PREFACE

Scholars have made several attempts to discuss Indian cinema from the perspective of sociology, especially in case of Hindi films. But such attempts are not confined just to use social theories and methods; rather scholars like M. Madhava Prasad tried to relate Hindi film narratives with our tradition as a part of the broader discipline of sociology, at least in the Indian context. In their works scholars have consistently tried to point out that Bollywood or mainstream Hindi cinema mainly symbolize Indian culture and tradition, both within and outside the country. The cultural representation of Hindi cinema is one of the dominant themes of these studies. At the same time it has been clear from these studies that while representing the Indian culture and tradition, the mainstream Hindi cinema upholds the role of Indian women in preserving them. In other words, the age old domination of patriarchal values over Indian women is projected as part of Indian culture. Of course, in representing culture, Hindi cinema in some cases (like in Fire) portrays the changing image of Indian women in terms of her class background. But overall the mainstream Hindi cinema in its representation maintains the dominant, stereotyped understanding of women as defined in Indian tradition and culture.

In this respect in Bengali films, as a part of India’s regional cinema, there is no dearth of such portrayals where women have been conceived primarily in stereotyped images of devoted wife and all-enduring mother. But these images are vitally connected with the evolution of Bengali middle class society which provides the background for most of the Bengali film narratives. Since women have to perform certain roles in keeping with one’s class background, Bengali films cannot ignore the basic attributes of the middle class women in representing Bengali culture and society. In this sense the social construction of Bhadramahila, which was invented in nineteenth century Bengal and developed in subsequent decades, is part of a dominant mode in the cultural representation of Bengali cinema even in 21st century. We can identify three major events which changed the course of the Bengali society in general and of the middle class in particular. These events are the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century; Bengal’s Partition in 1947 and the neo-liberal turn of 1991. Of course, these events in a large way changed the composition and value system of Bengali middle class because they vitally
affected their position and status in Bengali society. But the question remains that did these changes bring about any corresponding transformation for the Bhadramahila of middle class in terms of her quest towards individual identity? Here we find the need to relate the image of Bhadramahila, as represented in Bengali films, with the changing understanding of middle class Bhadralok in Bengali society.

But the status of Bhadramahila in Bengali society has largely been constructed in relation to men, marriage and family. Hence we find that most of the Bengali film narratives while portraying middle class women, revolve around the marriage, family and men (husband or boyfriend). It is quite difficult to find images where women have been imagined as self-conscious individual human being beyond her familial identities. Those attempts which have been made to portray women’s image beyond her familial roles to uphold her self-identity in society, remains exceptional in view of the general understanding of the middle class women. In respect of such understanding of Bhadramahila, the present study attempts to raise questions about the role of family, marriage and men in the life of a woman in search of her identity as individual human being within the middle class society.

For this study, I am greatly indebted to my teacher Professor Partha Pratim Basu, for his thoughtful advice and suggestions. From the very beginning he remained the source of inspiration and encouragement for me. I hope this project will make a contribution to developing a new understanding of the Bengali middle class and its women as represented in the cultural sphere of Bengali cinema.

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