitution. As we have already noted in the film ‘PRATIDWANDI’, when the main character Siddartha finds that her own sister is preparing herself for modelling, he immediately imagines her as a prostitute to like the one he recently visited with his friend. The other side of the picture is that in such professions, beauty and glamour constitute the most important criteria, over and above educational qualifications. Women’s beauty was traditionally regarded as something very personal, now at present it is transformed into glamour which is customized. In order to be glamorous she has to remake herself according to the demands of the market. This situation once again might lead her to be treated as an object, not as human subject. It does not suggest that men are totally free from such constraints. Because in market economy everything is looked up as a profitable item. But like women men do not need to groom himself to look more glamorous. In order to be a good product men need to be more efficient and hard working in terms of his productivity. In other words different criterion has been fixed for men and women to have success in public sphere.

Before to sum up the chapter let’s talk about an advertisement of a mobile phone in 2008, in which a girl working in a private company asks her boss for her next increment. The boss replies that women do not need increments; instead it would be far better for them to get married. Suddenly, he sees the girl’s mobile phone which has the facility of a digital camera. The woman employee then shows him the movie pictures, loaded in her camera phone which had captured her boss flirting with one of his women
colleagues in an office party. In the advertisement the most objectionable part is the comment of the boss that women do not need increment which is the right of any dutiful employee, whether the person is male or female. This also indicates that he cannot accept that a lady could be equal to a male employee. If she is not equal to man, it is not possible for her to enjoy the status of a human being. Ultimately, for getting her own dues she in this way had to blackmail her boss. It is again a lesson that in normal way women cannot get proper prestige and dignity as human being, she has to use other means, which can not necessarily be called ethical. The view about women, which her boss has expressed in the ad piece is the result of that same process of socialization which begins from our family. In a way, to identify women as an individual human being amounts to an attempt to change the understanding of human being as well as to change the nature of public sphere. The manner in which human rights discourse included women’s/group rights fails to abolish the status of women and other groups as ‘separate’ categories. Above all these rights do not encompass the ‘women’s world’ of private domain but only pertained to the public sphere. The Bengali films under study seemed to work with these assumptions; hence whenever they tried to look at Bengali women as human beings, they failed to break out of the mould of Bhadramahila. Though figures like Parama and Paromita represent radical images, the inherent message of these films essentially remains closer to general middle class values. In such situation the next question obviously is that what ought to be done for salvaging the identity of women as human being? Since we are trying to find out women’s identity as an individual in respect of Bengali Bhadramahila, next we need to look at those valuable findings in next chapter so that we could suggest certain alternatives in course of women’s search for self-identity.