INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any disagreement about the fact that women have the subordinate position in our society. But it cannot be said that all women suffer equally irrespective of their class and social background. In fact it will be wrong to consider women apart from her social background since her subordination is in a way related to different kinds of social values and outlooks. Things become more complex when women’s issues are represented in variegated ways in media and films. As representation itself constitutes politics, women’s image in different media and films inherently produces certain political meaning which could further reinforce the traditional understanding of women. The study on Bengali middle class women actually focuses on the social background of middle class Bhadralok and at the same interrogates the portrayal of women in Bengali cinema.

The Research Problem

The present research project focuses on the identity of middle class women as portrayed in Bengali films. Identity here refers to self image; the way an individual comprehends of himself or herself as a discrete or separate entity which remains a prime determinant of his/her behaviour. Identity in turn is shaped by the kinds of roles society allocates to or deems appropriate for individuals, both men and women. In other words, this self-image is in a major way rooted in social perceptions. Hence the importance of taking into consideration the social/class background in studying women’s identity.

The middle class in Bengal is such a segment of society which has been able to exert its pervasive influence on almost all aspects of Bengali existence: socio-cultural life; art and literature as well as politics and economics. Of course, this is not a ‘class’ in the strict Marxian sense which is economically defined; it is more akin to the Weberian notion where culture plays the predominant role. As the middle class is culturally different from the rest of the Bengali society, the middle class women too bear this distinctive cultural legacy.
We frequently use the term ‘Bhadramahila’ without delving deep into its significance. In social vocabulary, the notion of Bhadramahila rests on certain cultural as well as ideological markers of a particular image of femininity. Etymologically the term ‘Bhadramahila’ refers to a female counterpart of middle class Bhadralok. In nineteenth century context, Bhadralok had the dominant position and status in Bengali society who sought to restructure the society on their own terms. As the superior class, both culturally and socially, the middle class Bhadralok wished to construct a new image of women who could uphold and maintain their class status. Hence, the very notion of Bhadramahila is a product the middle class value matrix.

But, emerging as the superior class in colonial Bengal middle class Bhadraloks developed their own cultural domain consisting of several new elements. Earlier in Bengal there was a traditional folk culture and art forms like Jatra, Kobi songs. In such traditional folk forms social problems had an important place beyond their main role of providing social entertainment. With the growing influence of middle class values in Bengali society these traditional folk forms became marginalized. The new cultural forms, inspired by the nineteenth century colonial modernity turned into the dominant mode of Bengali culture. Among various new forms, the most popular was the modern Bengali drama which provided a platform to represent various social messages and nationalist sentiments while performing its role of offering entertainment particularly for the Bhadrolok gentry.

But as a cultural product, film is different in respect of other performing arts like drama. Though, in all over the world they are regarded as the offspring of theatre and drama, films (or cinemas or movies) as part of the mass media are mainly considered as ‘providers of entertainment’. Besides providing entertainment, however, films also constitute an influential component of the world of culture of twentieth century context. Because the extent to which culture is understood ‘as a way of life’, film with its images, sounds, language generate and disseminate various social meanings. As such, films while maintaining a critical distance from the domain of reality contribute significantly towards affirmation, re-creation as well as construction of social identities. Now the question is how the Bengali films as a different form of culture represented the image of middle class women so that it could able to affirm/reject the social construction of Bhadramahila. The
present study is an attempt to examine the evolution of the identity of the Bengali middle class women by scanning the contents of Bengali films. The aim is to explore how the Bengali films reproduce/interrogate the conventional image of the Bhadramahila.

**Significance of the Problem**

Women’s place has conventionally been located in the private sphere and her identity defined in terms of familial roles and relationships. Yet, theoretically speaking, the question of self-identity has always been associated with the notion of universality and, by implication, the public domain. While challenging the public-private dichotomy the women writers actually located the identity of women within the sphere of public because their rejection and criticism against such dichotomy inherently accepted the prior significance of the public domain over family. From this angle, women’s quest for identity involved securing greater visibility and due recognition of their potentialities within the public arena which almost by definition remained the ‘man’s world’. Because in public domain women must qualify in masculine terms and her feminine attributes seem to be less significant. In maximum cases the ‘success’ of the members of fair sex in the public realm depends on the extent to which the public domain accommodates the feminine values. But in those cases where women find success in masculine terms these instances are often branded as isolated instances. Hence the need for a wider conceptualization of women’s quest for self-identity and defining it as being counted as full-fledged ‘human beings’ at par with their male counterparts in all spheres of human life cutting across the public-private divide. It is important to recount in this connection that even the conventional notion of human rights pertained to the public realm alone and the important role played by the women’s movement to bring the private or familial sites within the purview of human rights discourse to address issues like marital rape and domestic violence. But the feminist intervention has not been able to change the status of women’s rights as the separate category within the human rights discourse. As part of the human rights regime women’s rights constituted a different sphere.

The idea of Bhadramahila which was collateral with the birth of the Bhadralok culture of nineteenth century colonial Bengal sought to sculpt a public image of the
enlightened Bengali women. The event of Bengal renaissance along with social reforms movement played the most important role behind the emergence of the social construction of Bhadramahila. But the Bengali middle class elites neither fully accepted colonial modernity nor wholly parted with the traditional mores; consequently this new concept largely turned out to be a mechanism for maintaining stability in gender relations as well as male domination in the public arena and failed in the ultimate analysis to take the Bengali middle class women effectively beyond the family’s bindings and obligations. However, in the twentieth century, two world wars and then partition of India followed by independence seriously challenged the stability of the Bengali society. The Bhadramahila had to come out of her familial confines to join the job market and the Bhadralok had to accept that, however reluctantly, in the interest of the economic sustenance of the family fallen on hard times. This development produced a series of mixed consequences. In a sense it paved the way for the ‘liberation’ of the middle class woman born out of financial independence who now carved out a niche for herself in the public domain. Yet, viewed differently, all this did not imply any deliverance on her part from performing the conventional family chores, for it was never meant to be; rather this ‘public appearance’ was only an extension of her familial duties, i.e. to bail the household out of financial hardships. In other words, instead of enhancing her freedom, it only imposed further burden upon the middle class women – and predictably generated new kinds of tensions – within as well as without the family unit. The object of the present project is to capture the predicament as well as the quest for self-identity of the Bengali middle class women – those who spent their lives primarily within the family confines as well as those caught between the contradictory pulls of the home and the world – as documented in Bengali films made in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Actually the whole understanding of middle class women is essentially connected with different historical moments. In this sense three such crucial moments can be identified. The first is the emergence of Bengali middle class in nineteenth century Bengal when the notion of Bhadramahila was invented and spread in society. The second moment was the Partition/Independence in postwar period in which Bengali middle class had to confront with several challenges that correspondingly affected the status of Bhadramahila. The third and final moment is the liberal economic policy or globalization
in the post 1991 period where we apparently find some remarkable changes in the whole understanding of middle class women. Our study primarily focused on first two phases of nineteenth century Bengal and the changes taken place in post-independence era. But the phase of globalization finds occasional references in our study since the process is to close to our time. However, certain features may suggest the changing image of middle class women in the age of globalization but it will be too early to spell out the whole impact of globalization and liberalization on the Bengali middle class and their women.

**Literature Review**

Our survey of the literature falls in two parts: those focusing on the content and context of the emergence of the notion of *Bhadramahila* in respect of our theoretical attempt to find out women’s individuality, and those dealing with the coverage of women’s issues in general and Bengali women in particular in the mass media and popular culture including films.

The construction of the ideal typical view of *Bhadramahila* in colonial Bengal has received substantial academic attention. Himani Banerjee traced the elevation of the woman to the status of ‘Devi’ (Goddess) which, according to her, was marked by the characteristic trait of *Lajjashilata* to be manifested through certain dress codes, practice of self-restraint, submission to husband and respect for in-laws, and efficient management of the household, all in effect functioning as ideological devices to restrict the women’s participation in the public sphere.\(^1\) In this connection, Bhattacharya reminded us that this notion of ‘Devi’ was a mutated version of the original non-Aryan connotation of the term which signified uncontrolled destructive forces and was linked to sexuality, blood and death.\(^2\)

Again, the role of the dutiful wife was supplemented by the conception of motherhood;\(^3\) the qualities of a good mother and her responsibilities towards shaping the

---


character of the child within the ‘new’ family were stressed in the nationalist pedagogy of Satischandra Chakraborty. Interestingly, rearing and educating the child in this context referred essentially to the male child; whatever little education the girl child received was not for her self development but only what was appropriate for socializing her into the assigned familial roles. Even the educational proposal for women was charted out in the manner which could only further assert her stereotype image beyond her claim to be an autonomous being.

Charaborty, Pyne and Bandyopadhyay compiled women’s diaries and memoirs written in the 19th and 20th centuries which recorded both the extent of women’s subordination to the patriarchal system as well as their quest of self-identity. Forbes explored the tensions encountered by women who went out into the public sphere during the colonial days with reference to the biographical details of Dr. Haimabati Sen and brought out the contradiction between women being allowed to participate in the outside world and yet sought to be kept within the overall authority of the patriarchal arrangement.

In Tagore, argued Sarkar, one finds an enlightened attempt at a progressive redefinition of the notion of ‘masculinity’ through Nikhilesh (in Ghare-Baire) who respected the autonomy of the woman and persuaded her to come out of her seclusion in search of a complete human self. This arguably represented the true spirit of the social reforms of nineteenth century Bengal and yet their limitations on the ground were


7 Ishita Chakraborty et al (2005) Naishshabdo Bhenge (Breaking The Silence), Stree, Kolkata

manifest in the reformist initiatives of Vidyasagar, the other stalwart of Bengal renaissance.\textsuperscript{9} Vidyasagar, Sarkar pointed out, sought scriptural as well as legal sanctions for his reform measures which put serious constraints upon any long term change in gender relations.\textsuperscript{10} According to Samanta, this had to be accounted for largely in terms of the judicial and administrative structures in a major way built on the tenets of Hindu scriptures and the Sharia laws leaving Vidyasagar with no other option but to invoke scriptural authority in defending his position.\textsuperscript{11}

Continuing this for the hindrances to this project of liberating the women from the domestic confines, Ghosh drew attention to the failure of many front-ranking reformist leaders to follow these precepts in their personal lives. Even the \textit{Tattwabodhini Patrika}, the mouthpiece of the Brahmos – admittedly the most progressive section of the then Bengali society – carried caustic comments on a proposal for women’s higher education.\textsuperscript{12} Chatterjee argued that the Bengali middle class intelligentsia never fully embraced the colonial modernity for they perceived themselves as only its recipients rather than its makers; hence the distinction between ‘our modernity and their modernity’ persisted all along. They also maintained a strong sense of affinity with the ‘glorious past’ which in fact became the source of an alternative to this modernist vision emphasizing a strict public-private separation and putting the onus of upholding the spirit of tradition primarily upon its womenfolk.\textsuperscript{13} Mukhopadhyay delved deeper into the socio-economic context of this reformist project and contended that this cultural transformation took place in the backdrop not of vibrant industrialization but of decline of indigenous industries on one hand and the Permanent Settlement giving birth to a new landed

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{9} Sumit Sarkar (2002) \textit{Beyond Nationalist Frame}, Permanent Black, New Delhi.


\textsuperscript{13} Partha Chatterjee (2000) \textit{Itihasher Uttaradhikar (The Legacy Of History)}, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata.
\end{flushleft}
aristocracy on the other which provided the key to these vacillation on the part of the Bengali elites and selective absorption of the values of Western modernity.\textsuperscript{14}

Murshid gave us an account of the entry of the middle class Bengali women into the public arena and their participation in an ever-widening range of activities in the second half of twentieth century. But the his conclusions as to whether this new exposure had made any change to the social standing of the Bhadramahila were not very clear.\textsuperscript{15} Sudakshina Ghosh too seemed to lament that in spite of the flowery myths woven around the Bengali women, their status as human beings remained far from confirmed; moreover, though a good many of them had made their mark in the field of literary writings, the level of consciousness necessary to firmly put forth the claim for equality in social life remained elusive as yet.\textsuperscript{16}

Now, to turn next to the second part of our survey, portrayal of women in various media forms have produced a wealth of literature (compiled in several ‘Readers’) and reached certain general conclusions: the portrayal was generally negative (though coverage of resistance against the dominant representations was not altogether absent);\textsuperscript{17} women projected as ‘strong’ remained so only within patriarchal terms; gender identity of women legislators was played up at the cost of their public activities;\textsuperscript{18} films captured women not as subject but objects of others desires; and TV soaps depicted women in vaguely ‘universal’ terms lifting them out of the class or racial contexts.\textsuperscript{19}

In the Indian context, Bathla observed that issues critical to women’s lives remained largely missing in the media; those which are covered remained event-oriented and bound by media ‘routines’. Crime/violence against women was reported but not

\textsuperscript{14} Subodh, Kumar Mukhopadhyay (1998) \textit{Bangalee Madhyabitta O Taar Manaslok (The Bengali Middle Class And Its Psycho-world)}, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata.


necessarily as something that represented social disorder or threatened public peace. On the other hand, women’s existence within the private sphere and the underpinnings of the patriarchal structure remained underexposed; women’s organizations and movements also received inadequate space.\textsuperscript{20} Pandey drew attention to the male domination of the media industry as a major factor accounting for this state of things.\textsuperscript{21}

Finally coming to the treatment of women in films, Chatterjee pointed towards the projected marginalization of the role and importance of men in women’s lives in the films of Aparna Sen as a way of transgressing the patriarchal values and morality.\textsuperscript{22} In a second work which published much earlier she maintained that while the mainstream Hindi movies usually focused on men’s adultery while deifying women by harping on their sacrifice, in some cases women too had been shown to engage in adulterous behaviour arguably in order to assert their autonomy and self-identity vis-à-vis their husbands.\textsuperscript{23} Prasad in an interesting work argued even Hindi films which focus on the middle class remained rooted in the values of Bengali middle class (the directors in many cases themselves being Bengalis) and dealt with issues such as the space problem, post-marital conflicts and threats to class identity.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Research Gap}

Our brief overview of the literature concerned reveals two major research gaps regarding the problem identified above. While the analysis of the construction and dissemination of the stereotype of \textit{Bhadramahila} have been rich and variegated, the treatment was


\textsuperscript{22} Shoma, A Chatterjee (2002) \textit{Parama And Other Outsiders : The Cinema Of Aparna Sen}, Parumita Publications, Kolkata


\textsuperscript{24} M, Madhava Prasad (1998) \textit{Ideology Of Hindi Film : A Historical Construction}, Oxford University, New Delhi.
predominantly historical – in the backdrop of the nineteenth century – and in-depth inquiry into the developments of the twentieth century, especially in the post-independence period, remained scant and sketchy. On the other hand, academic works dealing with the potentially powerful role of films in constructing and disseminating notions of women’s identity, with reference to the Bengali middle in particular, remained few in number. Some of these (e. g. Shoma A Chatterjee’s) generated useful insights which need to be pursued further by linking them to their historical background. The present research project seeks to take some humble steps in that direction.

**Research questions**

The researcher proposes to address the following research questions in this work:

- How far has the portrayal of women in Bengali films been influenced by the middle class discourse?
- How has the women’s role been portrayed within the private familial sphere?
- How have the relationships between women and their (i) husbands; (ii) children and (iii) in-laws been depicted?
- How do the films treat the question of denial of a ‘space’ to women inside the family?
- How do the films grapple with the issue of women’s marginalization in the public life?
- How has the ‘liberation’ of women been captured?
- What were the limitations of these visions of ‘liberation’?
- How far has the women’s overall status as ‘human being’ been represented in the films?
Methodology

The thrust of the project would be analytical, evaluative and comparative. A sample of Bengali films made in second half of twentieth century especially from 1970’s to 1990’s would constitute the primary data to be supplemented by books, journals and film review articles. The 1970s marked the rough beginning of new social movements (focusing on non-class identities) in India – of which women’s movement constituted a significant part; hence the focus on the said time period. The material would be explored thorough qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. Since the whole project deals with Bengali cinema, our analysis will be based on three kinds of comparisons. To have different and variegated images of Bengali Bhadramahila our comparative study will look at certain Hindi films for supplementing certain image gaps in Bengali cinema. The second comparison will be made between the Bengali films and some popular television shows and mega serials for having contemporary references. The third category of comparison will include literary works and popular newspapers articles to relate Bengali film narratives with contemporary thought currents.

About Films

In course of the evolution of the Bengali cinema some films have directly dealt with women’s question in terms of changing status of middle class Bhadralok in Bengali society. In this study fourteen such films have been selected, viz. ‘CHARULATA’, ‘STREER PATRA’, ‘GHARE-BAIRE’, ‘CHOKHER BALI’, ‘PRATIDWANDI’, ‘JANA ARANYA’, ‘MAHANAGAR’, ‘PARAMA’, ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’, ‘UNISHE APRIL’, ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’, ‘ANU’, ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ (see appendix). These fourteen films have almost covered the identity question of middle class women in various manners in Bengali cinema. But there are other films which are not necessarily focused on women’s issues though some of images of these films have been brought into the discussion to illuminate the subject which included ‘SHAPMOCHAN’, ‘SURJOTORAN’, ‘SAT PAKE BANDHA’, ‘PARASH PATHAR’, ‘DAHAN’, ‘ADALAT O EKTI MEYE’, ‘YUGANTO’, ‘SUBARNALATA’,

CHAPTERIZATION

The first chapter falls in two parts: the first part introduces the historical account of the evolution of Bengali middle class Bhadralok and the question of women’s identity in Bhadralok discourse, the later part deals with the question of representation of women in general and middle class women in particular in media and films. The second chapter discusses the theoretical issues relating to women’s identity as an individual. The third chapter analyzes the historical backdrop of the emergence of the notion of Bhadramahila. The fourth chapter focuses on her role in the inner familial domain as captured in the films. The following chapter explores the familial relationships and the women’s location inside them. The six chapter highlights the portrayal of women’s experiences in the public domain along with the question of her emancipation. The last chapter addresses the overall issue of women’s status as human beings as it emerges from the scanning the films in our sample.