CONCLUSION

The idea of women was subject to various interpretations of leading philosophers in western intellectual tradition. But in all these interpretations women were assigned a subordinate position in society. What is more, most of these philosophers paid little attention to the issue of women’s individual identity. The question of women’s identity finds its place in political discourse only after the emergence of women’s movement in 1970’s. But, while political theorists located the question of individuality in the public sphere the traditional political discourse placed women firmly within the sphere of family and defined her identity in terms of her familial roles. Thus, it followed that in order to attain her individuality women should participate in the public domain which is theoretically held as the world of men where only masculine code of conduct prevailed. The women’s movement and writings failed to bring about any change in the above theoretical positions while addressing the question of women’s individuality. When the attempt was made by the middle class intelligentsia to construct the image of Bhadramahila in nineteenth century Bengal it had no place for women to participate in the public world to find their identity. Instead of allowing their women to appear in public the notion of Bhadramahila was at first made to correspond with the status of middle class Bhadralok and later with the spiritual identity of the nation. Significantly, the primacy of familial identities of middle class women over her individual identity was not affected even after her participation in public domain in post-Partition era when the economic sustenance of the family became the major concern of the Bengali middle class. Moreover, appearing in outer world, a woman from the Bengali middle class family finds herself in a marginal state since her feminine qualities seems to be less significant in terms of other masculine attributes in public sphere. Now, an examination of representation of women in general and middle class women in particular the Bengali cinema reveals that it refrained from seriously engaging with the question of women’s identity but tried to accommodate middle class women’s desires and other aspirations within the space of family and familial relations. No doubt, the conforming attitude of media and film help to sustain the traditional male perception about women in society.
So that, theoretically as well as practically there is a need to articulate a third category which could change the nature of male dominated public sphere and allow women to have just and substantive participation in that domain. The idea of human rights along with the notion of human being could provide a solution to her marginalization in outer world as a more broad based understanding beyond masculinity and femininity. But changing the male dominated understanding of public sphere is troublesome. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its attempt to accommodate women’s rights have failed theoretically and of course practically to change the nature of public sphere. While portraying the notion of human being, the human rights discourse could not accommodate feminine values in male dominated sphere and does not provide any alternative view concerning the received understanding of rights, based on public-private dichotomy. In other words, the attempt to represent feminine understanding under the broader category of human being remains unsuccessful.

But despite of its male centric approach public domain is the only sphere where women could claim her identity as individual being. In Bengali films characters like Parama in search of her own self, wants to participate in public by taking the job of sales girl. Aditi also, in the film ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ through her literary skill wish to represent herself in greater public world. It is not like that only Bengali films portray such aspect of women’s identity, there are several instances in Hindi films where there is a clear massage about women’s participation in finding her self identity. In the much known Hindi film ‘ASTITVA’ the man, ‘Srikant Pandit’ suddenly gets to know that Aniket is not his offspring, rather he belongs to someone else with whom his wife, incidentally, physically intimated just for once. The end result is that the husband (Srikant Pandit) divorces his wife after knowing the truth. Apparently this is the only cause of this parting and no doubt the most valid reason as it is related with women’s sexual infidelity towards her husband. But slowly it has been realized that the problem is much deeper than one thought of. We gradually know that as a wife of Mr. Srikant Pandit, Aditi has lost her own identity as an individual human; her world has been confined within four walls where she performs her duties as an ideal wife and mother. So that the separation from her husband is a kind of liberation because now she could once again start to find out her own identity. It is not that she does not feel pain to leave her
home and family which she has maintained and nurtured for near about twenty seven years. Astonishing to us is that in such a situation she gets the support from a younger girl who would have been her daughter-in-law but later refuses to marry her son. The family members thought that her rejection of marriage was due to the revealed past of Aditi. But she makes it clear that her refusal is due to the behaviour of her family members towards Aditi after knowing her past, without recognizing her devotion towards her family. In the end of the film we find that Aditi is leaving her home along with that young girl which clearly indicates that they now wish to leave together. The way the film ends should raise some vital aspects about the relation between family and men with women’s quest for her identity. To realize her own identity, as this film has suggested, she should not only reject family but also man and find out a woman as her companion. Since our whole project is an attempt about the multifaceted understanding of the identity question of Bengali middle class women now it is a time to look at our findings in terms of research questions which we have raised at the very beginning of the study. Only then we can suggest valuable insights and other alternatives in respect of women’s search for self-identity.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Engaging ourselves to the problem of individuality of middle class Bengali women we have to address couple of research questions which have been mentioned at the beginning of our study. In fact the research questions primarily focussing on the extent to which Bengali film is influenced by the middle class discourse in portraying women. But the image of women is deeply related with her role in the private inner domain consisted with different kinds of familial relations. In respect of her familial

1 In the film ‘ASTITVA’ the character of Srikant pandit is portrayed as a most conservative person who does not pay any respect at women’s autonomy and believing in double standards of our society for men and women. Besides, the character of ‘Srikant pandit’ the film portrayed another character ‘Ravi’ who is the most intimate friend of him, like their family member, but his outlook is completely different, just an opposite of ‘Srikant pandit’. Unlike his friend, Ravi is modern, progressive, believing in women’s autonomy even he married a woman Meghna who is a divorcee, having her two daughters. This couple, because of their modern outlook could understand better the pain which a woman faces who, while performing her all duties for her family, does not get the proper recognition by her family members or by her husband as the life of Aditi suggests in the film.
relations it is important to see how Bengali films capture the denial of women’s space inside the family. While representing such vital aspect to deal with women’s search for self-identity we have to deal with how Bengali cinema visualizes her liberation in public sphere and its limitations to attain this liberation. In other words how Bengali cinema portrays women’s marginalization in outer domain. If she remains marginal in public world then we must seriously explain how far her status as ‘human being’ been represented in Bengali cinema. To address these research questions we need to elaborate our research findings to understand the basic problem of individual identity of middle class Bhadramahila.

Going into the details of our research findings in this study, we must remember that we are discussing about a section which have been confronted with so many changes in last fifty years but remains farm on their traditional understanding of women. So it is important to see how Bengali cinema deals with such tension within the middle class discourse while portraying women. It is true that the Bengali cinema could not overcome the influence of middle class discourse in its narrative style and as a result most of the Bengali films still today represent middle class values often with different forms. The middle class discourse from the early nineteenth century centred around family and women but to define the role of family it focused on the duties and responsibilities of women in terms of their familial identities. In respect of her familial duties, the Bhadralok discourse constructed women’s image in terms of the characteristic traits of Lajja and imposed other feminine qualities like benevolence, forgiveness. Since family and women are inseparable, including those few images which stands against the traditional image of Bhadramahila, the Bengali cinema really does not able to relate itself beyond the inner domain of family represented by women. In a sense the Bengali cinema, often with different tones failed to represent women beyond her role other than her familial identities even if she has the access to the public domain. The extent to which Bengali films internalised the middle class values of family and women to that extent it avoided to provide a radical solution to the question of her identity as individual.

The most exceptional image at the backdrop of Swadeshi movement in the early twentieth century context, Mrinal in the film ‘STREER PATRA’, left her home and family to search the actual status of women in larger society. But she left the family for her
protest against the inhuman attitude of the family members to an orphan girl Bindu. Her protest for that orphan girl in a way, reflected women’s qualities like benevolence, forgiveness as part of middle class discourse and expressed her valuable sacrifice of her family for an orphan girl. The only difference is that in case of Mrinal, her benevolence attitude directed towards an orphan girl rather than her own child. Here we can draw a parallel image of Mejodidi based on the novel of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhay with that of Mrinal, who, for the cause of an orphan boy Kesto, prepared to leave her home as her husband refused to take his responsibility. Ultimately he agreed to that and Mejodidi returned to her home again. For Mrinal that was not happened and she did not come back to her family. But the film narrative of ‘STREER PATRA’ representing the image of Mrinal as all-enduring sacrificing being who equally possessed other feminine qualities in her character but refused to assert her self-identity.

In the second half of twentieth century characters like Arati who in many ways represented new image for middle class women but does not fulfil their aspiration to be an individual. In the film ‘MAHANAGAR’ we find that Arati because of the financial plight of their family comes out from her home for doing job. By earning money for the family she, being a woman, successfully represents herself in the public domain. But in spite of her participation in public domain she does not able to assert her individuality, she remains confine to her familial identity such as mother and wife. The theoretical argument that a person cannot achieve his own individuality without participating in the public world seems to be wrong in case of Arati because the middle class discourse does not allow a woman to assert her self-identity over her familial relations. At the end of the twentieth century the image of Paromita also an example to the fact how Bengali films diverted the identity question of middle class women in its narrative structure. In ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ what we find that despite of a highly educated person Paromita did not make any attempt to build her career and she was quite happy to perform her roles as wife and daughter-in-law. When she joined in an ad agency that was not a conscious effort on her part to attain her individual identity rather her working in the ad agency made her close to Rajeev with whom she built new family, leaving her first husband Biresh. It suggests that instead of asserting her self-identity her participation in the outer
world provided her to find more appropriate man, Rajeev in her life to form new familial identities.

Perhaps, the only radical image in this genre is Parama who tried to find her autonomy by doing an across-the-counter sales job at a modest salary of Rs. 600 at the Khadi Gramudyog. She announced that for a long time she has been identified in terms of her familial relations with other family members but in which she has lost her individuality. Her job in the Khadi Gramudyog provide her that opportunity to know about her own potentiality as individual in public sphere where her status of someone’s wife or mother does not have much significance. But again it was not a conscious attempt for Parama to find her self identity. It was happened as part of her relation with a much younger man Rahul who was an outsider in their family. The film ‘PARAMA’ did not successful to represent such image of middle class women who could find her self-identity without the support of a man. Despite of such limitations the film stands against the Bhadralok middle class values which does not allow non-stereotype image of women.

But it does not suggest that in middle class discourse private sphere of family is held as the superior to public domain. In ‘CHARULATA’ we see that Charu feels that her husband will be famous in society because of his sincere effort to run the newspaper ‘Sentinel’. She could not think that her own commitment and duties for the family also valuable. It is more clear in the attitude of Nikhilesh in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ who took the initiative to appear his wife in outside world, otherwise her individual autonomy would be affected. As a member of an educated middle class, for Nikhilesh public sphere always remained to be more important than private domain. If family was considered to be higher than the public world there was no need on the part of Bimala to appear in public domain. Even the film ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, while representing the last decade of twentieth century Bengali society, the main protagonist Aditi has to stop her writing as her husband orders her to do so. He can do this because he represents the superior public world for whom women hold the subordinate place as they represent private domain of family. Whatever be the commitment of his wife for the family that does not seem to be valuable to him. The feminist writers, both in theory and practice made attempts to end such superior-subordinate relation between public and private and protest against the
unpaid domestic work and responsibilities of women in the family but such attempts are largely absent in the middle class discourse of women and family.

Theoretically speaking, situating individuality within the public domain finds conflicts with the historical construction of Bhadramahila – the image of middle class women. So what could be theoretically achieved that does not seem to be true within the world of Bhadralok. According to the mainstream political theories individual identity can only be possible outside of private sphere and such understanding of mainstream political discourse has been equally shared by the writers like Wollstonecraft or Mill who represented women’s cause in their respective societies. But on the contrary, the image of middle class women did not allow them to identify herself with larger world. The historical necessity for the Bengali middle class was to represent itself as a superior group in respect of other sections of the society. For that they constructed a new image of their women but in reality imposed more restrictions on her and reject her claim to be an individual. The Bengali renaissance accompanied by the reforms movement attempted to make certain visible changes in nineteenth century Bengali society which mainly aimed at to improve the condition of women so that they could represent the identity of middle class Bhadralok. In defining the image of Bhadramahila in terms of the characteristic trait of Shame along with new dress code, mould her personality into a self-sacrificing moral Goddess who is above of all earthly desires. However, the social construction of Bhadramahila in early nineteenth century needs to be understood within the cognitive framework of modernity which hardly addressed the identity question of women and when such image became part of the nationalist discourse in end of the nineteenth century that represented the traditional mythic understanding of Aryan women.

To identify the Goddess image within the private sphere of family the middle class discourse did not able to portray women’s status other than wife and mother. For representing the familial roles of women the particular Goddess image of Lakshmi was reinvented. But such idealization of her image does not provide women to hold commitment and sincerity beyond her family or for the outside world. In the film ‘PARAMA’ her friend Sheila represents the image of a woman who refused to go Bombay with her husband and divorced him to fulfil her commitment for her spastic school. But her preference for the public commitment over the familial duties have been criticised,
even by her own friend Parama, for whom women should perform such duties to maintain her image of Lakshmi of the home. In ‘UNISHE APRIL’, Sarojini Gupta who apparently neglected her duties towards her husband and daughter and pursued her dancing career, not only criticized by other relatives but also by her own daughter. It is to be remembered that her daughter Aditi is a doctor who does not mind to sacrifice to play familial duties. For women like Arati, who joined public domain to earn money for her family but her image as an earning member originally was not part of the invented portrayal of Lakshmi in nineteenth century Bengal. Hence, Arati’s participation in public domain should further assert her Lakshmi image as her participation also is part of her commitment for the family itself. Surprisingly, instead of asserting the image, her public appearance seems to be a threat for the middle class values. This is the reason why an unemployed youth Sidhartha, knowing very well that her sister is the only earning member of the family, does not want to allow her for job as it violates the Lakshmi image of her sister.

Perhaps every middle class Bengali, like Sidhartha could not tolerate women’s place in outside world. The different kinds of familial relations which actually determine women’s place in the family are justified and sanctioned by the social institution of marriage. As we find in different film narratives that marriage in women’s life play a major role to shape women’s relation with husband, her relation with her children and her relation with in-laws, chiefly mother-in-law. But most important is each familial relation represents different identities – wifehood, motherhood and daughter in-law or mother-in-law – and all this identities could not be socially as well as legally accepted without the sanction of marriage. In ‘PARAMA’, her status as the wife of Bhaskar Chowdhury; her status as the mother of two sons and a daughter; and above all her status as the daughter-in-law of Chowdhury family have been established by the legal and social process of marriage. Without it all her status and familial relations would be socially ostracized.

But Bengali cinema except some casual impressions in popular films, largely avoided to portray live-in relations between man and woman beyond the marriage system. It seems clear that the world of Bengali cinema does not want to intervene in the sanctity of marriage in society. The moral and ideological conformity once again clear when we see that the Bengali cinema does not wish to negotiate with the traditional
understanding of domestic world. In representing the inner domain and husband-wife relationship, husband was always considered to be a benevolent teacher of his wife and wife remains as an ideal follower. But in attempt to modernize their wives husbands did not reject the notion of Satitya or chastity of women, rather their attempt was to improve the morale of their women so that such notion should not be affected.

To what extent husbands were the benevolent teachers of their wives that we find in ‘CHARULATA’. In the film Bhupati, Charu’s husband tries to educate her in different subjects like politics, society, literary writings and inspired her to know this world as an active participant, not as a passive recipient. But such benevolent teacher could not overcome the age old notion of Satitya and as a result did not understand the importance of the emotional bonding between Charu and his cousin brother Amal which ultimately could help her in finding her own self. In nationalist era when women’s qualities like Satitya or Pratibratya were asserting in a more rigid manner to what extent it was possible for persons like Nikhilesh to completely ignore them despite of the fact that he firmly believed in women’s autonomy and liberty. Like Bhupati, Nikhilesh as a benevolent teacher of his wife took the initiative for Bimala’s appearance in public sphere. But in respect of Bimala’s affair with Sandip and the subsequent events which led to the demise of Nikhilesh, the film ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ upholds the view that such an affair is a serious violation of the idea of chastity, does not matter whether Nikhilesh believing in it. But in nineteenth century Bengal not all husbands were ready to be the teacher of their wives. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’ we find that Mahendra first of all rejected to marry Binodini who was in every sense had the modern outlook and refined behaviour, then he married Ashalata who was an illiterate person and does not know about modern housewifery. Even Mahendra did not take any initiative to improve the morale of his wife. Later we find that Binodini came in his life and Mahendra was gradually attracted to her. But Bengali film to preserve the sanctity of marriage did not provide to Binodini an opportunity to be a real companion of Mahendra and to save the their conjugal life she left out from his life.

In post-independence era, the most important example of the above is the film ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ where Avijit motivated his wife Bandana to overcome all kinds of superstitious beliefs and rituals. After his sudden death in an accident Bandana,
following Avijit’s progressive ideals, refused to perform the customary rituals which normally every widow does. She joined a job and brought up her son, and she was even ready for a second marriage at a later age though ultimately it did not take place. But the role of the husband as teacher seems to decline with the rising level of education among women in 60’s and 70’s. It does not suggest that the growing literacy rate among Bengali middle class women has in any way reduced the importance of chastity in social outlook. This notion remains firmly embedded in women’s life as an inalienable part of their existence. Because of such attitude Subrato in ‘MAHANAGAR’ became anxious to know about his wife’s extra income, the commission she had earned for her good work. His suspicion was that the source of this income might have been in some ‘special’ relationship between his wife and her boss which amounted to violation of her sanctity.

In other instances like Parama or Paromita we see how they could easily be called a ‘whore’ or ‘Nasta mayechhele’ because of their extra-marital affairs. In the ideological world of Bengali middle class such ‘adulterous behaviour’ is a gross violation of the notion chastity which must be maintained by every woman.

Actually the way marriage system legitimizes the conjugal relation between a man and woman also sanctions the latter’s motherhood. In Bengali cinema, films which substantially dealt with the notion of motherhood portrayed it in relation to marriage. We find a few sympathetic depictions of unmarried mothers who attained their motherhood without being a wife in the world of Hindi cinema. But in Bengali film such images are largely absent. The Bengali cinema, to represent the mother image of middle class women basically focussed on mother’s relation with her own offspring. In fact portraying mother image in such a manner Bengali films exclude the possibility of defining motherhood as an ideology where her child is not necessarily her own offspring. But there are many instances of such ideal mother image in our mythology and even in popular Bengali literature.

Beyond the representative world of Bengali cinema, historically all debates and discussions on motherhood was part of nationalist discourse where mother-figure was increasingly identified with the nation. When nationalist discourse defined the mother-figure essentially in relation to the male child, the Bengali cinema even representing motherhood for middle class women in post-independence period does not overcome this
nationalist trend. Except ‘UNISHE APRIL’, mother images in post-independence Bengali films largely were constructed around the male child and while the female child remained in marginal. Here we should note that Bengali literary creations presented a whole spectrum of debates and discussions on motherhood in nationalist era but this could not inspire the Bengali film makers to engage in experiments with different mother figures in their film narratives.

The only film which represented the nineteenth century mother-figure ‘CHOKHER BALI’ in which we find Rajlakshmi, mother of Mahendra like other typical middle class women reflected a self-sacrificing image but could not conceal her expectations from and possessiveness over her son. But in post-independence era, the projection of all-enduring mother-figure survived in Bengali Bhadralok discourse. The images of Arati and Parama indicated that they were very much concerned about their responsibilities to their sons, taking care about every little thing, including feeding the children. Such affection is part of the broader understanding of all-enduring mother image who could sacrifice everything for her children. However, the best reflection of sacrificing motherhood can be found in the film ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ where Bandana after his husband’s sudden demise, not only brought up her son but also rejected the person named Sudipto who wanted to marry her, because her son did not approve their relation. In this respect the film ‘UNISHE APRIL’ gets a different treatment because the film while representing the mother-daughter relationship in place of mother-son, refused to portray mother image as self-sacrificing Goddess. Though Sorojini performed her all familial responsibilities to bring up her daughter Aditi, that she did without sacrificing her dancing career. ‘UNISHE APRIL’ is able to portray in a limited sense a different mother-figure who does not neglect her responsibilities but equally wish to fulfil her individual aspirations.

But the self-sacrificing mother-image seems to be different in her relation to daughter-in-law. The Bengali film successfully captures the attitude of mother who is totally dependent on her son but does not want to recognize the fact that her son is the only dependable person for her daughter-in-law too. So a conflict arises between the mother- and daughter-in-law which often find different manifestations in Bengali cinema, centring around the son. When Rajlakshmi criticizes her daughter-in-law for being
negligent towards household activities, that actually expresses her anxiety over the growing influence of *Ashalata* on her son *Mahendra*. In a way the cinematic representation of mother- and daughter-in-law relationship often remained different in respect of nineteenth century domestic manuals which advised women to treat their mother- and father-in-laws as their own parents. But it makes little difference if the mother-in-law is moderate or conservative because in both cases the daughter-in-law remained a distant person, and not like her own daughter. As we find in *‘PARAMA’* the apparently moderate mother-in-law could not tolerate her extra-marital affair because though she once considered her as the *Goddess* of her home, she never looked at her as her own daughter.

If the daughter-in-law appears in public to earn money for the family what kind of changes could take place between the mother and daughter-in-law? This question finds some reflection in *‘MAHANAGAR’* where *Arati’s* mother-in-law becomes quite anxious once she joins the job for she feels that will no longer pay as much respect to them as before. As a housewife she knows very well that *Arati’s* public appearance could be a part of her search for self-identity and in that case her individuality could dominate over other familial relations. Here comes the relevance of somewhat different relation between *Paromita* and *Sanaka*. The film *‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’* conveys the message that the question of individuality of a daughter-in-law could get full respect from her mother-in-law and it is possible for them to carry on without an active presence of husband or son in their relationship. But still the age old difference between mother and mother-in-law and daughter and daughter-in-law becomes evident in the film especially when *Paromita* leaves the house to marry *Rajeev* despite *Sanaka’s* request not to leave her alone.

In respect of these familial relations, the familial space constitutes an essential part in the representation of women’s identity in Bengali cinema. But in the cinematic world of Bengali films the spatial understanding does not follow the basic theoretical argument in relation to individuality of women. Theoretically speaking, human beings get more space and autonomy in nuclear family than in joint family system. But in mapping out familial space, Bengali cinema does not make any difference between the two systems so far as denial of space to women in quest of subjectivity was concerned. In *‘PARAMA’* she performs all her responsibilities in joint family during the Durga Puja
where she has to carefully handle different kinds of familial relations, whereas in her husband’s office flat she is also doing the same vis-à-vis her husband, children and mother-in-law. But in both places the coveted space for her search of selfhood remain absent. In ‘STREER PATRA’ Mrinal felt deprived of this space while living in the joint family which goaded her to leave the family. Of course, upon a close observation one may find that film narratives often identified some such space at the intersection of the inner domain and the outside world. In nuclear family women could enjoy much more spatial autonomy as it is more open to outside influences as it happened in case of Aditi in ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’. Hemenmama, being an outsider might not have reappeared in Aditi’s life had she belonged to a joint family. In the joint family system there is the possibility for women to create their own world in andarmahal as we find in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ or ‘CHOKHER BALI’. In ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ we see that Bimala is spending her leisure time with her sister-in-law and in ‘CHOKHER BALI’, Rajlakshmi is often chatting with other women where Binodini also participates. But since the nuclear family lacks the ‘world of women’ in andarmahal it is not possible for Aditi to secure her little space within a nuclear family from her husband. On the other hand, though in a joint family women could build up their own world in the andarmahal, this did not enable Bimala or Rajlakshmi to realise their individuality because such space could only ensure a mutual bonding among women themselves.

So in theory and in reality women can not have any space of her own within the sphere of familial relations. But in Bengali film the problem of women’s individuality could not be resolved simply through her appearance in public sphere. In Bengali cinema the public appearance of Bhadramahila to find her subjectivity is essentially connected with her stereotypes image. The stereotypes of mother and wife based on certain feminine qualities seriously affect her claim to have substantive participation in public domain. Since there are various representations of wives and mothers in different Bengali films, in that sense the stereotype image of Bengali middle class women has been portrayed in several forms. But as to portrayal of non-stereotype images, Bengali films either present them as exceptional to the particular image of Bhadramahila or try to accommodate such non-conforming images within familial roles and responsibilities as far as possible. In ‘PARAMA’, the image of Sheila in all aspects represents the atypical woman who remains
an exception within the broader understanding of Bhadramahila. But in case of Bandana and Sorojini the films quite clearly asserted that their appearance in outside world and for that matter their success in their respective fields, is partly at least associated with their responsibility towards their family and children. In relation to stereotyping of women Arati in ‘MAHANAGAR’ constitutes a different kind of representation because she is earning money for her family while her husband has lost his job. Arati’s public appearance rejected the stereotype understanding of man as bread earner and woman as housekeeper. But at the same time she could not transcend the typical perception of women as her public participation is very much related with her familial responsibilities. Her image of bread earner does not free her from the status of housekeeper.

But situating women’s liberation in public domain the Bengali film turned our attention to another important argument about the nature of representation. According to film narratives women’s public appearance could hardly threaten the entrenched male supremacy in outside world because most of jobs offered to women belong to a small segment of public domain where feminine attributes could be accommodated. In ‘MAHANAGAR’ Arati is a saleswoman who primarily deals with women customers. In ‘UNISHE APRIL’ Sorojini Gupta is a famous classical dancer and her dancing career is quite compatible with other feminine qualities. But the public sphere is a domain of men where male code of conduct dominates over other virtues. Thus, women’s emancipation and equal participation in the outside world demand that they learn and adopt male qualities and behaviour that we find in the film ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’. This is the film which pointed out that there is no other way but to qualify in masculine terms to get entry in the exclusive male domain of business. Otherwise women have to remain satisfied with the limited sphere allotted to them within a male dominated world. In the film the trio Maya, Mukti and Alo proved themselves in terms of masculine courage and bravery which acted as their passport into the world of men in public sphere. Such limitations deriving from femininity and the supremacy of masculine ideals keep women in a state of marginalization. Bengali cinema quite successfully portrayed these limitations and marginalization of Bhadramahila in public life.

One of the ways to overcome the limitations and marginalization of women is to change the understanding of male dominated public sphere, so that women with their own
qualities could have equal and just representation. However, the theoretical attempt to define women as human beings at par with men proved inadequate for correcting the male dominated character of public sphere. In this direction the human rights discourse failed to offer solutions on two grounds. First, the discourse while representing women’s rights in public domain, tends to view it as a separate category outside the general understanding of human rights. Second, the received understanding of rights does not encompass the private sphere and as a result in spite of the existence of women’s rights, human rights discourse offer very little to address women’s issues in private domain. Reflecting these theoretical inadequacies, Bengali cinema portrayed middle class women either as Goddess or as maid servant (both have the equal significance in Bhadralok discourse) but not as human being. The best example of this paradoxical state the Bhadramahila finds herself in is Mrinal of ‘STREER PATRA’. In the film her symbolic status of Goddess was turned into the actual status of maid servant after her protest in favour of the orphaned girl Bindu. In ‘PARAMA’ also, we find her Goddess image during the time of Durga Puja in Chowdhury family but in her own family she attends her mother-in-law during lunch hour, takes all care of her husband and children as the most loyal servant of the family. In fact, it is only in keeping with the middle class discourse that Bengali cinema represents the self-sacrificing Goddess image of women only as the other side of their status as the maid-servant in the same familial domain. Moreover ‘PARAMA’ signifies how the Goddess image could in no time be degraded into that of a ‘Whore’, bearing almost a sub-human status, after her extra-marital affairs with Rahul comes into the open. For her family members Parama can be a Goddess or Whore but not a human being and should not have any ‘human’ desires. Even in case of Aditi in ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, her husband and her sons seemed to forget that she is an another human being just like them. As a matter of fact they failed to realise that her literary exercises will enrich her qualities as an individual above all other identities. According to Bengali film narratives Bengali middle class women are not fully fledged human beings who have a claim to equal participation in public sphere just like men as full blown individuals.

In sum, the above study exploring the individuality of middle class Bhadramahila finds that in private sphere, the cluster of familial relations provides hardly any scope for
her to curve out an individual space. On the other side, the only sphere – the public – where she could attain her own self-identity is under strict masculine domination and her feminine attributes remain marginal. Now the point is, what kind of alternatives could be suggested to address such situation which not only satisfies quest for self-identity not only of the Bhadramahila but of women in general. The first alternative is to reject the family so that women’s individuality will not be subordinated to other familial identities. But to maintain their domination in public domain men will not allow women to reject family and other familial responsibilities. In this context the second and more effective alternative could be to reject men altogether. But our study reveals that it is men themselves who take the first initiative to make women conscious about their own state of being and it is under their inspiration that women begin the quest for their individual identity in the larger society. In other words, men could play a vital role in women attaining their identity. The third and final alternative therefore is to reform the traditional understanding of marriage and family so that women’s claim to individuality could be adequately addressed.

**THE FIRST ALTERNATIVE : QUESTION OF IDENTITY AND REJECTION OF FAMILY**

Looking at the first alternative our study begins by examining how the Bengali cinema addressed this question through its narratives. In theory there are some attempts have been made to dissolve the private sphere of family so that there could be no division between public sphere and private sphere. In classical Greek philosophy, Plato through his writings in ‘Republic’, explores and accepts the division between public and private. Plato believes that private interests have only divided citizens and undermined their concern with the well being of polis as a whole. In essence, Plato’s ideal republic will set out to eliminate the private sphere altogether. For Plato, the key to the ideal republic is the elimination of the internal divisions within a state which pull leaders away from the collective good, towards their own private interests. As he says : “The best run state is one in which as many people as possible use the words mine and not mine in the same sense of the same things. What is more, such a state most nearly resembles an
individual.”² It is private concerns which divide the state, in particular private property. For Plato, “our citizens then are devoted to a common interest which they call their own…and the element in our constitution to which this is due is the community of women and children in the guardian class.”³ In order to realize such an ideal republic and to eliminate these divisions, it was necessary to abolish the private sphere of the family.⁴ What is significant is that by abolishing the private sphere for the guardian class, Plato actually transforms the roles of women as wives or slaves in the private sphere. The skills which Plato suggests for the guardian class, are necessarily those of a traditionally masculine variety, namely analytical thought, ambition, pride and military skills. Other skills, such as nurturing, caring and intuition are to be eliminated. So that way this arrangement for women is just the adoption of masculine attributes.⁵

Aristotle criticized and challenged Plato’s abolition of family within the guardian class because he believed that both the public and private spheres were necessary. This dichotomy between the public and private as mentioned by Aristotle is continued in modern political philosophy. From the Marxian point of view, with the development of modern economy in the form of capitalism, the dichotomy between the public and private spheres has become more acute. Public sphere becomes the sphere of production and the reproductive functions are assigned to the sphere of family.⁶ In modern political philosophy such division of spheres is the replacement of Aristotelian understanding of public-private distinction. His account of the development of political society begins with an account of what he calls the ‘first societies’, namely families. These were formed, according to Aristotle, not by deliberate intention but by a ‘natural impulse’. The purpose of the private sphere, the family, was to meet the basic biological needs. The public sphere or polis, on the other hand, goes beyond the needs of ‘mere life’, existing instead for the sake of a ‘good life’. Thus the two fundamental dualisms between nature and

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. P. 29

⁵ Ibid. P. 30

culture and between the private and public lives come together in Aristotle. On the one hand there is the private sphere where the needs of mere nature (food, sex, shelter) are met in a domain inhabited by wives and slaves but ruled over by free men. On the other hand there is the public world of reason and culture, which meets the higher spiritual needs of the good life for free men alone. From the very beginning, the public sphere has been considered the sphere of men beyond the requirement of their natural needs and their family relationships and it is the only place or sphere where individuals can attain their identity as free men, not bound by any familial relationships and duties.

From this theoretical position if we look at the Bengali films, we should first mention the film ‘STREER PATRA’ as it portrays a radical image of a housewife in the nineteenth and early twentieth century context. Just following our theoretical assumptions she (Mrinal) leaves the family to find her place in larger society. The character called Mrinal is completely different from the image of Parama who attempts suicide when her lover goes missing. Mrinal, coming out from her family, ultimately rejects it to live a life of a free individual, but that does not mean that she is going to commit suicide believing family is the only place for women beyond which there is nothing for them. In case of Parama, when her husband knows about her affair, she loses her old world of family. Still, she thinks that it was Rahul with whom she could make a new home. But Rahul was missing and nobody knew where he was and when he would return. Under the circumstances, there was nothing left for her but to commit suicide. Though it is also true that through her relationship with Rahul she became aware about her individual identity but she cannot think about the complete rejection of family, rather she very much wants to have a new family, along her journey towards her own individuality.

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7 Barbara Arneil (1999) *Politics & Feminism*, Pp. 31-32

8 ‘STREER PATRA’ belongs to those few Bengali films which deals with nineteenth century domesticity. Other notable films are, ‘GHARE-BAIRE’, ‘CHARULATA’, ‘CHOKHER BOLI’. But the importance of ‘STREER PATRA’ lies in the fact the boldness and uncompromising nature of the chief protagonist of the film Mrinal which we do not find in other films and their female characters. Because Charulata, Bimala or Asha, whatever their complexities in their familial relationship they ultimately come back in their family but Mrinal without compromising with stand left her family and husband.

9 In ‘PARAMA’ apparently her relation with Rahul is part of sexual infidelity towards her husband. Incidentally there is a scene in the film where her husband Bhaskar Chowdhury while visiting Bombay as part of his office tour is attracted towards her young secretary, even he asks her whether she would like to go with him for dinner. It is not clear whether such scene was an attempt on be half of the director to justify
If this is the crux of the matter, then ‘PARAMA’ in a way represents how Bengali films negotiate with this particular aspect on the rejection of family for women’s identity. Except in ‘STREER PATRA’ where a housewife rejects her family to find herself, as we find in case Aditi in ‘ASTITVA’, no other Bengali film is able to present this radical view with regard to the relationship between family and individual identity. Bengali films generally do not address this aspect even if such question arises. The tendency is to maintain the sanctity of the family and bring her back to it. Actually the narratives of Bengali films avoid such questions as we find in ‘PARAMA’ or in ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’. In that way Bengali films in addressing the women’s question do not celebrate the rejection of family. What is mostly visible in Bengali cinema is that a deep bond between family and women. Among the middle class women, those few who have come out to public sphere bypassing their stereotypical role of wife and mother, have done it for their family itself. To support her family, Arati joins the job of a sales girl in ‘MAHANAGAR’; Bandana takes up a job in her husband’s office in ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’. When these women come out in public life to maintain or support their own family, how it is possible for them to think about the rejection of family whatever be her level of involvement and participation in public life? Another interesting point is these women are equally careful to play their familial roles; sometimes they feel guilty about not spending much time and cannot fulfil the demands of family members because of their work. Thus we see Arati just after returning from work, gets busy to attend her little son, without taking any rest. Bandana is equally worried about her son’s future as she could not give much attention to his studies and other activities. These women may have engaged in

*Parama’s* extra marital affairs. But if the focus of the director is to address the question of Parama’s identity where the arrival of Rahul in her life is playing a vital role in that respect then the above scene is unnecessary. If her husband remains honest then also her relation with Rahul and the positive role which it played in Parama’s life would remain to be important.

10 Here we should remember that Mrinal is representing nineteenth or early twentieth century Bengal but Aditi representing the twenty first century India. Obviously, from late nineteenth century to twenty first century, the situation has been changed. Now women getting more education and have more scope to enter into public sphere. So what Mrinal had done in her own time that was more significant than what Aditi has done in 21st century.

11 Arati in ‘MAHANAGAR’ is a simple housewife who comes to work only to support her family. Her husband Subrata also does not want that her wife would go for work but the economic pressure let him to allow Arati for doing job. In other words her husband was not much progressive. He genuinely feels that a woman’s place is in the home. But Bandana in ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ is to that extent more
participation in public life and to that extent enjoyed her autonomy too, but ultimately their lives are directed or structured by their family commitments.

The actual state of middle class women who have some kind of access on the public life through their job and career we find in the remarks of Sujata, a college friend of Aditi in ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’. As an employee of Eastern Railway, she is to attend her office everyday at a given time. But as a housewife, from early morning she performs all household activities: she prepares Tiffin for her husband and daughter, looks after other household chores, and only then she comes to office in overcrowded buses. She does not even find time to take her meal before coming to office. Despite such condition, she cannot think of leaving the job because it provides economic benefits to her family. What is noteworthy in her remarks is that in spite of the economic support for their family they cannot have any space for themselves. On the contrary working women are more tightly bound with their families. In our society women’s freedom and liberty are determined by men, if anyone cannot accept it her destiny will be loneliness. Who wants to remain alone? We are living in twenty first century but even today woman’s freedom is determined by men whether she is a housewife or a working lady. It is also quite understandable that men would not relieve women from their family responsibilities in such a situation because it is the only way by which men can enjoy their supremacy over women. So what ultimately comes out is that with family women should also reject men towards asserting their identity - but in that case she will remain alone. Not only that, she will lose her family, her children or her husband but the most important that she will lose companionship because every human being wants company from other human beings. In that respect if women’s companions are not men then they must be women as we see in the ‘ASTITVA’. But, does Bengali film raise this possibility while portraying middle class Bhadramahila?

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fortunate than Arati. It was Bandana’s husband and his progressive ideals which prepared her to think beyond the stereotype life of a widow in a conservative joint family. It was her husband’s influence that she could reject to perform all those rituals which a widow must follow.
THE SECOND ALTERNATIVE: QUESTION OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND THE REJECTION OF MEN

We can examine this question from two angles. One, we can discuss those women characters who have rejected men from their life and secondly, we can examine women who get companionship with other women, instead of men. The controversial film ‘FIRE’ directed by Deepa Mehta, addressed both these aspects in its own narrative structure. ‘FIRE’ is the story of two women Radha (played by Sabhana Azmi) and Nita (played by Nandita Das) who happen to be sisters-in-law. What they share in their lives is that both are neglected by their husbands. Radha is the elder sister-in-law, spending her days with her husband just like a brother and sister, without any physical and sexual intimacy with him. For her husband, who is very religious minded, feels sexuality is a human desire that keeps away human beings from the Almighty and, to get close to God human beings should control their passions. From this kind of an understanding he refrains from normal physical relationship with his wife as it exists between a husband and wife.¹² In case of Nita, the situation is more troublesome, even humiliating. Her husband married her but he spends his nights with another girl and Nita is a helpless witness to it. Both these women are related with their husband’s name but their husbands are not theirs. They are wives of them but their relationships are far away from the usual relationship between a husband and wife. They perform their own housework as housewives like any other wife of middle class family without being a wife in the true sense.

Hence, in this situation, deprived of their husbands’ attention, they become close to each other, both emotionally and physically. Gradually they have built their own world

¹² Radha’s husband Ashoke, like Gandhi, harnesses moral authority through the technology of trial and denial as the celibate male, constructing sexuality through the rhetoric of repression. In ‘FIRE’, this sanctioned non heteronormative and patriarchal practice emerges within the context of Asoke controlling the family as the eldest son and moral and economic force. In addition, he requires Radha to serve as the object and mechanism of his desire. Ashoke here, too, like Gandhi, needs Radha not only as an embodiment and projection of his desire but also as the “proof of his successes in the cause of celibacy….capable of not inciting male desire was absent”. Ashoke practically regulates his sexuality through the incitement and then suppression of Radha’s desires. The film’s logic deems this valorized anticolonial nationalist celibacy anachronistic and misogynistic within the context of the middle class. Jigna Desai (2004) Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural politics Of South Asian Diasporic Film, Routledge, New York And London. Pp. 165-166
in which there is no access for their husbands; they are completely outsiders in that respect. Finally as we find they leave their home to live together. Maybe they will make a new family of two women which is unusual or exceptional in terms of our traditional understanding of family, based on heterosexual relationship between man and woman.

Theoretically, some women writers, like Charlotte Bunch or Marilyn Frye, argue that women’s primary oppression is related with her sexual relation to men and to overcome such oppression women must identify with other women by being sexually committed to them. According to Bunch, the relationship between men and women itself constitutes politics for it is really a relationship of domination and subordination which goes all the way back again to the sexual division of labour. Bunch says that the first division of labour in pre-history was based on sex: men hunted, women built the villages, took care of children, and engaged in farming. Women collectively controlled the land, language, culture and the communities. Men were able to conquer women with the weapons that they had developed for hunting. When it became clear that were leading a more stable, peaceful and desirable existence. We do not know exactly how this conquest took place, but it is clear that the original imperialism was male over female, the male claiming the female body and her service as his territory (and property).

This relationship is not only confined to the question of sexuality, rather it aims to make a revolutionary consciousness to build women based communities where women binding to other women in their daily lives. Still, whether and how far the attempt to create, like Radha and Nita, a secluded sphere for women themselves would really be helpful for women in their search for self identity remained a moot question.

Beyond sexuality and emotional ties, another aspect is friendship among women which can provide mutual support in the male-dominated world. In the single word of ‘friendship’ there lies the mutual respect for one’s quality and that prepares one to find her place in society. Thus friendship remains crucially important for those who suffer from oppression. This kind of message has been given in the film ‘DOR’. It is the story

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. Pp. 61, 63
about *Meera* and *Jinat*. *Meera* belongs to a traditional Rajasthani family of a remote village, who has recently lost her husband. Her husband was killed in Saudi Arabia by a person who used to be his friend and worked with him there. It was an accident but since there was no eye witness, according to the Saudi law the accused person has to be sentenced to death. Only if the victim’s widow pardons him, the accused will be released. That person is *Amir*, who is the husband of *Jinat* and to save her husband’s life she comes to meet *Meera*. When they meet each other we do not find much problem to differentiate between them. *Meera* is a simple girl, suffering from all forms of repressions and subordinations, common to any conservative family. Her status in the family is hardly different than a maid, especially after being widow. She is living only with this hope that one day she will punish the killer who killed her husband because with her husband’s death she has lost her freedom, her dignity, everything. So *Meera* is one of those traditional women who think that husbands are everything in women’s life, without his presence, there is no life, no world for her.

*Jinat* also wants to save her husband’s life but she does not think that without her husband there is no life; after all she has her own life which she wishes to live on her own terms. This outlook, compared to *Meera*’s, makes her bold, open minded and confident; and that’s why she could come from Himachal Pradesh to Rajasthan to save her husband’s life because she loves him. Gradually, *Meera* and *Jinat*, become friends and *Jinat*’s personality slowly influences *Meera* to such an extent that now she could face and oppose all forms of abuses which her family members put against her. Finally what we find is that *Meera* signs the letter of pardon and in that sense, abandons her desire to punish her husband’s killer. Perhaps what she has got from *Jinat* that is more valuable for her and it is the friendship with *Jinat* that makes her more confident about her own existence, not centred on husband or men but beyond that. The last scene of the film is very remarkable where we see that *Jinat* who is leaving, calls *Meera* to come with her and *Meera*, now confident enough to take her own decision, gets up on the train and both go together. Throughout the film there is no indication that either *Jinat* or *Meera* have rejected men from their own life. The relationship that grew between them is the friendship but this friendship does not call for the rejection of men from their lives. This is utterly different from the message which *FIRE* tries to convey in portraying the
relationship between Radha and Nita. ‘DOR’ tries to represent the fact that solution lies not in rejecting men but to create a bond of friendship among women to provide mutual support and help in realizing her identity and existence in male dominated society.\(^{16}\)

Bengali films, compared to ‘FIRE’ and ‘DOR’ seem to be rather conservative. Whatever space has been provided to discuss the question of women’s identity in Bengali cinema, these aspects have hardly been addressed. Only in ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’, there are some images about women’s friendship but that also exists for a very short time. Because, ultimately the film upholds that the destiny of a woman is in the arms of a man, maybe he is her second husband. In general Bengali cinema has addressed the question of identity not in exclusion of men from women’s life, rather men, if not her husband, constitutes the most important part in her search for identity. Until Rahul appeared in her life, Parama remained within her own world and fulfilled her duties as wife and mother. Essentially Rahul makes her aware of the possibility of a new life, of her own ambitions which had been lost while maintaining her housewife’s image and performing familial duties after her marriage. She stopped playing the sitar, which she had learnt before her marriage in her parental home. Through Rahul she is schooled in individualism, encouraged to express her sexuality freely, even if it is outside the strictures of convention-bound marriage. That’s why, with Rahul, Parama could share dreams of a journey across America in a small trailer, stopping by at small towns where she will give sitar recitals and he will be busy with his photographer’s assignments. All this at least emotionally liberates Parama to discover herself beyond her stereotyped life as a middle class housewife.\(^{17}\)

Hemenmama is another example of men who wishes to bring change in the life of Aditi in ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ through encouragement of her lost skill of writing. This man, Hemendra Nath Mallick inspired her to start writing once again and she to some

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\(^{16}\) In ‘DOR’ there is a character of a male chameleon who helps Jinat to find out Meera. He helps her in every way in her mission. Through her courage and sincere efforts Jinat deeply influenced the chameleon and ultimately he fall in her love. Though he knew that Jinat is married, even then he tells about his feelings for her. But his love for Jinat also mixed with respect and this important to build relationship between man and woman. Moreover what this character tries to suggest in the film that in every course of life there is a need of cooperation and assistance between man and woman, irrespective of their nature of relationship.

extent was successful, as Aditi’s writings were acclaimed in several places and one of her articles was published in one of the popular magazines. The importance of Hemenmama in Aditi’s life might be compared with the role played by Amal in the life of Charu in ‘CHARULATA’. With the arrival of Amal in their family, Charu gradually began to think beyond her routine housework in her family. Amal brought fresh air in her life and inspired her to develop her writing skill. He inspired her to such an extent that Charu ultimately wrote and it was published in a popular magazine.18 Except in ‘STREER PATRA’ there is hardly any attempt made to address the question of women’s identity by excluding men from their life. While dealing with this question, men have been brought from outside. In this sense these men from the outside world are the liberators in women’s life and their husbands appeared to merely act as agents of patriarchal ideology.

Beyond these emotional ties, as in ‘CHARULATA’ and ‘PARAMA’, there are other areas where men could provide support in each and every step in women’s life, despite of the fact that these men are not their husbands. The character of Somenath in ‘UNISHE APRIL’ extends all kinds of support to Sorojini Gupta. He takes active interest in her dancing career and takes care of every little matter related to her profession. He also cares about her home management; hence Sorojini asks him to lodge a complaint at the telephone exchange for the inconvenience in service. He wishes to help her daughter who is a doctor, by providing a suitable place for her practice. His contribution in the life of Sorojini Gupta and her family is invaluable: still instead of marrying him Sorojini prefers to live alone as the widow of her husband Manish. Is their relationship totally devoid of any emotional ties? Apparently it seems so, but actually she does not feel that marriage is necessary. She may have developed certain kind of emotional bonding with Somenath but she does not want translate it into a formal marriage. When her daughter Aditi asks this question to her, Sorojini replies that he is just a friend who supports her in every way and she never feels the need to marry him. ‘UNISHE APRIL’, in this respect

18 One of the most common feature about women protagonists of Bengali films that they have used their writings as the expression of their self. Their writings are not aimed at to get social acclaim and status. Mrinal, Charulata, Paromita, Aditi, for all of them writing constitutes their own imagined world of emancipation. Actually it is an old legacy, started from nineteenth century Bengal with the publication of ‘AMAR KATHA’ by Rasasundari Debi. Perhaps, the major contribution of women’s education is that it prepared them to express in writing about how their life was in the overall male domination and hegemony.
provides valuable insights as to the importance of men in women’s life beyond the husband-wife framework.

Bandana in ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ wants to invite Sudipto in her life after spending several years as widow of Abhijit Mukherjee and fulfilling her all commitments towards her son. Sudipto is an outsider who is nothing but an art teacher of her son. But he proves his sincerity towards her when she falls ill and Sudipto takes all responsibility to cure her. He does everything by serving and attending her. According to the narrative Bandana is open minded and also aware about her desire and needs; that’s why it is possible for her to think about Sudipto and not hesitate to cultivate emotional ties with him. Unfortunately, she is unable to marry him though she wants to do that. It is not possible because her son does not like it. So men are an essential part in women’s life not only as companion or husband to play a critical role in terms of finding their individuality. Men’s involvement, at least in Bengali cinema is an indispensable fact in women’s life towards their identity.

As we have already mentioned, ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ made an attempt to portray friendship between women who could be each other’s companion. In the film this friendship is between mother and daughter-in-law but this friendship lasts just for some time and within this short while it would be wrong to say that Paromita’s individuality grew due to their friendship. It is clear when she chooses to divorce her husband Biresh and marry Rajeev because it is Rajeev who makes it possible for her to think beyond her family and her spastic son. He arranges a job for her in advertising agency after knowing that she has done a M.A. in mass communication. Though she had a genuine female bond with her mother-in-law but in terms of her quest for individuality, Rajeev plays the role of the catalyst. As is expected, she chooses Rajeev to spend her life with him and leave her mother-in-law. When she marries Rajeev, she not only accepts another man in her life but she builds a new family. ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ does not suggest that in search of

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19 Here we can make a distinction between Sorojini and Bandana. For Bandana, Sudipto is important because he is the person with whom she could share her own emotion and desires. Bandana is the product of 80’s when the changing middle class values yet to allow a woman to maintain friendship with a man, without marrying him. But Sorojini represents the era of new women of 90’s. For these women their material requirements are more important that their emotion. Since Somenath supports her in every way to maintain her career and other material need so there is hardly any necessity for Sorojini to to turn this ‘friendship’ into husband-wife relationship. Not only Sorojini but many women now place men just as the support in their everyday needs, men are now not someone very special in their life.
individual identity women have to reject family and banish men from their life. On the contrary men could play a positive role to attain women’s individuality by making her conscious about their position in family/society. Thus, family and men cannot be ignored altogether in women’s lives, but simultaneously it has to be a reformed family and changed man. This in turn is inevitably related to the nature of marriage.

**THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE: REFORMING MARRIAGE & FAMILY SYSTEM TO ADDRESS WOMEN’S INDIVIDUALITY**

When we talk about the changing nature of family we should begin with the question of marriage and its sanctity, especially in the Indian society. We know that it is through the event of marriage that a family comes into existence at least formally, so in a way marriage determines the nature of family to a large extent. Let us look, once again, at ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ where Paromita after divorcing her husband Biresh, marries Rajeev, the documentary filmmaker. Like other Bengali middle class women, she refuses to spend an unhappy life just to save her marriage in the name of ‘her destiny’. It also implies that she does not believe in the sanctity of marriage which every Bengali woman maintains, but at the same time she does not reject the system of marriage since she marries for the second time. She keeps faith in marriage, but as a system which validates the man-woman relationship and in that respect she cannot keep away from the family. So, for Paromita, marriage is not something which cannot be broken, and if it once has been broken, there is nothing wrong to be married again, just like any other man does.²⁰ Now one could very well ask, to what extent is this transformation of marriage from its sacred place to the status of ‘system’ viable to the understanding of women’s identity? As the film shows, because of this marriage with Rajeev, Paromita does not have to make

²⁰ There is another film ‘SAT PAKE BANDHA’ which portrays marital break up of a couple Sukhendu and Archana. But this break up was not for any subordination on the part of a wife in the family. The main reason behind this separation is the outside intervention of their relatives, chiefly by Sukhendu’s mother-in-law. But even after their separation they did not forget each other. Archana very eagerly waited for Sukhendu if he would call her again. In the day of her sister’s marriage she could not resist herself and went to the house of Sukhendu. She did not find him because he was out of the country. After that she did not marry again but waiting for him. Now it is well understood that the separation between the husband-wife takes place in ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ is altogether different. In this film the separation is related with the vital question of women’s search for identity.
any compromise with her professional life, in that sense this marriage acts as the perfect balance between her professional public world and personal life. Obviously this kind of balance between public and personal life is essential especially for women, as family usually gets more important to them because of their fixed identities in terms of their familial relations.

But, regarding the violation as well as the sanctity of marriage, the difference is: earlier the violators were only men but now women were also raising questions about its sacredness. With their growing participation in the public domain there is a change in the women’s perceptions about the traditional notion of marriage. Today middle class morality, if not totally diluted, definitely faces erosion in some sections among women. In some cases, being within the relationship of marriage, both men and women involve third persons in their lives; in that sense such marriages are to be considered as part of ‘open marriage’ which allows strangers in their personal lives. In the 1972 best-seller book, ‘Open Marriage : A New Life Style For Couples’ authored by Nena and Geore O’Neill defines open marriages as a system designed to gives partners space to grow as individuals first. From this perspective Parama’s relationship with Rahul as a stranger or as a third person, who makes her aware about her own existence, can be justified. Even divorce increasingly loses its stigma and gradually women are opting to walk out of a bad marriage rather than live unhappily ever after.

It may be noted in this connection that growing feeling among women professionals about marriage is that, it will affect their identity as individuals. Because of such fear these women are keeping away from marriage and among both, men and women there is reluctance about it. This problem among men and women especially in metro cities, deserve some attention. Renowned writer Shobha De, in her ‘SPOUSE :

21 It is written in ‘Sunday Times’ of ‘Times Of India’ on 12th October, 2008 by Sreemoyee piu Kundu. The title of the article was the ’When threesomes Work’. In this article it argues that so many couples around us are either into or seriously considering open marriages. There is hardly any question can be raised on the ground of morality when both partners are voluntarily experimenting it.

22 Hoihnau Hauzel ‘Knot Tied Down’ in Sunday Times on October 9, 2005. The writer in his article describes some women’s marital fate who are otherwise very successful in terms of their career and in their professional life. They are celebrities of our society but they living alone due to their separation from their husbands. This break up however did not stop them to carry out their own life. Even society also accepted their talents and efficiency beyond their marital status which is the sign of, according to the writer, growing tolerance regarding the stigmatization of divorce especially for women.
THE TRUTH ABOUT MARRIAGE’, highlights this problem.\textsuperscript{23} It does not mean that women are simply banishing men from their lives; in fact the importance of men remains as usual, but that does not confine them to the formal understanding of marriage and family. The growing numbers of ‘living together’ and ‘live in relationship’ perhaps confirm this suggestion. What is important is that in ‘living together’ and ‘live in relationship’, men and women are not bound by traditional marriage and familial relationships. Comparing with our common understanding of marriage and family, ‘living together’, as the new concept on conjugality, provides more space and liberty in firming up the direction of one’s identity. As the ‘live in relationship’ does not have formal legal sanction as it is in case of marriage, the morality among couples play far greater role here. Mutual trust and respect is necessary in every relationship, more so for ‘live in relationships’. Both man and woman have to accept that mutual responsibilities, even in the absence of legal and social bindings.\textsuperscript{24} In Bengali language there is a word ‘Bhalobasha’, if we try to split this word as ‘Bhalo’ and ‘Basha’ that implies in colloquial sense, as a ‘good home’ or a ‘good place’. Actually there is no better place than each other’s heart where couples could live happily forever after where all questions about the legal formal sanction on marriage becomes superfluous.\textsuperscript{25} In view of the

\textsuperscript{23} Bidisha Chottopadhayay ‘Weekend : Sambad pratidin’ 22\textsuperscript{nd} April, 2005. This article is based on the interview of the author Shobha Dey entitled as ‘Nijer Biyeke Chinun’(Know about your marriage). In her interview she expressed her anxiety on the growing disenchantment about marriage which is also true for her own children. For the author to make a married life successful couples should be friends of each other both mentally and physically.

\textsuperscript{24} It is an article entitled as ‘Living Together: Dampatyer Natun Concept’ written by Debolina Ghosh and Priyanka Bose. This article has been published in one of the most popular fortnight Bengali magazine ‘SANANDA’ on 25\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008. It is a women’s magazine and definitely when such issue has been raised in the magazine it has been discussed from women’s point of view. If we go through the whole text we do see that some advise have given to make live in relationship more successful so that there will be no break up. Most important advise which is related with the stereotype roles of women that men also should perform household activities like cooking or cleaning. But this advice cannot be confine just within the live in relations rather it should be a part of the life for those couples who are legally married.

\textsuperscript{25} With growing influence of consumerism the love between man and woman increasingly turns towards the physical aspect ignoring the fact of mental and emotional ties. But as Bengali our notion of love have been constructed with nineteenth century values. As it is well known fact that our world of understanding in nineteenth century was determined by the Victorian ideology of England where physical desire or biological needs totally discarded and put all emphasis on the human mind and sanctity. The term ‘Bhalobasha’ representing this understanding of love. As a physical being we can reject everyone from our life after fulfilling our needs but if we place a person to close to our heart it will be difficult to reject him.
evolution of family system from cohabitation to modern nuclear family, there is no logic in discarding the ‘live in relationships’ as something beyond the general understanding of family.

To what extent are all these issues relevant in the life of a middle class woman? In portraying the image of women there is hardly any representation in Bengali cinema about the changing status of *Bhadramahila* in domestic world. Since, Bengali cinema still predominantly subscribes to middle class values and morality, such questions relating to the changing nature of marriage and family, quite expectedly, are not reflected in film narratives. But in metro cities like Kolkata, some visible changes are happening to the Bengali middle class which Bengali cinema in general failed to address. In *PAROMITAR EK DIN* there is a scene when Paromita tells her mother-in-law, about her decision to divorce her husband Biresh to marry Rajeev. Having become aware of it, her mother-in-law Sanaka replies that from that very beginning she knew it that this relation was not going to last. Sanaka can feel about Paromita’s unhappiness because after her own marriage with her husband, she too did not spend a single happy moment in their long married life, but still she did not seek separation from her husband. That is why she tells Paromita that married life is not always a happy journey. It is true that she does not lead a happy life with Biresh but that same unhappiness she could encounter with her new found love, Rajeev. So, she should live the usual life like her mother-in-law, Sanaka and should not get separated from her husband. But, while opposing her decision to divorce his son Biresh, Sanaka really raises no objection to her growing relation with Rajeev. In other words, by saying this, Sanaka is ready to accept Rajeev as the second person in Paromita’s life, despite her husband’s presence. Paromita, however, chooses the path of marriage to Rajeev by separating herself from Biresh. Thus, Sanaka’s stance here is far

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So before make any physical relation we should place that woman in our heart, only in that way it will be an ideal relation between a man and woman beyond every legal and social aspects.  
26 If anyone asks about the most radical image in the film *PAROMITAR EK DIN* the answer will be it is Sanaka, the mother-in-law. Not that she allowed her daughter-in-law to maintain a parallel relation with a second person but being a married women she realized Paromita’s unhappiness in spending days with her son Biresh and the need of a person like Rajeev in her life. Indeed, it is a very modern outlook in terms of Sanaka’s middle class background. It is the only film where we find that a daughter-in-law could openly talk about her divorce and second marriage before her own mother-in-law. This image of mother-in-law is strikingly different in *PARAMA* where her mother-in-law could not accept her daughter-in-law’s relationship with another man. There she feels that her daughter-in-law has done a great sin which affect the status and sanctity of the family. There is no question for her to realize that why that person has become so important in Parama’s life?
more radical than Paromita’s who refuses to maintain a parallel relationship besides her married life what Sanaka suggested. Moreover, Rajeev’s exact contribution to the enrichment of Paromita’s self – beyond arranging a job for her – remains unclear since the film narrative does not enlighten us on this aspect. After all, unlike Parama who maintained extra marital affair with a third person Rahul, Paromita married Rajeev which ends their affair.

Except ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’, from ‘CHARULATA’ to ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, the general tendency is to somehow save marriage and to avoid exploring other possibilities that could radically transform the nature of the institution of marriage and with that also the family. ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ is the latest addition to this genre. The film represents the lives of three women in the context of twenty first century. These three women – Maya, Mukti and Alo – as it is known to us, have their own dreams: Maya wants to do business, Mukti wants to open a Kabadi training centre and Alo wants to be an actress. None of them has any aversion to marriage and even after the marriage of Maya and Mukti they keep alive their dreams and they are able to actively pursue them. If ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ shows women’s faith in the system of marriage then the above film indirectly depicts there might be no conflict between women’s marital status and her professional public life. Does it imply that the nature of husbands as ‘men’ is changing as they do not prefer to confine their wives within the private sphere of family? The question is more significant when we see that their professional roles are not necessitated by their family or personal needs, like the appearance in the ‘public’ of Arati in ‘MAHANAGAR’. Their participation in the public world stems from their search for self identity. Paromita joined the advertising agency not because of her own financial or family needs, but rather to get absorbed somewhere so that her talents and time were not wasted. Later it became her sphere of identity. The difference of Paromita with those ‘three women’ was that it was Rajeev who arranged the job for her; that is, there was a man who facilitated her entry into the professional life. But in ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ when Maya, Mukti and Alo decided to take part in their desired professions that was not inspired by some men; it was their own decision which they dreamt of from the
Bengali cinema does not attempt to experiment with the traditional notion of marriage and family. So, does it try to project the changing image of Bengali men? It is more important to change the nature of men who are the prime agents of patriarchal order than to change the nature of marriage.

To substantiate this understanding one can look back at the portrayal of Rajeev who unlike the stereotype image of Indian men, has no problem to marry Paromita, the wife of someone else and also the mother of a child. He seems to be satisfied with his own status as the second husband in her life. Indian men are familiar with second wife but ‘second husband’ still faces stigma and humiliation because of the traditional mindset of the people. The dominant position of men in our society cannot allow them to be the second person in a woman’s life; he is always considered to be the first person. If we consider the background of Rajeev what we can note is that he is an Indian, but not a Bengali as his full name is ‘Rajeev Srivastava’. It is very difficult to say whether non-Bengali men are more liberal though a subtle hint in that direction may have been dropped in the film by the director Aparna Sen. Obviously, in contemporary Bengali society we find many men who are less bothered about the fact that he is a second husband in his wife’s life. It is not easy to gauge the extent to which Bengali men have become liberal in the present day of twenty first century but there are several instances around us where we find some new male who at least free from all kinds of chauvinistic attitude.

But have Bengali women made up their minds to change the traditional meaning of marriage? To sum up the whole thing let us turn our attention to this question. There was a talk-show programme called ‘GHOSH & COMPANY’ in one of the popular channels where the renowned film director Rituparno Ghosh as anchor engaged celebrities from Bengal’s cultural and social life into conversation. In one episode, he invited famous super model and upcoming Bollywood actress Koena Mitra. Through her conversation with Rituparno we get to know that Koena came from a middle class background but like other Bengali girls she refused to be bound by the traditional image.

26 If any woman wants to take some kind of profession beyond her financial requirements it is assumed by the male members, mainly by her husband that she surely needs more money for her own expenditure. In the traditional understanding it is hard to accept that a job for a woman could be part of her dignity as individual. As we see in the ‘PARAMA’ when her husband heard that she is going to take the job he offered her to increase her pocket money as if she is going to do that job for earning money.
But the question of marriage is something very special for her because she believes in one time marriage. While believing in marriage and family she expects that she would prefer a man in her life who will equally respect her profession, work and above all her dignity. If these are the expectations of today’s modern Bengali woman having a firm foothold in the public arena then it cannot be perceived as a radical shift from the traditional notion of marriage from the woman’s point of view. At the same time, it involves a married life and family which deeply corresponds to the reformed nature of men who can respect a woman’s work and individuality. The extent to which it is possible is directly proportional to the extent a woman’s life will be easy; particularly for the Bengali middle class.