Chapter One

THE BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN
IN MEDIA AND FILM

No doubt that all forms of struggle so far has been fought someway or other, whatever their immediate goal, to address the core idea of identity. If the nation-state is the manifestation of one’s collective identity, then it will be unjustified for not to recognize one’s own individual identity in society. It is believed that a person’s right could well be secured by recognizing his political rights which is based on the famous notion of Aristotle that man is a political animal. But when a person has the political rights, what does he actually achieve? It is important because recognition of one’s right allows a person to represent himself in civic and public life. In ancient Greece, politics was considered as the master science, in that respect political rights is something which includes other aspects of human life because man is essentially a political being. In ancient Greece man’s individuality lay in his political identity. From that time political rights have enjoyed the predominant position in the discourse of rights. Even rights in general are associated with the concept of representation which ultimately addresses the notion of individuality or self identity of a person. In his writings Aristotle particularly emphasized the actual modes of participation which make a citizen, a citizen. In his language, “citizens, in the common sense of that term, are all who share in the civic life of ruling and being ruled in turn.” Aristotle carefully defined participation in the civic public life in terms of direct participation in civic affairs. But the family/private sphere is not included within this framework; it remained outside of the notion of civic-public life. If participation is meaningful in terms of individual rights, then the system of rights is limited within the public sphere, it does not have the significance in the private sphere of family.

In ancient Greece there was no difference between state and society so that each and every social aspect was part of the polis. As we know, in modern political systems there is a clear difference between the state and society where state is a separate institution and society is constituted by public and private spheres. Even though the modern rights system does not incorporate the sphere of family within its scope which implies, individuality is a matter of one’s representation in the public domain as the individual rights can be located within the public sphere alone. But the question remains that if identity is a matter of the public domain then what about the status of those who belong primarily to the family? If women are primarily thought of as confined beings of the family then how can we address their question of individuality? Moreover, if they remain within the family, what kind of status do they enjoy? To address these questions we have to thoroughly examine women’s status in terms of specific socio-cultural background. But in particular case of Bengali middle class women we should study the emergence and nature of Bengali middle class and how the identity question of middle class women represented in theoretical discourse as well as in media and film. To study Bengali middle class we have to pay attention to the ontological and epistemological understanding of the class, then we interrogate the images of middle class women in Bengali cinema.

**EMERGENCE AND NATURE OF THE BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS**

According to Lawrence James, a disposition for debate is one of the reasons why it is hard to pin down the middle class. It has never been a homogeneous body, rather a sprawling, untidy organism in a perpetual state of evolution. It is the common concerns and visions which give continuity and coherence to the history of the middle class. But at the same time there were disagreements among the members of the class over the primacy of individualism, between idealism and pragmatism and between empirical science and religious faith. The impulse to challenge and question, according to James

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2 In modern political theory state is supposed to be the institution which protects the rights of individuals. Political rights emerged as the first generation of rights and politics is mainly thought off as the matter of public sphere so that even in modern rights system private sphere of family remains beyond the sphere of rights.
meant that the middle class never fell under the spell of any single dogma.  

From this standpoint, when we examine the making of Indian middle class there are similarities as well as differences in the emergence of middle class in India and the similar developments in other parts of the world.  

The most important difference in case of Indian middle class with that of rest of the world is that it emerged in the context of colonial rule. The middle class in India was essentially a product of the British rule. It was only by using ideas and institutions which came with colonial rule, and because of social changes and disruptions initiated by colonialism, that a group of western educated men, from the upper strata of the society came to constitute them as a middle class.  

But modernity in India was imposed in the form of colonial rule; as a result colonial modernity did have its own limitations: it never totally rejected the tradition because the modernity was partial. In this version of western modernity Indians had no representation; we were just passive recipients of it.  

So the middle class emerged as distinctive social entity with a perfect blend of tradition and modernity. Its belief in modernization coexisted with older hierarchies and its belief in progress was simultaneous with its advocacy of tradition. 

In his seminal work on the Indian middle classes, B. B. Misra presented before us a rich introduction to the history of the commercial, landed, educated and professional ‘middle classes’. His study of the Indian middle class to a large extent concurs with earlier assumptions of colonial administrators. Misra, like the British officials before him, saw the middle classes in colonial India simply as a product of English education, rule of law and the capitalist economy introduced by the British in India.  

As a social category it is not possible to define Indian middle class from a particular economic perspective.


5 Ibid.  Pp. 09-10  


Instead of being a fixed sociological category bounded by income or occupation, Wahrman argues that in Britain “the precise social referent of the notion of ‘middle class’ was far from well defined, and indeed this vagueness often served the purpose of its users”. But there is also a point of contention because in every era there are some people whose place is in the middle rank of society, between the higher and lower strata in terms of their socio-economic position. But the emergence of middle class as a distinct social group is bound up with the development of capitalism. From a Marxist point of view it is argued that with the development of the capitalist system a section of people without involving themselves in manual labour and directly participating in the productive system, played a contributory role by providing various services for the maintaining the system. In other words, the members of the middle class do not belong to the labouring class but they are very much related with and a contributory factor in the capitalist system. William Wade who published an analysis of the middle class in 1833 which offered the class a new, corporate identity that dispensed with old notions of hierarchy and rank. Wade defined capitalism as wealth employed practically and productively. In that sense for Wade all members of the middle class were capitalists, not because they had surplus cash for investment, but because they were engaged in the generation of wealth. The vast network of capitalism extended beyond those engaged in the funding, production, distribution and sale of goods to all professions. By curing the sick, the doctor made it possible for men and women to work. While belonging to different professions, members of the middle class play this reproductive or contributory role in the interest of capitalism to which Wade draws our attention.

From this socio-economic perspective, we can look at the nature of the Bengali middle class who share some common ground with their other regional counterparts. At the same time it has some other attributes which are unique in its own way. The differences of the Bengali middle class with rest of the country are inevitable in the sense that Bengal was the first province which came under the direct rule of the British. Naturally the Bengali middle class developed much early than in the rest of India. With

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8 Ibid. P. 06

the advent of British rule in Bengal capitalist relations of production were introduced. But capitalism only transformed the land relations; for the first time private ownership of land was legally recognized. On the basis of this new land system a new class emerged in nineteenth century Bengal. Thus the middle class in Bengal was a class which emerged primarily as a new aristocracy for whom land was the most important source of income. The economic revolution which was the key factor in the emergence of middle class in England was not possible in the colonial Bengal, even if indigenous industries were ruined in the imperial interest of Britain. Since there was no scope to invest in modern industry, this new propertied class in the middle of the nineteenth century had no alternative to investing more and more in land and immovable properties. While ruling Bengal, the British established a modern legal and administrative system and for running this machinery they needed a large body of the people who could support this colonial rule by involving themselves in the administration. For this purpose English education was initiated and it was the members of the newly propertied class who mainly participated in it because this class had the power and resources which enabled them to take to modern English education.

The introduction of modern English education was the most important factor in the formation the Bengali middle class, ‘the only civilized group among other uncivilized Indians’. The extent to which the Bengali middle class was able to absorb the values of modernity by receiving western education determined their position as part of the civilized society where persons have cultivated minds and refined attitudes. The term ‘Bhadralok’ was projected against the opposite notion of abhadra or uncultured. From the middle of the 19th century the middle class emerged as a distinct status group in Bengali society. What is important and more significant is that the Bhadralok image changed the public perception of the class but they remained part of the new landed aristocracy, founded in early nineteenth century as the result of permanent settlement.

10 Dr. Subodh, Kumar Mukhopadhyay (1998) Bagali Maddhyabitta O Tar Manaslok, progressive publishers, Calcutta. P. 02


12 Dr. Subodh, Kumar Mukhopadhay (1998) Bangali Maddhyabitta O Tar Manaslok, P. 03
nineteenth century there was also the emergence of the Bengali intelligentsia as the progressive section of middle class who belonged to different professions. The history of the development of the middle class intelligentsia with the spread of education in late nineteenth century Bengal is found in a most interesting study by Binoy Ghosh. By analyzing the census reports he showed that participation within various professions had increased. Though from the census report of 1881 and 1891, there was a clear indication about the growing number of clerks compared to other professionals, still the number of teachers, professors and lawyers had been increased in significant manner, coming from the Bengali middle class. The extent to which the middle class was able to become a class of professionals, by that extent their dependence on land was reduced. By the end of the nineteenth century, the middle class became a class which possessed education, was more or less dependent on land but not interested to participate in manual labour. Their expectation was to get government jobs and get involved in some kind of profession.

But while pointing out the nature of the emerging middle class Ghosh cited the comments of Thomas Hozskin. According to Hozskin, the middle class represents both the characteristics of labour and capitalist class in their nature. It is a general view of the middle class and in particular for Bengal the added dimension was that this section was the offshoot of a distorted version of modernity of colonialism which did not allow this section to think of radical social changes beyond all traditional and conservative values. This is the most vital cause why social reforms movement, projected by this class, was not able to create sufficient conditions for its success.

The term ‘Bhadralok’ can be found in administrative and district magistrate’s reports and they were defined as educated government employees, professionals, rentiers and non-peasant tenant. But the actual discussions on middle class Bhadralok was first found in, as Binoy Ghosh wrote, ‘Bangadut Patrika’ in the number of 13th June of 1829. In that article three main causes were pointed out behind the emergence of middle class: one, increasing rate of land; second, free trade and commerce; finally, the arrival of the

14 Dr. Subodh, Kumar Mukhopsdhayay (1998) Bangali Madhyabitta O Tar Manaslok, P. 04
15 Binoy Ghosh (1979) Banglar Nabajagriti, P. 64
European entrepreneurs in Bengal. From this reference ‘Samachar Darpan’ on 20th June of the same year printed that before the advent of the middle class, property was concentrated in the hands of a few persons and most of the people were living under them. With the emergence of this new class so many social benefits would be created not only for Bengal but for the whole country. The extent to which people would include themselves within this class was the degree to which they would be free. ‘Samachar Darpan’ in this way welcomed the emergence of the middle class because it would ultimately end the domination of aristocracy. Even an article in Amrita Bazaar Patrika of 9th December, 1869, argues that this class is free from all vices of aristocracy, but has brilliantly adopted the positive qualities of that class. They always looked for their own material and intellectual development. It was declared in the article that if there were to be a social revolution, the middle class would lead it.16

But it will be wrong to assume that as a class of professionals the Bengali middle class constitutes a homogenous group. From the very beginning different professions had different types of statuses and incomes. Even in the context of nineteenth century, the middle class was seen as divided into three main sections: higher or propertied middle class, middle class Bhadralok, daridra athacha sat Bhadralok (poor but honest middle class man).17 Here, we should look at the situation in England because it had the direct influence on the Bengali middle class in terms of their social and political understanding. In nineteenth century England, while the English middle class cultivated an image of it as more useful and morally superior to the aristocracy, it looked upwards in matters of guidance on entertainment, taste and manners similar to the upper middle class Bhadralok of nineteenth century Bengal. In England the richest business and professional men flocked into the country side, bought properties there and if they could afford to, lived like rural squires. Lower down the middle class scale there was a similar urge to escape the town for that no man’s land between the urban and the rustic, the suburb;

16 Dr. Subodh, Kumar Mukhopadhayay (1998) Bangali Madhyabitta O Tar Manaslok, Pp. 03, 06-07
17 Ibid. P. 07
something like the condition of lower middle class Bengali Bhadralok often called ‘Daridra Athacha Sat Madhyabitta’.\textsuperscript{18}

The Bengali middle class ultimately refers to a very large body of a hierarchical, heterogeneous, upwardly mobile, cultural community of professionals, bureaucrats and civil servants who emerged as an offshoot of the colonial administration and acted as an intermediary between the British rulers and the common people.\textsuperscript{19} That is why we cannot define middle class in general and the Bengali middle class Bhadralok in particular under Marxist understanding; on the contrary because of the cultural homogeneity, the understanding of this middle class comes closer to its Weberian notion. Whatever be the nature of hierarchy within the class, the most common point of their homogeneity is education, as pointed out by Dr, Subodh Kr. Mukhopadhayay. In England also it was found that education for 19\textsuperscript{th} century English middle class marked by the family ambition was usually distinguished by the concentration of resources on the education of children. Education was both a vindication of a faith in education and an expression of a primal urge to move up in the world. Attending good school was the first stage in any individual ascent, which was why the Victorian public schools were so attractive to the middle class. The same urge was reflected in every middle class family aspiring to send their children to the Hindu college in nineteenth century Bengal.\textsuperscript{20} But from the last decade of nineteenth century there was a clear indication that with the increasing number of educated middle class and their dependence on government jobs created a situation where most of the members of Bengali Bhadralok had to join in lower rank jobs popularly known as clerks. In twentieth century especially in the decade of mid twenties, the socio-economic power of Bengali Bhadralok began to wane. N.C. Chowdhury comments that due to the decline of their socio-economic status the question of cultural superiority and

\textsuperscript{18} Lawrence James (2006) \textit{The Middle Class : A History}, P. 04


\textsuperscript{20} Lawrence James (2006) \textit{The Middle Class : A History}, P. 04
their image as the progressive section was affected in a way that marked the end the glorious era of Bhadralok hegemony over the whole social life of Bengal.\textsuperscript{21}

Perhaps the greatest blow against the Bhadralok superiority over the whole society was the Partition. The partition of Bengal affected the economic power of the class because the partition involved transfer of a large portion of land to East Pakistan, the actual source of their superiority. As a result pressure built for government jobs because there was no other way to survive for the middle class Bhadralok. The only dream for the Bengali middle class in the post-independent era was to somehow to get some job in an office whatever be its rank and status. As there was no option, the destiny of the class was more and more to identify itself with the clerks. The old classical superior image of Bengali Bhadralok was gradually replaced by the image of ‘Kerani’ (clerks) and in 1960’s or 1970’s the image of the Bengali middle class became identical with the status of clerks. In her study Dalia Chakraborty states that for a proper understanding of the status of Bengali clerks it is not enough to indicate their position in the bureaucracy. Because in colonial period their location in the social structure was as much an important indicator of the kind of status clerks enjoyed or to be more accurate the clerks suffered from. In colonial Bengal clerks constituted a different social subgroup in respect of superior position of Bengali Bhadralok. The irony is that in the post-partition era, the middle class which had a rich background, placed under a new and different social structure which reduced their position from a class of superior taste and culture to lower class Kerani. But the pursuit of status was one of the features which defined the middle class who once enjoyed superiority in terms of their social position in society.\textsuperscript{22} Now the question is in such a declining situation, how did they ‘look down’ on the other? Experiences show that on a public level, the middle class pays lip-service to the abstract notion of equality but on another they are still inclined to make private judgements which assume differences of mental worth and intelligence.\textsuperscript{23} Because of the rich aristocratic background, whatever be the position of the Bengali Bhadralok in post-


\textsuperscript{23} Lawrence James (2005) *The Middle Class : A History*, P. 593
independence India it is not possible for them to cherish the idea of equality in a substantive manner. It was the reason that in 60’s and 70’s with all ideological commitments and all forms of movement to change the society failed. These movements never reached beyond the scope of the middle class and were not able to incorporate the other sections, primarily the working class.

In the 1980s, the protagonist of the neo-liberal order the prime minister Mrs. Margaret Thacher advised the people of Britain that they should become less concerned with status and more concerned with performance. The reality for the British citizens in a changing socio-economic condition was also the hard fact for us since partition. Because, now, except little euphoria made by the middle class youth, survival was the most important issue and there was no question for them to be satisfied with their old status and sense of pride. In other words economic necessity became predominant over the cultural aspect of the middle class. As the middle class emerged as a distinct part of an economic class who did not have any socio-historical background as Marx had conceptualized, to that extent the Bengali middle class lost its earlier values and mindset. So there is a new Bengali middle class who are now considered less in terms of other factors beyond economic prosperity. In one of his interviews the famous social scientist Ashish Nandy argues that the emergence of middle class in India as an economic class created some problems. All forms of cultural thoughts and social movements in the past were doubtless initiated by the active leadership of this class. But now hardly any new thought or movement was to be seen where the middle class plays a vital role. If income is the criterion then there are many people could be counted as members of this class but they are by their attitude and outlook closer to the upper sections of the society. Then to what extent could we call these people middle class? We are bound to use that name for them because it is not possible for them to be identified with the working class or lower sections of the society in terms of their income and socio-cultural pattern. On the other hand they cannot be perceived as part of a higher section in society since their income does not match theirs. The term middle class will not cease to exist in the near future in

24 Ashish Nandy’s interview with Shobhan Tarafdar published in Anandabazar patrika on 30th December, 2008
particular for the Bengali middle class whose members still cling to some old values. It would take some more time than the middle class of other parts of the country to outgrow the class identity of Bengali Bhadralok.

Here, another observation of Lawrence James can be mentioned, for whom ‘the middle class remains a sprawling, complex organism in a state of continuing evolution.’ 25 ‘The middle class’s power is still vast and visible. They are considered to be the organizers and servants of society who get things done. The most important aspect of the nature of middle class is that no single philosophy has ever guided the middle class who on the whole, gravitate towards pragmatism and compromise’. 26 For the Bengali middle class too we cannot be sure about their own ideological position because in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali middle class extended their support to the nationalist movement and its main protagonist Indian National Congress and refused to be a part of colonial modernization project. Later, especially after independence middle class Bhadralok was deeply influenced by the radicalism of Marxist political ideology but in the 21st century it will be very difficult to say with any certainty whether the middle class really believes in Marxism as an ideology or it is used only to obtain political power. Throughout its history the middle class has believed in the rights of the individual to think and do as he wished (within the bounds of reason and law) and in government by consent. The middle class insists that the state should protect their rights and property and wish everyone to be free to ascend as far as their talents allow, and for this reason they have an enormous faith in education.27 Bengali middle class in every way followed this general pattern and it continues even today.

But post-partition era witnessed different kinds of impact on politics and society in Bengal beyond the liberal persuasions of Bengali middle class. The extent to which Bengali middle class turned into an economic group it lost the superior hegemonic position in society. Significantly, the declining status of middle class Bhadralok just as

26 Ibid
26 Ibid. P. 593
another economic group allowed other different sections within its fold but that reduced its position as distinct socio-cultural segment in society. Now it is important to know that how the changing position of Bengali middle class affect the identity question of their women. For that, one has to look back to the formative years of early nineteenth century Bengal when the particular image of Bengali women was constructed within Bhadralok discourse.

**WOMEN AND QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN BHADRALOK DISCOURSE**

N.C. Chowdhury relates the decline of position and status in society of the Bengali middle class with the growing participation of middle class women in public life in the second decade of twentieth century. In his words, “now women are trying to find out some jobs in office instead of getting married as the most important event of her life”.28 Does it imply that if the Bengali middle class Bhadraloks were able to maintain their dominant position in society, their women did not need to have come out of the family? The above remark also indicates that in the hey days of the middle class Bhadralok the question of public appearance of their women was not at all taken into account. For women the only important fact in their life was marriage and members of their families, with whom they had to identify their selves. Here also we find the deep influence of English domesticity over Bengali middle class. In England, particularly in early nineteenth century women were expected to be subordinated to her husband’s desires in every respect. Women remained confined to their own sphere, the home where she supervised the household and the early education of her husband’s children. For these tasks she was prepared from girlhood and was conditioned to believe that marriage was the proper consummation of her life. The middle class wife of this period lived under constraints similar to those imposed on her predecessors.29 Lawrence Stone in his study points out that from the advent of the Renaissance in Europe up to early nineteenth century, women’s identity and her feelings received greater attention in public domain.


But in Bengal the situation was different because the very nature of the patriarchal order determined the duties of a woman in a joint family system and shaped her values, opinion, desire everything.  

With the emergence of the Bengali middle class Bhadralok as the progressive section especially in the second half of nineteenth century, there was the need for the men to have the proper female counterpart to suit their social status. In this sense Bhadralok wanted Bhadramahila, and there is little doubt that the bulk of the social reforms movement, initiated by the Bengali middle class, primarily aimed at changing women’s position in society. Bhadramahila, the female counterpart of the Bhadralok, has been used in the broadest possible sense that includes all female members – wives, mothers, daughters and sisters – of the Bhadralok families. But the term ‘Bhadramahila’, signifies more than the counterpart of Bhadralok. The term suggested the ideal image of a woman who possessed certain qualities and for that matter has a particular image in her attitude before public sphere. The construction of Bhadramahila in nineteenth century colonial Bengal was influenced by the image of Victorian lady of nineteenth century England. On the basis of the understanding of Victorian womanhood, Bhadramahila emerged as the moral, desexualized, duty-bound and self-sacrificed being within the middle class discourse. It was the image of a Goddess who is beyond of all worldly desires and needs. Education of women was the part and parcel of it. So in one way social reform movement improved the condition of women to the extent that was appropriate to their role of an ideal wife and mother. In the reform movement attention was paid to maintain stability in gender relations which should not be disturbed by any radical social movement.


So the question of improving women’s status was ultimately reduced to a project which sought to build a progressive image of the Bengali middle class. Bhadramahila was to protect this progressive image and status of middle class Bhadralok by maintaining herself as the civilized gentlewoman. By studying nineteenth century manuals, written by both men and women authors, we find particular emphasis laid on how women could become good wives who were subordinated to their husbands and ideal mothers who are ready for any amount of sacrifice for her children.\textsuperscript{35} It may be noted, in case of England, the Evangelicals, the most renowned social group of nineteenth century British society, considered the home to be the seedbed of godliness and in this context the wife was paramount. It was in the nursery that spiritual awareness first took root and it was the highest duty of motherhood to cultivate it. There were volumes of advice, like the Bengali manuals, on the conduct of a Christian household and on how parents, in particular mothers, should instruct their offspring. Perhaps the most revealing vision of the evangelical home is in Mrs. Sherwood’s novel ‘The History of the Fairchild Family’ or ‘The Child’s Manual’ which first appeared in 1818. It provides a fascinating insight into the evangelical view of how the young should be brought up, as well as a picture of everyday life within what the authoress considers an ideal household.\textsuperscript{36} As we know that it was the Evangelicals who propagated for the improvement of the condition of people in colonial Bengal and provided active support in expanding education for the natives. It was quite natural that middle class intelligentsia was influenced by the Evangelicals’ idea about women and her place in family.\textsuperscript{37} Like Bengali manuals, in England popular journalism was joining forces with another, equally powerful agent of social conformity, parental pressure. The upbringing of a middle class girl was an apprenticeship for marriage; it was her destiny and the means by which she justified her existence and took her place in the world.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{36} Lawrence James (2006)  \textit{The Middle Class : A History}, P. 214


But the growing nationalist sentiments in Bengal put Bhadramahila in a situation where her status was shifted from the custodian of class status towards the protector of spiritual nationalist culture. In the nationalist age, the image of Bhadramahila was defined against all modernization attempts which could affect the nationalist character of Indians. It was held that family was the spiritual domain of the nation and women should maintain the spiritual identity of the nation. A strong case was made stressing the need for educated women to develop such womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience, and the labours of love. The ideological point of view from which such protestations of ‘femininity’ were made did not allow women a place in public affairs but made strict distinction between public and private domains. There was also the answer in favour of women’s seclusion from the public domain which pointed out that in colonial context; the public was essentially a domain of colonial rulers where natives were in subordination to them. The family was the real sovereign domain for the natives and women should remain in that sphere which is free from colonial oppression and subordination. In the nationalist era, the ‘spiritual’ signs of women’s femininity were clearly marked in their dress, their eating habits, their social demeanour, their religiosity. But interestingly, nationalism used the Goddess image of Bhadramahila in a more gorgeous manner to portray the symbolic understanding of nation. Obviously such an attempt of nationalist politics created a condition in which women could get a sense of public political spirit though it did not mean they were allowed to actively participate in political movements. They played their role by providing symbolic representation to the movement, but in reality they were more and more confined within the private sphere in the name of preserving national identity.

From early nineteenth century women had been considered not as individuals but as the symbol of either class status or national identity. In the post-war period, when economic pressure became the hard fact for the middle class Bhadralok, forcing Bengali women to come out from their families into the public sphere. It could be an ideal situation to assert their identity beyond their familial roles and identities but that did not

happen because family retained its values in women’s lives and their appearance in public has been justified in terms of family necessity. So familial need was the main concern for women in finding a job, not her quest of self-identity. In the course of the development of the middle class, the wife, in most of the cases, was exempted from the burden of paid work: she was supported and protected by her husband as it happened in case of the Bengali middle class women. Given to such arrangement in terms of responsibilities between husband and wife, the Bengali middle class women did not have the same status and position of their male counterpart. She was revered as the Goddess of the hearth who provides a comfortable and tranquil refuge from the hurly-burly of work. She supervised servants and the purchase of victuals, bore children, guided her sons through infancy and trained her daughters for their eventual duties as wives and mothers and played the part of the hostess. If these are the essential features of middle class wife in general, Bengali Bhadramahila in particular cannot be an exception. As Ruskin observed in ‘Sesame And Lilies’, her life was wholly devoted to her husband’s happiness and in this she gladly embraced ‘self-renunciation’ and what he called ‘the modesty of service’. The admission of young women into the masculine world of business and administration was a concession to necessity. The home and not the office remained the focus of a woman’s aspirations. This message was reiterated in the growing number of cheap weekly magazines that first appeared in the 1890s and catered to lower middle class girls and housewives.

Not only the middle class but it is a common tendency among every community to consider their women as a symbol of their identity. Any kind of sanction or moral dictum can be imposed on them in the name of community or nation. Even women’s

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41 Ibid. Pp. 346-347

There is hardly any difference in the experience of Bengali middle class women between the post-war scenario and that at the end of twentieth century. For the most talented woman having modern outlook, home remains the prior than her job and career. Even society also put emphasis on such role of women. Very few persons are there who support careerist women. Most of us criticise them for violating the ideal image of middle class women. In the film ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ which represents the last decade of twentieth century Bengal reiterated such view of society. In the film Sujata, tells her friend Aditi that women’s liberty is determined by men and men cannot allow her to be free from all familial responsibilities and if a woman does not accept this situation then there is no other way but to remain alone, leaving everything, her husband, her children, even her own home which she builds. Sujata’s observations about the attitude of middle class men regarding the image of women suggests the existence of stereotype understanding of femininity even at the beginning of new millennium.
status and position in society merely serves the role of an indicator in development discourse. It may create a situation where she could achieve the objective conditions of freedom implying abolition of all legal and institutional barriers but this condition does not lead her towards self-emancipation, vital to her own identity. The notion of emancipation is related to the question of all ideological, moral subordination of a person. Subjective freedom is the most important factor regarding women’s self-identity. The dilemma for the middle class wife is that she is free from all legal subordination but she is still subject to moral and ideological restrictions imposed by her family, school, above all the society itself. But it is also true that in nineteenth century Bengal a new culture emerged which raised a lot of promises regarding women’s issues. Unfortunately this culture within a very short span began to propagate old values which confined women in family and subordinated them either in terms of their class status or national identity. We shall back with detailed study about the social construction of Bhadramahila and her image of Goddess in chapters three and four. But, now we look at the cultural representations by which the image of Bhadramahila was maintained and further asserted in a greater manner beyond the sphere of middle class gentry. No doubt, Bengali film remains most important in this regard in representing Bhadramahila as a socio-cultural construction. After all Bengali film narratives in general, in almost every way represented the middle values developed in Bengal since nineteenth century. Before going into Bengali films however it would be interesting to look at how women are being represented in the wider media which is largely related to the general image of women in film.

**WOMEN’S IMAGE IN MEDIA**

To begin with, ‘media’, in a neutral sense, means that something is in the middle, ‘in between’, serving as a bridge to connect the space between two or more things, and transmitting particular messages and information. Media of communication are not hollow, empty, receptacles that connect addresser and addressee. Rather media are dynamic entities that actively shape and reshape the world. In other words domains such
as culture do not merely use media but instead are used by media and created by them. When we deal with media, we need to distinguish between the print and electronic media before discussing women’s image as represented by media. It is very difficult to say that what kind of media is more effective than the others. At least we should accept the fact that both electronic and print media, in their own ways, have exerted influence over society. In portraying women, how do the media in general pick up the issues? It is found that events often get more media attention if women are the major victims. On 31 March, 2009 a District Court announced its verdict on Dhantala issue which occurred on 5 February, 2003. It may be recalled that the incident involved robbery and rape of women on a bus. But people might not have remembered the incident had the media not paid enough attention to it. The most important reason for media attention was the incident of rape. There are many instances of robbery but unlike the Dhantala incident those do not get wider media attention. Since women were victimized media became more active in this case. The famous Jessica Lal murder case remains another pertinent instance. She had been killed in a bar and the convicted persons belonged to some of the most influential families, both economically and politically. Initially because of their economic and political clout all the convicts were released. But due to the pressure of media and from the people of all corners of the society, the case was reopened and ultimately the accused were punished. Here again Jessica Lal was a model and above all a woman; but if a man was killed in place of her, media probably would not have paid that much of attention. It is the victimisation of women that mainly attracts media to play up such incidents. In other words, to get popularity the media tries to cover the victim image of women as much as possible. Because it conforms to our understanding of women in patriarchal societies where women are considered to be the weaker sex and a vulnerable category.

But the representations of such incidents against the weaker sex mainly reflected sexism in media. That is why Sonia Bathla comments that most issues regarding women are missing on the media agenda and those which are covered are mainly event-oriented,

like rape, suicide which easily fit into the media’s routine with minimum effort. In event-oriented coverage, the structures that perpetrates oppression on women are left unquestioned and ‘issues’ appear simply as ‘accidents’ or ‘incidents’. It is supported by the observation of Mrinal Pande who shows that between 1982 and 1987 Doordarshan began to commission serials and programmes that would nudge the collective social conscience of Indian T.V. viewers and help them see women the way they really were, not as faceless mothers and workers or mere playthings. Serials like Adhikar, Aur Bhi Hain Rahein, Udaan were screened. According to her analysis, although all these serials proved to be popular, the most popular programme was Ramayana, a commercially sponsored serial by a commercial film maker on the mythological tale of Rama and Sita. Since sponsors were looking not for social message but for viewership ratings, the socially relevant serials usually did not get a renewal of their contract. Indeed, to secure renewal they had to look for commercial sponsors. Gradually all of these features and serials disappeared because the sponsors, mostly the makers of chocolates, soaps and toothpastes were all for loud entertainment, consisting of spicy film extracts or else religious mythology. Due to the support of the sponsors Ramayana went on to dominate the small screen for months and ran into several hundred episodes and was then followed by the another equally crude small-screen version of Mahabharata which too had no dearth of sponsors.

So it is the structure, in Marxist sense, which reproduces the traditional women in the government controlled media, like Doordarshan that served the dominant interest of the society along with their economic interest. It is not possible for the media like Doordarshan to go beyond the liberal-capitalist structure and representing different images of Indian women. Because to serve the economic interest of the dominant section it is necessary to represent women in a most traditional manner and state owned media is bound to do that to spread and sustain market economy. On the basis of this structural constraint whatever be the nature of representations, that is bound to be considered as the part of a political superstructure.


But the structure which maintains the dominant interest of the society could generate reactions at the level of the political structure. In this sense every kind of representation is political because such representations may support the dominant interest or stand against it. In case of women, the question of representation is subject to the very definition and decisions of others which are likely to produce definitions of their own interest. In a patriarchal society it is not very difficult to find who these others are but the men. To define womanhood according to men’s own interest there is hardly any need for instituting a deliberate process of oppression because it may just seem to be ‘common sense’ that women should have babies and cook, or that they should wish to totter around on high heels to make themselves attractive to men. This appears to be the natural order of things. If women are defined as wives and mothers to the exclusion of their work outside the home, if they are judged by their sexual attractiveness to the exclusion of their moral and intellectual qualities, if they are defined as inferior to men, then they cannot receive fair representation in society.\footnote{45 Margaret Marshment (1993) ‘The picture Is political : Representation Of Women In Contemporary Popular Culture’ in Richardson, Diana & Robinson, Victoria (Edited) \textit{Introducing Women Studies}, MacMillan, London. Pp. 123-124} In India the portrayal of Sita is so popular because she is somehow identical with the traditional mythological image of women as wife and mother.

Here we need to explore the relation between reality and representation. At the simplest reflective level, where this ‘reflection’ is felt to be accurate the recognition involved can be a considerable source of pleasure: we all seem to enjoy the sense that an artist, in whatever medium, has got it right to capture the texture of real-life experience. At the same time representation has to maintain some critical distance with reality itself. If representation becomes identical to reality, in that case we may not understand what reality actually is. What is more significant here is the regime of representation, as it concerns gender in our society, the range and frequency of particular types of representation, the extent and nature of omissions, the meanings attached to particular types of representation, the way these meanings are produced a reproduced in specific contexts, and how representation of women compare and relate to representation of men. In theory it is very difficult to establish a ‘truth’ against which representations can be
judged. In practice, we accept that we must make judgements about how accurate and fair representations are. All representations require principles of selection, omission, emphasis, explanation, context which are all processes that produce meaning and it is not always of primary importance whether the end result accurately reflects reality or not.46

Media, as scholars from Marshall McLuhan to Elizabeth Eisenstein to Friedrich Kittler have pointed out, are not so neutral; specific media actually alter the very information being transmitted; and there is no concrete easily definable distinction between the medium and the message. James Carey’s important essay, ‘A Cultural Approach to Communication’ offers a useful understanding of the power of media as he discusses the difference between the commonly held idea of a transmission view of communication – whereby information is ‘sent’ or ‘imparted’ and arrives relatively unaltered – in contrast to what he calls the ritual forms.47 So in representing the popular image of Sita involves certain omissions and emphases conforming to the socio-cultural understanding of Indian women. In western media also, sexual violence which projects women’s victimhood image as pointed out by Jenny Kitzinger, still makes ‘good copy’ for newspapers. According to her observation, instead of virginal Eliza Armstrong or the spectator of ‘Jack The Ripper’ we now have, in the UK, sex murders and murdered children in the 1960’s, the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’, who raped and murdered at least 13 women before he was caught in 1980. High profile events in the USA include the 1984, ‘Big Dam’ trial which involved the gang rape of a women in a tavern, which inspired the film ‘The Accused’ and the 1989 brutal assault on a jogger in central park. But the most sensational media coverage was obviously the trials of boxer Mike Tyson and William Kennedy Smith, where both faced accusations of rape.48 The most common aspect in all such events is women’s victim image which justifies the notion of women as weaker sex.

It is true that media exposure is important to inform and provoke public awareness, debate and policy responses but on the other hand, such media coverage can

46 Ibid. pp. 129-130


decontextualize, abuse, promote stereotypes of women, blame victims and excuse assailants.\textsuperscript{49} That is why some feminists ask for a redefinition of the values of patriarchy, to redefine ‘positive’ and ‘powerful’ in feminist terms. Representations that demonstrate the causes of women’s subordination and strength of women in enduring, subverting and challenging oppression may be seen as both ‘realistic’ and ‘positive’. But for that they need to struggle against the signifying codes of power in our culture which have defined strength as those qualities possessed predominantly by men and then defined masculinity as connoting these qualities. Again, to substitute male for female, as Greselda Pollock argues, within a text does not necessarily shift the meanings attached to one gender over to the other.\textsuperscript{50} When Katzinger shows the event-based news is the ‘good copy’ for newspapers, she does not forget to inform us about the growing dilution of routine abuse of women from media coverage. If routine abuse quickly ceased to be news, that does not, however, mean that certain ‘angles’ on the story do not gain a hearing. A new angle has often been provided by controversial allegations and the rise of a new form of scepticism. The mainstream representations of sexual violence fail to address the radical strategies for expelling this from society. Instead, these representations are often marked by a kind of token solution to the problem. This involves much distorted reflections of the nature of sexual violence, with an emphasis on stranger-danger and a tendency to attribute sexual violence to only certain type of ‘person’.\textsuperscript{51} The media largely failed to establish a link between sexual violence, masculinity and normal heterosexuality; rather it often took the opposite track. The rape of women or girls is not treated as a ‘heterosexual’ crime, however; attacks on boys are often labelled ‘homosexual’.\textsuperscript{52} The media is not free from politics and its own political agenda against women.

The subordinate position of women vis-à-vis men is essentially reflected in their images of wife and mother. At the same time they are also vulnerable to the ideological

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Margaret Marshment (1993) ‘The picture Is political : Representation Of Women In Contemporary Popular Culture’ Pp. 131-132


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. P. 29
and moral code of conduct if not a victim of physical rape. That traditional image of women along with their image as victims is an integral part of the representation which projects women as the weaker sex. It is not only confined to the media reports or mythological serials like Ramayana. A detailed analysis of soap operas revealed that prime time soaps do represent a version of a universal female condition which cuts across age, race and class and allows women to recognize each other across the barriers. It is also clear however, that soap’s pleasures are based on highly conventional notions of women’s skills, their role in the family or community and the notion that they should look for fulfilment albeit often unsuccessfully, in the personal sphere. From this standpoint if we go through the contemporary Bengali soaps one finds full of images where women are projected as the image of ‘Devi’ who is either ready for all kind of sacrifices to save her in-laws (for example the character of Ipshita in ‘Bandhan’) or to put her all power to save life of her husband (the character in the serial of ‘Durga’). What is significant that in constructing the image of Devi typified with our cultural notion of Bengali women does not allow going and thinking beyond the sphere of family and familial relations. Bengali popular soaps are no exception compared to their other vernacular counterparts. Now it should be examined how cinema in general and Bengali cinema in particular projected the image of women. Here the most important question is: does it do it differently from other kinds of media?

**FILM AS FORM OF REPRESENTATION AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN FILM**

Pierre Sorlin in his article ‘How to Look at a “Historical” Film’ argued that the study of cinema considered as a document of social history which without neglecting the political or economic base aims primarily at illuminating the way in which individuals and groups of people understand their own time. Audiovisual material reaches the senses and establishes communication through a combination of moving pictures and sounds,
particularly television and the cinema - is a part of our daily life. It is a source of much of our knowledge, information and entertainment. The extent to which film is able to communicate itself to the audience, to that extent it can spread its message or some form of image, in its own way. Films do not merely appear on a screen, rather they only exist in any real sense as far as they are watched, becoming part of the fabric of our lives. It is argued that film viewing is a social activity that alters our interactions in the world. Film has the power to create conditions where even if viewers do not know the people next to them in the movie house, their outlooks on the world and thus also their social interactions have been changed because of the film they have seen. In this sense, compared to other audiovisual material, film has the power to change the belief system of a group irrespective of their position in society. They come away believing, variously, that all Arabs really are terrorists or that Roman Catholic mothers are all rigid, intolerant and their children are in dire need of liberation. While most cinemagoers rationally know the difference between the ‘screened world’ and the ‘real world’ and will really reaffirm the split in exit polls, the veil between worlds is surprisingly transparent and the ‘two worlds’ thesis given above breaks down readily. Film across the world and in ways unthinkable even one hundred years ago, has changed our georeligiosity.

Here we need to analyze film as audiovisual material in relation with culture and ideology. Greame Turner in his influential work *Film as social practice* describes two broad categories of culturalist approaches to the relation between film and culture: textual and contextual. The textual approach focuses on the film text or a body of film texts and ‘reads’ from them information about the cultural function of film. For example, Andrew Tudor’s work on film movements is text-based; his initial premise is that the texts of German expressionism or Italian neo-realism have something in common which can be understood as expressions of particular aspects of these cultures. Genre criticism was also initially text-based, even though it may attempt to trace changes in genres to their sources within the culture producing them. In general, these textual approaches are responding to

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54 Pierre Sorlin (2001) ‘How To Look At An “Historical” Film’ in Landy, Marcia (Edited and Introduced) *The Historical Film: History And Memory In Media*, Rutgers University press, New Brunswick, New Jersey. p. 25

a set of conclusions about the specific characterizations of the film texts; then operating on the assumption of the cultures ‘authorship’ of the text, they trace the myths or ideologies of the films back to their sources within the culture. Although, there is no hard distinction between the two angles of approach, contextual approaches tend to analyze the cultural, political, institutional and industrial determinants of a national film industry. And although there is again an interest in a particular group of film texts, this is not the primary concern of such approaches. It is the process of cultural production rather than the work of representation that concerns these studies.\textsuperscript{56}

It is simply beyond our capacity to deal with all the determinants necessary to understand fully the cultural aspect obtained at any particular point of film history. That is why for Turner, most discussion has focused on the structure or the theoretical composition, of the relationships. Even the primarily historical accounts are valuable for what they tell us of the structure of the film-culture relationship. The common thread, however, which links the textual and contextual, and makes an understanding of them complementary rather than mutually exclusive, is that both industry and text, the processes of production and of reception, must be in some way related to ideologies. But there is a difference between culture – a way of life – and ideology – a set of beliefs and ideas. In a way any ideology if it wants to get a solid formation in a given context, needs to conform to the larger cultural background. This is the reason why the term ‘ideology’ is itself continually being redefined, contested and explored within all areas of cultural theory. Put at its simplest, we can say that implicit in every culture there is a ‘theory of reality’ which motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on. ‘Ideology’ is the term used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality and although ideology has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relation to our idea of what constitutes an individual. The term is also used to describe the workings of language and representation within culture which enable such formations to be constructed as ‘natural’. According to Turner, films then both as systems of representations and as narrative structures are rich sites for ideological

analysis of film texts; it is important to stress that ideologies structure institutions as well as texts.57

Also, we need to study the question of ideology with respect to representation. It is a problem for many when they first encounter notions of ideology; the argument that they and their identities are culturally constructed is often interpreted as saying that they are not ‘real’. It is difficult to get around the sense that there is some genuine reality out there which ideology prevents us getting at. On the other hand, our only access to reality is through its representation. Even as we look at a landscape we do so through cultural filters which actually order what we see. Representations of the real world are like any other language system, saturated with ideology. However, this ‘real’ which culture on constructions for us to know and live with is no less material in its effects on our lives and our way of seeing the world, does not mean that our relation to the world is in some way false or provisional. There is hardly any simple way to state this problem. However, Richard Dyer approached a specific aspect of it in his concluding remarks in his essay on film stars. Dealing with the notion that beauty is not inherent, even in film stars and that the pleasure beauty generates, is learned rather than being instinctive; even in films, he says, “while I accept utterly that beauty and pleasure are culturally and historically specific and in no way escape ideology, nonetheless they are beauty and pleasure and I want to hang on to them in some form or other”. This is a sensible and instructive reaction to the force of ideology and to the pleasure of film.58

From this theoretical understanding of cinema as a form of representation with its relation of culture and ideology now we proceed to discuss its role in society. Film has a vital role to play in effecting cultural and psychological changes in human consciousness necessitated by the economic and political transformation. Most of debates about the question of representation of historical events continue to be fuelled by the similar concern vis-à-vis the relative merit of documentary or fiction films to represent historical events, while debates about how to represent marginalized subjectivities and unpopular identities have oscillated between the respective merits of fire grounding form or

57 Ibid. Pp. 180-181

prioritizing content. If we look at the most dominant film theory of realism, we notice that it is less a metaphysical problem than a contextual one. While nineteenth century proponents of realism felt able to claim a correspondence between employment of a specific artistic form and the reality it purported to represent, this confidence is no longer possible. Realism is now considered to be a matter of form, with a very debatable relationship to the real. The formal qualities of realist texts that distinguish them, for example, from fantasy or the avant-garde, can be identified, but there are too many differing forms and uses of realism to define realism as such. So as theory, we need to see realism as locally and historically specific which the Hollywood film industry, with its assumption of ‘universal’ criterion of what constitutes reality, tends to obscure this relational view of realism. But it is important to recognize the degree to which all definitions of realism are locally specific exactly which the Hollywood film, with its ‘universal appeal’ is not. In this sense all definitions of realism are necessarily locally contingent, hinging on their fidelity to perceived notions of the familiar and the ‘other’ that constitutes audience’s experiences of one mainstream movie as ‘more realistic’ than another. Here, we could mention what Noel Carroll observes, ‘realism is not a simple relation between films that is interpreted in virtue of analogies to aspects of reality: A film or film style may be deemed realistic because it differs from current films or film styles where the difference is construed as revealing a reality that was formerly hidden or absent’. Carroll maintains that because realism is a term whose application rests upon a historical comparison with other films and film styles, it cannot be used un-prefixed, hence the use of term such as Soviet realism, Neo-realism and ‘Kitchen sink’ realism are all descriptions of attempts to depict a reality that was absent from other styles at the time of the conception of the category.

In our common understanding we place man inside history and depict women as ahistoric and eternal, which pondering the question that in such an atmosphere to what extent realist cinema is different from other styles regarding the projected image of women in films. This question leads us to look at the nature of general representative

59 Julia Hallam With Margaret Marshment Realism And Popular Cinema, Manchester University press, Manchester. P. 33

60 Ibid. P. 11
mode of women in films. According to Claire Johnston there is a far greater differentiation of men’s roles than of women’s roles in the history of the cinema, relates to sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places men inside history and women as ahistoric and eternal. As the cinema developed, the stereotyping of man was increasingly interpreted as contravening the realization of the notion of ‘character’ but it was not the case for women. But from realist understanding we can say that whatever be the universal notion of women as eternal and ahistoric, the forms has to be different in terms of socio-cultural variations. Because of these different forms it is possible for women to enjoy some form of autonomy in some cases.61 Within the sexist ideology and male-dominated cinema, as Johnston puts it, women are presented as what they represent for man.62 In the early and 1970s, many feminist film-makers and film theorists began to discuss women’s historical and cultural position as one of absence from or marginalization to, dominant cultural forms. Using psychoanalytic and semiotic models, they theorized that women have been defined in masculine culture as lack and as other. ‘Women’ is not a subject in its own right but the object by which the patriarchal subject can define himself. Mainstream cinema’s contradictory/complementary representations of women as either idealized objects of desire or as threatening forces to be tamed are not attempts to establish female subjectivity but rather reflect the search for male self definition. Popular forms of filmic discourse, therefore, are said to ‘belong’ to patriarchy, women are silent, without language or voice.63 Laura Mulvey points out, that woman as woman is totally absent, the fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism, woman represents not herself, but by a process of displacement, the male phallus. It is probably correct to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle, in the cinema, woman as woman largely absent.64


64 Claire Johnston (1999) ‘Women’s Cinema As Counter Cinema’ in Thornham, Sue (Edited and Introduced) Feminist Film Theory : A Reader, P. 33
Due of such manipulation woman is largely absent or misrepresented in cinema. In fact there is no such thing as un-manipulated writing, filming or broadcasting. The question is therefore not whether the media is manipulated but who manipulates them. A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear; on the contrary it must make everyone a manipulator. Hans Mugnus Euzensberger suggests the major contradiction operating in the media is that between their present constitution and their revolutionary potential. Quite clearly, a strategic use of media and film in particular, is essential for disseminating our ideas. When a particular film projects that the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification, it in a way implies that the man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense, as the bearer of the look of spectator, transforming it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by women as spectacle. The power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived at the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control in motor co-ordination.

All films or literary works by nature are ideological products. The idea that art is universal and thus potentially androgynous is basically an idealist notion: art can only be defined as a discourse within a particular conjuncture. It is important to point out that the workings of ideology do not involve a process of deception/intentionality. For Marx, ideology is a reality, it is a lie. Such a misapprehension can prove extremely misleading; there is no way in which we can eliminate ideology as if by an effort of will. This is very important when it comes to discussing women’s cinema. The tools and techniques of

65 Ibid. P. 36

cinema themselves, as part of reality, are an expression of the prevailing ideology; they are not neutral, as many ‘revolutionary’ film-makers appear to believe. It is an idealist mystification to believe that ‘truths’ can be captured by the camera or that the conditions of a film’s production. So, what kind of filmic gaze, in terms of both gender representation and gender address, also ‘belongs’ to the male, leaving the female audience to identify with either the male-as-subject or the female-as-object. In this analysis women are left with no active spectatorial position at all. Any pleasure that the female spectator derives from classic realist cinema is false because it is based on woman as an object of someone else’s desire. What is represented before us in the name of real, that is essentially reflected the male bias against women. If it is the universal pattern to represent women in cinema, then in case of Bengali films, the form must be different according to the realist version. But to what extent such forms are different in representing the image of Bhadramahila?

**IMAGE OF MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN IN BENGALI CINEMA**

‘DAHAN’ and ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ two films based on the novels of Suchitra Bhattacharya, portrayed the lives of Romita and Aditi who suffered physical and emotional humiliations in different ways. In ‘DAHAN’, the character Romita, was not only physically assaulted only by some outsiders but even by her husband. In ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, the character Aditi, also is an image, who sacrificed all her desires and wished to fulfil the family demands as an ideal wife and mother. Not only such characters reflected the common understanding of media on the victimhood image of print and electronic media in India, but the above characterizations fit into the popular perception of Bengali people regarding the image of middle class women. Since these two film narratives are the direct offshoot of Bengali literature there is hardly any

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68 E. Deidre Pribram ‘Female Spectator’ in Ryan, Michele (Edited) *Representations Of Women In The Media*, P. 476

difference in the overall approach in the literary form to represent the image of women. It is important because in the history of Bengali cinema there is a close link between film and literature and unfortunately both forms celebrate the victimhood image of women.⁷⁰

What is common in both these novels is the family which is the sphere of women’s subordination by men. This subordination is not necessarily related to any physical punishment but in terms of her so called definition, puts them ultimately as inferior to men. Whatever be their glorified image she is confined within the sphere of family, beyond that there is nothing for her. This family centrism in women’s life is the most important feature in terms of middle class identity; in other words family and women are closely related because without the presence of women, family cannot be a happy place and women’s only place is her family. And there is hardly any doubt that Bengali cinema again and again represented a family centric image of women with the background of the Bengali middle class Bhadralok. We can recall here an article by Rituparno Ghosh, the noted Bengali filmmaker, who argues that it is the family, around which the consciousness of Bengali middle class revolves and they want to reflect it in various other forms like literature and film. Ghosh points out that in the first generation of Bengali films, the middle class was the most important subject to be represented. Middle class Bengalis always wish to see themselves in films and their life remains the main source of the narrative structure for the Bengali film. This is the point of difference of Bengali cinema from that of Hindi film. Here again he relates the particular narrative pattern of Bengali cinema with Bengali literature as he clearly says that this particular pattern was part of the literary works of Saratchandra Chattopadhay, the illustrious Bengali literature. His literary characterizations of father, brother, wife, mother all correspond to the family values of the middle class. It was Saratchandra who celebrated

⁷⁰ In ‘DAHAN’ we find a kind of difference between its literary and film narratives in terms of their narrative patterns. In case of their literary representation we find, all characters in the novels find their proper places and get their deserved attentions in the whole narrative. When the same narrative was chosen for another totally different media, cinema, it has been represented in different manner where the main two female characters Romita and Jhinuk hold the maximum space within the film narrative. They become the main characters around which the film revolved. The other characters, compare to its literary narrative, get less importance. So in the film narrative a kind of injustice has taken place against them. It happens because when a writer writes she represents totally different mode of expression. But in film the director has his own style of representation with different outlook and different motif. The difference between the narrative of literature and film is part of that different outlook between a writer and a director.
the sacrificing image of women which was still popular even in 21st century Bengali film narrative.\(^7\)

How Bengali cinema reflected the common middle class concerning about family and women that is evident in films like ‘CHARULATA’, ‘MAHANAGAR’ or ‘PARAMA’. In ‘CHARULATA’ we find the image of a woman who is confined within the private sphere of family and performs all her duties as a house wife. Her devotion and sincerity are parts of her image of a goddess. In the nationalist era this Goddess image was part of the symbolic portrayal of the nation and women were the custodian of its identity as we find in the image of ‘Makshi Rani’ as constructed by Sandip, a nationalist leader for a woman, Bimala in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’. Since the experience of Bengali women were different from the other parts of the world, the victimhood image was identified with their image of Goddess both as a symbol of sacrifice and power while confined to her ‘own’ world of family. The image of Arati in ‘MAHANAGAR’ who came out of her family, apparently violated that image but it was ultimately the family for which she had to take a job. So family remains prior to everything else and since Arati took the job to support her family as a result her image as goddess got a new shape where she was not confined to the family but still was bound by her familial responsibilities. It is not that no attempt has been made to portray any different image which violates the goddess image of women. For example Parama who violates this image to get into a relationship with another man. But these exceptional images have been portrayed as against the stereotype image of the Bhadramahila and traditional outlook remains unchanged. On the contrary in the Bengali film narratives there is a growing tendency to reaffirm the middle class anxiety for their women.

Not only Bengali films but in the portrayal of the middle class even in Hindi films, remain equally careful about representing an ‘ideal’ image of women because that is integrally connected with the existence of the middle class itself. Any violation against such ideal image of women in middle class film narrative is a threat to their identity. Belonged to this genre, films like ‘Guddi’, ‘Abhiman’ sincerely represented images of women who does not challenge male superiority and remains subordinate to her

\(^7\) Desh Patrika, 4th August, 2001
husband. It takes us back to what Pierre Sorlin observed that if the study of cinema is considered as the document of social history then it is necessary to find a relation with the evolution of the middle class along with their women and their cinematic image. Another important thing is to how such images of women correspond to the social history of Bengal? For that we have to start with the basic social process under which Bengali women and their image is developed.

It is now clear that despite of so many changes in society in last fifty years, the middle class Bhadralok discourse retains its traditional understanding of women. But to consider women either as the symbol of class status or of the nation is a serious violation of her claim to be an individual. In the images of Charu and Bimala in ‘CHARULATA’ and ‘GHARE-BAIRE, directed by Satyajit Ray, we find that while Charu represented the class status of Bhadralok section which was necessary for the class itself to be a dominating part of nineteenth century Bengal, and Bimala represented the symbol of national identity which was part of the growing affinities between the ‘westernized’ middle class with nationalism. But in these two different images the question of women’s own individuality was not recognized. It also suggests that film and media not only represent such phenomena but creates a condition where other possibilities could be automatically suppressed. Actually to represent women in general and the middle class Bhadramahila in particular, media’s approach is hardly different from the societal understanding about them and to a large extent media’s representation of women reflects the traditional victimhood image of Sita and Sabitri. Even if media represent women’s issues they mainly covers those which are event oriented like rape and molestations because such incidents are conducive with increasing media viewership and the real issues are being avoided. On the other hand women’s representation in the film basically reflects the male understanding of women which tends to remain them as eternal and ahistoric, devoid of their own perspective. They are not subject but the object of men’s desire. But beyond every other relational or familial identity, individual identity is the most important part for any human being. Since women have suffered from a kind of

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marginalization for a very long time, it is important to see that how the mainstream political discourse address the question of their claim as individuals.