Chapter Four

REPRESENTATION OF BHADRAMAHILA IN BENGALI FILMS

The historical construction of Bhadramahila was an attempt of middle class Bhadralok to create an image of their women in changing circumstances of nineteenth century Bengal which was ultimately turned into a self-sacrificing moral understanding of Goddess. We have seen in the previous chapter that the goddess image of middle class women was an integral part of the status and position of middle class Bhadralok in nineteenth century Bengal. It was expected that in course of time the Goddess image of middle class women would have changed in the context of changing social position and values of Bengali middle class, particularly in the post independence period. In fact, the era of modernization and nationalism represented two different kinds of attitude of Bengali middle class in nineteenth century Bengali society as discussed in the previous chapter. For example, in ‘CHARULATA’ we find that Charu is the wife of the liberal minded Bhupati who believes in the West-defined notion of progress. Charu’s personality embodies qualities like refinement, gentleness in her appearance along with her education. She also possesses the ability of writing which later becomes the point of interest for her husband. But having all these qualities, as a member of a civilized Bengali middle class, she is not allowed to appear in public, though she tries to have a taste of the public world by peeping and praying through windows. She is totally confined within domestic world and maintains her role as an ideal companion of her husband. She performs all kind of duties towards her husband and family without expressing her desire for herself. The image of Charu as all-enduring and self-scarifying woman was perhaps the best portrayal of the Goddess image of middle class women in early nineteenth century context. Bimala in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ maintains similar life-style until her husband takes initiative for her public appearance. Despite her confinement like Charu, Bimala is able to cultivate her mind by learning western music, studying English from an English lady teacher. Just like Bhupati, in ‘CHARULATA’, Nikhilesh also inspires Bimala, his wife and arranges things by which Bimala could become a truly autonomous
being. Nikhilesh’s attempt to make his wife Bimala appear in the public domain is the most important step in that sense. But Sandip with whom she develops an affinity brings back her again in the private sphere of family by giving her the new title, ‘Makshi Rani’ (the queen bee) which in a way portray her as Goddess who could be exploited for narrow self interest. Apparently, Charu and Bimala seem to be similar in terms of their fate in middle class family but these two women in ‘CHARULATA’ and ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ represent two different ways of constructing the image of Goddess in nineteenth century Bengal, reflecting the age of reforms, and the age of nationalism.¹

But the cinema was the invention of early twentieth century and it was preceded by other cultural artefacts. Through various representations in different cultural artefacts, the image of Bhadramahila further penetrated into society. In nineteenth century Bengal the image of middle class women was represented in various forms in Bengali folk culture. In fact, it was the modern Bengali drama by means of which the image of middle class women appeared in the cultural world for elite Bengali Bhadralok before the advent of Bengali cinema. The modern Bengali drama, as a cultural form played its role to interrogate the social identity of middle class women, while regenerating and disseminating the goddess image of Bhadramahila. To study Bengali films we cannot really bypass the tradition of Bengali drama because of its influential role in the constitution of the cultural world of Bengal. As part of cultural form when we study how Bengali films represent the goddess image of Bhadramahila in course of changing nature of middle class Bhadralok at the same time we should pay little attention to understand how the image of middle class women was represented in the cultural world of nineteenth century Bengal.²

¹ ‘CHARULATA’ is based on the Tagore’s short story ‘NASTANIR’ and ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ is originally a Tagore’s novel of same title. Since literature and film are two different forms, so that the pattern of representation is to be different. In ‘CHARULATA’ Charu is the central character and the narrative revolves around her life whereas the ‘NASTANIR’ is a story where every character finds his own deserving place. In case of ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ the original novel is constituted by the self-revelation of three main protagonists, Bimala, Nikhilesh and Sandip about their relationship. But the film represents the narrative where Bimala is the central character and we see the film through her eyes. Such differences point out to the age old debate between literature and film narrative and their proper relationship.

² There are two main differences between the performing art of drama and the audio-visual form of cinema. In drama or play there is a scope of direct response from the audience which is not possible in film. In cinema, there is virtually no scope for the audience to have direct contact with the actors of the film. Because in auditoriums there is no possibility for the viewers to put their individual opinion to the artists.
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CULTURE AND
MODERN BENGALI DRAMA

The far-reaching changes in society practically reconstructed the cultural world of nineteenth century Bengal. It is often argued that the emergence of new Bengali culture was the product of the greater process of colonization of Bengali society. In many ways this new cultural world was different from the earlier age where modern Bengali drama was an important part of it. But here we need to define the meaning of culture. Culture is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all. Culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. But within this single term, questions of freedom and determinism, agency and endurance, change and identity, the given and the created come dimly into focus. If culture means the active tendency of natural growth, then it suggests dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us. In every culture, there are elements of change and continuity but which will predominate depends on the specific circumstances. At a particular moment a culture may respond to external factors while retaining its core historical values and legacies. In

on their performances. Secondly, technology plays an important role in cinema, in fact in recent times the level of technology in film making has been increased comparing to the world of theatre and drama. Because of such importance if technology the scope for the individual actors to present their talents is less than the scope in theatre and drama where actors have the greater opportunity to show their acting talents. However, both Bengali drama and Bengali film follow the same narrative style and particularly in Bengali film there is a strong influence of Bengali drama and theatre over the story telling and acting style of cinema.


4 According to Marxist understanding, culture brings together both base and superstructure in a single notion perhaps behind the pleasure we are supposed to take in ‘cultivated’ people lurks a race-memory of drought and famine. But the semantic shift is also paradoxical: it is the urban dwellers who are ‘cultivated’ and those who actually live by tilling the soil who are not. Those who cultivate the land are less able to cultivate themselves. Agriculture leaves no leisure for culture. The word ‘culture’ traces a momentous historical transition it also encodes a number of key philosophical issues. In a further dialectical term, the cultural means we use to transform nature are themselves derived from it. Nature itself produces the means of its own transcendence rather as the Derridian ‘supplement’ is already contained by whatever it amplifies. Terry Eagleton (2000) The Idea Of Culture, Pp. 01, 02, 05
the nineteenth century, Bengali culture because of the presence of colonial rule, responded to the external influences but there was always a tendency to preserve its old values and tradition that we find in the second half of the nineteenth century Bengali theatre. In a sense this new Bengali culture and modern Bengali play was the combination of both the modern and traditional values. From the Vedic period, Sanskrit drama was considered to be the main form of traditional Indian culture which also was a part of the ancient literature. But modern Bengali theatre in the nineteenth century was not confined to being just a product of Bengali literature; it acquired a new role of representing the social reality. As a form of culture, the nineteenth century Bengali drama shaped the cultural life of the land in a manner that even influenced another totally different form, the Bengali cinema in twentieth century. Unfortunately, modern Bengali drama in the nineteenth century, unlike Bengali films mainly represented the nationalist age, and failed to reflect the phase of modernization and reformism. Before the advent of nationalism in 1870s, ‘farces’ were the main form to be performed in Bengali theatre which mainly criticized the emerging middle class culture Babu Culture and their social attitude.\(^5\)

Commenting on the ancient Sanskrit plays Keith says, “The Sanskrit drama may legitimately be regarded as the highest product of Indian poetry”.\(^6\) There was hardly any possibility to represent the actual society of ancient India. In this sense, the modern Bengali theatre and drama at least in some way or other portrayed the emerging middle class society in early nineteenth century Bengal. The most important play in which we find the reflection of actual Babu culture was ‘SADHABAR EKADOSHI’, a ‘farce’,

\(^5\) ‘Babu’ refers to a particular section of emerging Bengali middle class in nineteenth century Bengal. Most of the members of the section were belonged to the comprador class of the colonial British merchants to serve their business interest. Gradually this section became the new propertied class in colonial Bengal and because of their social position and status, the British called them Babu. They, on the one way developed certain modern outlook by receiving English education but at the same time established new form of feudal aristocracy which lead them towards moral degradation. ‘Babu Culture’ refers to a kind of lavish lifestyle and attitude of this section. In nineteenth century Bengal this Babu were mainly represented in so many farces and plays.

\(^6\) According to Dr. Keith, Sanskrit drama not only the highest product of Indian poetry but summing up in itself the final conception of literary art achieved by the very self-conscious creator of Indian literature. But drama bears, essential trace of its connection with the Brahmans. They were idealist in outlook, capable of large generalization, but regardless of accuracy in detail and to create a realistic drama was wholly incompatible with their temperament. Ajit kumar Ghosh (2005) *Bangla Nataker Itihash*, Dey’s publishing. Kolkata. Pp. 02-03
written by Dinabandhu Mitra and it was first performed in 1868 at Bagbazar by the ‘Bagbazar Amateur Theatre’. Later it was staged in 1872 at the ‘National Theatre’. The character of Nimchand, in this play on the one hand symbolizes the middle class Babu culture. On the other hand he is aware of its shortcomings, which in a way could be traced to colonial rationality that was the basis of new emerging Bengali culture.\(^7\) It is to be noted that in the play, there is a woman character Kumudini, the wife of Atal who is deprived of love and affection from her husband like other propertied Bengali women. Still, she maintains her dignity and status which every Hindu traditional woman must practice.\(^8\) It suggests that ‘Sadhabar Ekadoshi’ is the product of a particular cultural form, it could not break from the socially constructed image of Bhadramahila; however, the play successfully criticizes the colonial middle class. Even Micheal Madhusudan Dutta who himself was deeply influenced by European way of life and culture questioning this Babu culture in his farces like ‘Buro Shaliker Ghare Roe’ and ‘Eki Ki Bale Sabhyata’ much before ‘Sadhabar Ekadoshi’.

In attempting to criticize the colonial middle class, Bengali drama in a way rejected the reformist agenda. The critique of colonialism which is found in such plays should be considered as the first step towards the emergence of nationalist sentiments which put an end to all reformist zeal as a colonial project. If Dinobandhu through his writing provided a critique of colonialism, Girish Ghosh put forward the nationalist views through his plays. ‘SIRAJ-UD-DOULA’ is the best dramatic expression, portrayed by Girish Ghosh among all other plays writtn in this period. In ‘SIRAJ-UD–DOULA’ the historical figure Siraj was characterized as a true nationalist who refused to make any negotiation and compromise with the British. Notably, the character of the Siraj, once the ruler of Bengal has been portrayed in a manner which stood against the urban middle class whose members were always ready to compromise with the colonial British power to serve their own class interest, jeopardizing the interest of the entire nation.\(^9\) What is

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8. Ibid.

significant is that in all the plays performed in this period, women’s question was either totally absent or women’s image was represented in terms of traditional values. Unlike the developments of early nineteenth century there was no question of liberating the women following the reformist modernization project. As a matter of fact, this nationalist cultural form reflected the social construction of Bhadramahila and failed to create space which could provide a kind of negotiation through its representative mode.¹⁰ Now the question is how does Bengali cinema represent the image of Bhadramahila?

**THE GODDESS IMAGE OF BHADRAMAHILA IN BENGALI CINEMA**

In ‘PARAMA’, a film made by Aparna Sen, there is a female character Sheila, who runs a spastic school. She is excellent at cooking, also good at stitching and tailoring. In other words, she is good at housework. But she chooses to divorce her husband when he is transferred to a different city even their son is brought up in a boarding school because of her commitment to the cause of the spastics.¹¹ In the film we often see that she smokes cigarettes. The image of Sheila offers a balanced and interesting counterpart to Parama who remains framed in the image of ideal wife and mother within her family. Sheila in one way represents the qualities of Bhadramahila as it was constructed in nineteenth century Bengal as she is excellent in cooking, stitching and tailoring. On the other hand her appearance in the film who smokes, gets divorced from her husband and lives apart from her son, are serious violations of the goddess-like image of middle class women in family, based on Victorian morality.¹² The image of

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¹⁰ The most important part of the relation between Bengali cinema and Bengali theatre is that most of the people, mainly first generation actors and actresses in cinema came from Bengali theatre. Naturally starts from film narrative to the style of acting, theatre marked its influence over every aspect of cinema which continues even today because most talented actors are still coming from the world of theatre. In case of quality of acting is concerned theatre is the citadel of acting for at least in Bengali cinema. But negative aspect of this close ties between Bengali theatre and film is that because of the influence of theatre, cinema as a separate medium lack the potentiality in terms of its narrative, acting and film production.


¹² Ibid. P. 102
Bhadramahila does not allow women to be separated from their husbands, as it suggests refusal to perform duty as wife to husband which Sheila has done even if it is for the commitment to her spastic school. The message is clear that a woman has to remain within her image of wife and mother in the middle class family; there is nothing greater than her family and husband which Parama maintains as a daughter-in-law of Chowdhury family. That is why Parama by other family members, acquires the image of ‘Goddess of the family’ who has her eyes everywhere.13

We have seen that the ‘Goddess’ image of middle class woman was the part of social construction of Bhadramahila.14 The notion of ‘Goddess’ can be traced back to ancient India when the concept did appear as non-Aryan Devi. In nineteenth century Bengal this concept gained a new significance for Bengali women in the middle class discourse. In traditional Hindu literature, ‘Goddess’ has many names and forms; they are often thought of simply as ‘Devi’, the goddess. Her characteristics are logically contradictory that tend to be identified with different persona and iconographies: one fierce, the other docile.15 These different images signify two different traditions – non-Aryan and Aryan – under which this image was constructed. Gatwood draws a link between these two opposite images and calls the first a ‘virtual template’, upon which a later Sanskritic tradition imposed the ‘Spouse-Goddess’.16 That’s why the fierce form is often represented as dark or malevolent, whereas the docile form is represented as light or

13 The goddess image of Bhadramahila is maintained even in new millennium. If we closely study the matrimonial advertisements of both groom and bride the parents do not forget to mention the desire of the groom’s family for a kind of daughter-in-law who is good in housework and maintaining the family affairs. Equally from bride’s family there are attempts in matrimonial advertisements to project their girl as perfect image of goddess as constructed in middle class discourse. The gorgeous ceremonial welcome of daughter-in-law in the family which is known in Bengal as ‘Bou-Bhat’ is nothing but the observation of the responsibilities which is going to be imposed on her. Literally also ‘Bou-Bhat’ implies that the new bride in that special day attend the invitees and making dishes by her own. From the very first day she must be qualified in all respect as the angel of the home whose primary responsibility revolves around her family and husband.


benevolent. As the notion of Goddess is rooted in non-Aryan tradition, it appears to correlate with characteristics associated with the independent, and violent manifestation of the Hindu goddess which in later ages underwent a process of ‘Spousification’, occurring within the more widespread Sanskritization of indigenous perspectives through which presently predominant Spouse-Goddess ideal emerged.\textsuperscript{17} The image of ‘Kali’ in this respect is representing the non-Aryan tradition which has been included within Aryan tradition in subsequent ages.

The image of Goddess in non-Aryan tradition is understood to bear a unique relation to each particular male deity, which is not a ‘mere’ consort relation, she is ‘beyond being a consort to anyone’.\textsuperscript{18} According to this understanding, the Devi or Goddess may not always be married and even if she is, her partner is either considered her equal or sometimes a mere helper or assistant. In other words, she is the dominant one, never subservient or inferior in any way. She can also enter into an unorthodox form of marriage that allows her to function independently without censure which is fundamentally different in case of Spouse-Goddess who must be ‘Sacramentally married’ according to ‘Dharmic principles’.\textsuperscript{19} The Devi might remain a unified deity who reflects the natural forces of creation and dissolution which does not depend on the presence or absence of marital control. This is not the case for the Spouse-Goddess. Reflecting an interesting moral duality, her ‘inherent’ malevolent side is looked upon as elemental to her original destructive nature like that of the Devi, but her benevolent aspect is expressed only in her ‘controlled’ married state, where she appears in her ‘Dharmic’ wifely role.\textsuperscript{20} What is important is that the Spouse-Goddess husband is viewed as ‘her clear superior’ and at times even as her personal God, as is outlined in the concept of ‘Streedharma’ and the Manusmriti for all women. In a sense the image of Spouse-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} ibid. \hspace{1cm} P. 41
\item \textsuperscript{18} Thomas Coburn (1982) ‘Consort Of None, Shakti Of All : The Vision Of The Devi-Mahatmya’ in John Stratton Hawley & Donna Marie Wulff (Edited) The Divine Consort : Radha And The goddess Of India, Berkley Religious Studies, Beacon press, Boston. \hspace{1cm} P. 154
\item \textsuperscript{19} Lynn Gatwood (1985) Devi And The Souse-goddess : Women, Sexuality And Marriage In India, Manohar, New Delhi. \hspace{1cm} P. 04
\item \textsuperscript{20} Anwesha Arya (2004) ‘Devi : The Disempowered goddess’ \hspace{1cm} P. 42
\end{itemize}
Goddess of Aryan tradition evidences gender inequality and functional disparity between two deities, extends to the hierarchical interactions involved in their worship. Whereas the Devi’s partner is essentially her co-equal or her youthful assistant. This gender equality extends to social interactions involved in the worship of the Devi, men and women worshippers are accorded equal status.\textsuperscript{21} In the transformation from the image of ‘Devi’ to Spouse-Goddess, marriage was believed to be the key factor which functioned as a control on a sexually threatening benign-but-potentially-malevolent Spouse-Goddess, rendering her status separate and unequal to that of her husband. The most important example is the present form of Durga who is seen killing Mahishasura though the emphasis still remains on her benevolent image. That is why the festival linked to her, as we celebrate, is explained to children as Durga visiting her maternal home on earth accompanied by her four children. The significant point is Shiva’s photo-image is hung in a corner of the puja pandal as a reminder to worshippers that she is married and therefore benevolent. Finally, on the day of ‘Dashami’ we again reaffirm our belief that she is married when the married women join to a customary smearing of sindur on her feet and forehead for the both, Goddess’s and their own married state. As Kinsley points out, Hinduism seems to teach that a theology in which Goddesses are important but it does not necessarily have to imply sexual egalitarianism. Female power, creativity and authority in the theological sphere do not necessarily imply high female status in the social sphere.\textsuperscript{22}

The best manifestation of Spouse-Goddess we find in form of Lakshmi which was invented in early nineteenth century Bengal to portray the image of Bhadramahila. Goddess Lakshmi is benevolent, who bestows wealth and happiness and remains passively devoted to her husband. She never receives blood sacrifice like the malevolent image of Devi. The Goddess Lakshmi is under the control of the male God and she stands meekly behind her husband Vishnu.\textsuperscript{23} This Goddess, who brings happiness and prosperity


\textsuperscript{22} David Kinsley (1989) The Goddesses Mirror : Visions Of The Divine From East And West, State University Of New York press, Albany P. xvi

\textsuperscript{23} Shoma, A Chatterji ( 1998) Subject : Cinema, Object : Women – A Study Of The portrayal Of Women In Indian Cinema, P. 34
was reinvented and reconstructed in the nineteenth century Bengal in order to shape the image of middle class women within the private sphere. The important difference between the form of Durga and Lakshmi is that, as far as Goddess Durga expresses her malevolent nature in killing Mahishasura, she reflects the characteristics of non-Aryan Devi. This malevolent aspect is completely absent in the form of Lakshmi. She is totally the benevolent Spouse-Goddess who is disempowered vis-à-vis male deities, so that there is no question to exercise her power against anybody. But it would be wrong to say that the notion of Goddess was the matter of Ancient India. In Europe also there was the existence of goddess especially in ancient Greek and Roman history. Here, one must remember the distinction between the literal interpretation of the Goddess and metaphorical use of the Goddess paradigm. The former is accepted as historical fact, an ancient and unified system of belief and practice, characterized by a matriarchal culture and centred on a powerful Goddess figure existing at some identifiable historical archetype or a poetic metaphor. The focus here is on the formal literal position, which is currently widely held.

The film ‘STREER PATRA’ which represents nineteenth century Bengali domesticity portrays the character of Mrinal who is the younger daughter-in-law of the family. The head of the family who is her elder brother-in-law considers that because of her appearance in their family lots of good happened to it which has improved their condition, created more wealth and led to expansion of their family business. But such prosperity did not take place because of the arrival of the elder daughter-in-law in their family; rather her brother had cheated them. It is a fact that wealth in some way or other brings happiness in the family and in so far as wealth adds to happiness, a wife reflects...
the quality of Lakshmi. But in the nineteenth century context, the image of Lakshmi signified much more than merely a Goddess of wealth. As we have seen, the social image of Bhadramahila was invented to maintain the existing relationship between genders; likewise, the portrayal of ‘Lakshmi’ was necessitated for maintaining male domination over women. A woman must be an ideal wife, must be dutiful towards her husband and family. By performing these roles she brings happiness which Mrinal is able to do. But we see that Mrinal also has her own self. For that she protests against the inhuman attitude of the family members including her husband towards an orphan girl, Bindu. She supports Bindu who has found shelter in their family. In the act of supporting Bindu, Mrinal deviates from the ideal image of Lakshmi constructed in middle class discourse. The extent to which Mrinal was following her husband and other family members, she symbolized the image of Lakshmi and it was violated when she began to raise her voice.

In nineteenth century Bengal ‘happiness’ got a new meaning and came to be associated with certain other factors which the educated middle class ‘Bhadralok’ found convenient. For that Bengali women required certain other qualifications besides their traditional virtues. What should be the proper image of Lakshmi in the nineteenth century
context that was discussed in an elaborate manner in contemporary manuals and magazines? The most important of these manuals was the ‘The Lakshmi of the Home’, written by Girijaprasanna Roychowdhuri. It was published in two editions in 1884 and 1888 in Bangadarshan Patrika. In this manual he focuses on family relations and family ‘dharma’ as it is related to the relationship of a husband and wife. More emphasis was laid by manual writers on husband-wife relationship, along with the fact that in the nineteenth century, family authority had shifted from elder members of family solely to the husband and second, most of the manual writers were men; those few women who contributed to manual writing also represented the same male viewpoint and opinions. Even the reformist ‘Bamabodhini’ echoed the same while portraying the image of Lakshmi in Bengali domesticity.

The importance of husband-wife relationship is also evident in Bengali films, especially those films which portray the nineteenth century domesticity. From ‘CHARULATA’ to ‘CHOKHER BALI, all the narratives represent mainly the nature and inner contradiction between husband and wife, sometimes in terms of their personalities, sometimes in terms of their attitudes toward each other. No other relation gets prominence in these film narratives and all other characters remain marginal. Most notable is the absence of other in-laws – mainly mother-in-law, the most common feature of any Bengali middle class family. Even if she is present in the film her role is considered to be less important. While writing, Girijaprasanna makes it clear that the modern times are such that it seems to us that the Hindu wife must, before all else, be re-educated about this relationship. Though the subject is extremely difficult, he maintains that it can be explained to her in a general way for she has an inner understanding of this relationship. Describing the nature of husband-wife relationship no other community on earth has imagined such a union, such a fusion of husband and wife. In the Hindu marriage, the distinctions between man and woman are lost and they become one – woman and man are fused into each other. As water combines with water, as flame combines with flame, as the self merges with higher self in the same way man has united


28 Ibid.
woman and woman has united in the same way with man. One is created again. In Hindu religion, whoever becomes the self born one attains release from incarnation and according to Girijaprasanna, this release is also the purpose of Hindu marriage. While arguing in favour of unity between man and woman in terms of their selves, he rejected the separate identity of women, beyond her relationship with their husbands. It signifies that in mythology also, Lakshmi does not have any separate entity beyond Vishnu, the husband God. In the real world because of the unity between husband and wife, the wife becomes half the body of her husband, that is why another name for a wife is ‘Ardhangini’ and without question the wife shares the sins and virtues of her husband. In the manual it is suggested that men have born as humans to reap the reward of women’s sins. Human beings will be afflicted with these sufferings in life after life, until the sins are exhausted. Here Girijaprasanna very categorically argues that for using up one’s sins and gaining release from the cycle of reincarnation, the householder stage of life is the best one. He holds that the household dharma is the supreme value of life in which men and women can enter only through the event of marriage. Like any other manual writers, he emphasized on marriage and family, constituted by husband, wife and son. The household functions are not only matters of a particular family because daily tasks such as self-restrain, helping others, asking care of family members and so forth – all these are highly related with a person’s own humanity. The most important duty for husband and wife is not only to love each other but also share their innermost thoughts. They would share their joys and sorrows. At the same time they should encourage, incite and support each other and care for household ‘Dharma’.

In ‘Bamabodhini Patrika’ too, the ‘Housewife’ is portrayed in the same way as Girijaprasanna figures it out. Bamabodhini holds that there is an inherent relation between house and housewife. Because of such relation a housewife is imagined as the Goddess of the house and in the presence of the Goddess, the house is supposed to be a temple in popular perception. The housewife only knows about those requirements which

29 Ibid. P. 108
30 Ibid. Pp. 110-111
31 Ibid. Pp. 112-113
are essential for the home. By nature she should possess righteousness, forgiveness, tolerance, pity and without these qualities the home cannot be an ideal one. Most importantly, she should look after every little matter of the home and take care for everyone and everything. Looking at Bengali films, it is very surprising that there is hardly any difference with the socially constructed notion of Goddess Lakshmi, in representing the image of middle class women in their inner domain. Any attempt to study the portrayal of Charu in ‘CHARULATA’ we find that she satisfies the image of Bhadramahila. According to the characteristics of Lakshmi, as defined by Girijaprasanna, Charu looks after every little need and requirement of her husband. As a responsible housewife she maintains all household functions. She sends tea for her husband at 4 o’clock in afternoon by their servant. She stitches a handkerchief and a pair of shoes for her husband. At the time of dinner she carefully attends him. What is most important that she believes what her husband is doing (running the newspaper ‘Sentinel’) will be good for the society and make her husband famous, no matter if it turns his attention from her and makes her lonely. She is the woman who has devoted her life for well being of her husband and family without thinking much about herself. Otherwise she is gentle, educated and has a cultivated mind. She is the ideal example of the requirement of the nineteenth century Bengali middle class who wanted that their women’s condition should be improved to increase their own class status without disturbing the existing gender relation.

In this context another important film is ‘CHOKHER BALI’, directed by Rituparno Ghosh. In the film Mahendra is a medical student and belongs to the middle class Bhadralok background. He marries Ashalata, a traditional girl, who does not have any education as she knows that if she learns she will be widow as it happens to other women. As a result, there is no question of refinement and gentleness in her attitude. She does not know how to maintain a household in the changing Bengali society and satisfying the modern husband. As a housewife she knows only about passionate love which she receives from the husband. With the arrival of Binodini such closeness

between the husband and wife is lost. Binodini is not a member of this family. She was living as a neighbour in their ancestral house of their village and received full affection from Mahendra’s mother Rajlakshmi. Even Rajlakshmi once upon a time wished to see Binodini as her daughter-in-law. Later she was married but very soon she lost her husband and returned to her paternal home. Visiting her ancestral house and seeing the misery Rajlakshmi brought Binodini here and she started to live in this family. Binodini is different from Asha because she is educated, she has learned English from an English lady teacher, knows very well how to run modern household and satisfying the modern requirements of nineteenth century Bengali family, especially modern western educated middle class men. Though she is a widow but because of her gentleness and superior sense of housewifery, Mahendra was attracted towards her. Here also we find that same passionate love between them in a different situation. After knowing about their relationship Asha leaves her home, though later she comes back but Binodini ultimately leaves from Mahendra’s life forever. In this way the narrative maintains the sacredness of marriage, even if it is not a happy one at all. In the film Asha is the legitimate daughter-in-law of that family but she does not have the ability to maintain the household. On the other hand Binodini, who has this ability but she cannot be recognized as Lakshmi, because she is a widow and not related with a man by marriage.

![Image of Chokher Bali](image)
If *Asha* would have been educated enough and had the ability to maintain the family, she could not face this situation. The mythological goddess *Lakshmi* needed more to satisfy its modern version in nineteenth century Bengal in terms of the requirements from *Bhadramahila*. Several measures were taken, just like the construction of *Bhadramahila*, to construct the image of *Lakshmi* in Bengali domesticity. As we find that the most important aspect of modernization and the reforms project was education for *Bhadramahila*. The educational proposal itself was such that it could be suitable for construction of the image of *Lakshmi* in family. The educational proposal for women aimed to produce a good wife who could properly maintain her home. In this sense the nature of education for women was different from the general education for men. In nineteenth century Bengal many debates and discussions were organized among the different sections of the middle class about the exact nature of women’s education and its purpose. It was argued that family was the domain for women: which could promote their ability to maintain peace, happiness and discipline in their family. It was taught to them how to bring their children up. If the general education for men was introduced for women, they could not learn anything because such an education was against their real nature. General education could be given but only in childhood and with the unfolding of the characteristics of femininity, the education for women should be separated.33

Noteworthy is that these kinds of views were mostly published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* – which belonged to the liberal *Brahmo* fraction of nineteenth century Bengali middle class. Though *Brahmos* took active interest in spreading women’s education but they never supported higher education for them. We find no difference between the views of conservatives and reformist *Brahmos* at least in this point.34 *Charu* in ‘CHARULATA’ and *Asha* or *Binodini* in ‘CHOKHER BALI’ never receive higher education which could prepare them to participate in the public domain. Even *Asha* received no education and *Charu* or *Binodini* received only that much which was enough to make them a good housewife who is always faithful to her husband. The education proposal for women was

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34 Ibid. Pp. 63-64
a part and parcel of the construction of *Lakshmi* image of middle class women in the private sphere.

Actually what Girijaprasanna portrayed was basically a conservative notion of wifehood in Bengali middle class women which was later shared by all sections of the society. He even criticizes modern girls because day and night they drive themselves for crazy thinking of nothing but Love! Love! The wife has to love the husband and it is not necessary to teach her to do it. But to think that the husband’s love is to be the only purpose of their life was harmful both for them and for their husbands. No one, either the husband or wife, can preserve household *Dharma* on their own; each needs the other’s help. Helping her husband to maintain household *Dharma* is the wife’s most precious duty. In order to maintain household *Dharma* some tasks are assigned to the husband some to the wife. As he says, “earning an income is a task for the husband but serving guests and family with satisfying food and drinks is a task of the wife. It would not be enough for the husband and wife just to love and search each other’s happiness.”

Saratkumari Chowdhurani who otherwise supported the modern outlook of middle class housewife but ultimately echoed Girijaprasanna by arguing that modern housewives are much more conscious about their family. She has more ability to take care of her family members. Moreover, she is more tolerant, decent and who never criticizes her husband before the public. She justified the modern attitude of middle class women but in terms of their responsibilities and functions which directly addressed the image of *Lakshmi* as defined by Girijaprasanna. Though *Charu, Binodini* or *Asha* belong to different family backgrounds, their appearances are the same in terms of their images within the family, which demands responsibilities to be performed for the family and sacrificing her own desires in life.

But when we look at films like *‘GHARE-BAIRE’*, it creates a kind of dilemma among us as to the portrayal of women, particularly in the context of nationalism in Bengal. After 1870, with the growing sentiments of nationalism, the nation was held as


Goddess and our national values were resided at the domain of family because the public sphere was governed by the British power. The private image of Goddess was extended in the public sphere as part of the process to project this image as the preserver of our nationalist spiritual identity. When the Goddess image of the private sphere also began to be celebrated in the public domain there was no other scope for the Bhadramahila but to remain within the family. In other words the public image or nationalist image of Goddess, instead of liberating her from the shackles of family, tied her more strongly with it. The film ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ was set against this nationalist background, on the one hand portrayed this nationalist image of Goddess but at the same time pointed out about various contradictory aspects concerning the real status of the Bhadramahila in the nationalist era. In the film Sandip is nationalist Swadeshi leader who comes to visit to his friend Nikhilesh who is a zaminder of that area. Sandip’s arrival is significant because of the fact that Nikhilesh’s wife Bimala appears for the first time in public to meet him from her own domain of Andarmahal. Bimala’s public appearance can be attributed to her progressive and liberal minded husband who always believes in person’s autonomy. Like Sandip, he is neither a part of the militant nationalist movement which Sandip propagates, nor he supports the way of nationalist politics portrays the Goddess like image of the nation. What is interesting is that slowly Bimala is attracted to the emerging nationalist outlook because of the influence of Sandip. Following the pattern of nationalist sentiments, Sandip conferred on her the symbolic Goddess image by calling her ‘Makshi Rani’(queen bee). Before such fire brand nationalist image of Sandip, Nikhilesh’s appearance seems to be ordinary for Bimala. Because Nikhilesh does not accept the symbolic representation of women in constructing the image of the nation but firmly holds that self-reliance is the way of liberating or improving their status in society instead of symbolizing them with the nation. Even the actual Swadeshi culture which aimed at self-reliance was introduced much before than the emergence of Swadeshi movement and leaders like Sandip. That was propagated by none other than Nikhilesh himself, but it failed due to lack of public support. It is quite clear that Nikhilesh

represents a kind of nationalism which respects other’s thoughts and opinions, whose roots lied in the liberal reformist project in nineteenth century Bengal. Bimala, in the end, after realizing the real nature of Sandip, comes back to Nikhilash. But it is too late because on that very night Nikhilash was killed in communal riot, incited by Sandip.

The whole narrative in a way disturbs us because of certain factors. Before her appearance in public, Bimala maintained her Lakshmi image within the family, had developed a cultivated mind under an English lady teacher, and looked after every small thing of the family and attended the husband at dinner. When she appeared in public with such an image and met a nationalist leader, it was quite expected that her Goddess image which nationalism loudly propagated in public, would be properly respected. But when Sandip seduced her for his own interest it indicates that whatever the public message of nationalism about women, in reality it failed to generate any respect for them. Even Sandip seduces Bimala by creating her image as ‘Queen Bee’; in other words, he is placing her on a high position in his struggle. Through celebrating the image of Goddess Sandip actually violates her sanctity in terms of her image in family. Goddess image of women in private domain was violated by the public version in nationalist era. As a result women lost their Lakshmi image of the family but were not able to get the Goddess image in the public beyond its symbolic presence. Apart from this observation what is more valid is that with the arrival of nationalism, the reforms project of nineteenth century was jeopardized. Bimala who once sang western song, suddenly started to sing Kirtan – traditional devotional song – in order to become more demonstrably traditional. Turning towards tradition, it seriously affected her quest of self reliance – what Nikhilash believes in and which also reflected the spirit of the reform movement. In nationalist age the modernization aspects of Lakshmi image was increasingly substituted by aspects of tradition.

In twentieth century, particularly in Bengali literature, some writers, especially women writers have made attempts to portray the different images of middle class housewives and Bengali girls in terms of the Lakshmi image in the family. The writings of Ashapurna Devi, provided an image of middle class women who reject the sanctity of marriage and ideal wifehood but however, do not defy their husbands. In her first novel, ‘Prem O Proyojan’ (Love and Necessity) she figured out stories of Arati and Mandira.
Arati performs as ‘Goddess of the home’ by playing her role as devoted and sacrificing wife of the family. But after her child’s death, she rejects her Goddess image and comes out of the family with a friend of her brother-in-law. As a result she loses her own relatives but she gets a new home. She becomes happy and makes a happy family with her husband, child and more importantly with her own income. The point to be noted is that in her very first novel Ashapurna Devi portrayed the picture of a middle class woman who broke her earlier marriage to find a more happy family with another man. The story of Mandira represents the commitment of her love towards her boyfriend. She, like other traditional middle class girls does not wait for his arrival; rather she comes out from her home to find him. Such a character stands against the conventional understanding of middle class women who hesitate to come out in open road or rejecting to be confined within home. When women writers including Ashapurna Devi, do portray these anti-Lakshmi images, question could be asked whether these images remain only as exceptional or these figures reveal important aspects of the changing status of the middle class. To study the changing image of middle class women, it is necessary to examine whether the nature of middle class has remained the same or not, particularly in post-independence Bengal in twentieth century.

BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA AS REPRESENTED IN BENGALI CINEMA

In the film ‘SURJOTORAN’ the lead character, an engineer cum architect, played by Uttam Kumar, wishes to build a big house for the people of lower middle classes, who live mostly in slums. When he finds that the proposed building for their rehabilitation is hardly better than their own slums, he burns it. In the court, while confessing his crime, he describes how people are living in overcrowded slums which no one can imagine. They live like animals and these people are none other than the Bengali middle class who are the backbone of the society without whom no society can survive. But when such

building was made to rehabilitate these people he finds that this building is nothing but a new kind of slum with small rooms and there is hardly any scope to get fresh air or sunshine. People have to live in this big building in the same inhuman conditions. Even if the situation of the Bengali middle class was not as critical in post-independence Bengal as he described, undoubtedly their status and position had been adversely affected. Let us look at another film, ‘PARASH PATHAR’ (Philosopher’s Stone) which portrays the character of Paresh Chandra Dutta. Pareshbabu is a clerk in an office but always suffering from the fear of losing his job. From this insecurity, his only wish is how to earn more money. Suddenly he finds a ‘touchstone’ with which he can transform any metal into gold. At the beginning of the film we find people, most of them clerks working in different offices, hurriedly running to catch buses to return to their homes after office and Pareshbabu is one of them. This man after finding the stone becomes a rich man within a very short time and now he plans to contest at the elections for more power and position. The story of the film suggests the changing aspirations, born out of

39 The story of the film is evolved around the three main characters, Somenath Mukherjee, Anita Chatterjee and Rajshekhar Mitra. Somenath is a young architect; most talented, but stubborn and uncompromising personality. Instead of compromising with his stand he prefers to live the life of labour. Anita is a daughter of the owner of famous architect firm. Even her father is also the owner of a slum. But as a writer she is quite sympathetic to those people who are living in city slums. She expressed what she observed in her own book and dreamt that they would be rehabilitated or liberated from such miserable life. In her book she imagined one day a big housing project would be taken place where these slum people could live with proper human dignity. The book in which she expressed her thought about this people is ‘SURJOTORAN’ that also the title of the film itself. Rajshekhar Mitra is a famous industrialist but he spent his childhood in a slum which has been owned by none other than Anita’s father who evicted his mother and him because they failed to pay the rent. He protested against it violently for that he had to spend some valuable years of his life in reformatory centre. To take revenge of that event he utterly ruined Anita’s father. In this situation he sent a proposal to him that he will bring back everything to them if Anita marries him. Though Rajshekhar is much older than her Anita accepted this offer but with condition that he would help her in realizing her vision to build a community project which she called ‘SURJOTORAN’ in her book. In course of the time Somenath becomes a famous architect and he is appointed by Rajshekhar for that project. Somenath also spent some time in slum and perhaps he was the only who could fulfil Anita’s vision of ‘SURJOTORAN’. He starts work on this project but in due course Somenath and Anita become close to each other. When he knows that Rajshekhar will go marry her, he walked out from this project and assigned it to his friend Subrota. But he failed to do this project successfully. As a result Somenath burns that building. After realizing their mutual affinity Rajshekhar committed suicide but keep his word to build ‘SURJATORAN’. Ultimately this project becomes successful under the leadership of Somenath and their love story also lead towards the happy end.

40 In one word ‘PARAS PATHAR’ is the revelation of the desire of every Bengali lower middle class people who spend their lives by working in offices as clerks. The ‘Touch Stone’ by which Pareshbabu upgrades himself from a petty clerk to the upper section of middle class his character represents the middleness which is the essential feature of middle class mentality. That’s why he bought a second hand car instead of having a brand new car for himself and that also not for showing his status but to avoid
economic pressure, of the Bengali middle class whose only desire now was to become rich and more powerful, other aspects of life relegated to being secondary concerns. The notion of the cultural superiority of the Bhadralok section in the context of nineteenth century Bengal was increasingly losing its sheen because of changing status and position of middle class.

The most important factor behind the changing position and status of the middle class has been the partition of Bengal which often escapes our notice but it was part and parcel of our independence. Because of the partition, people from erstwhile east Bengal migrated mainly to Calcutta as refugees and many of those who had the requisite qualification joined clerical jobs in order to earn their livelihood. Actually, during colonial period people from various parts of Bengal migrated to the city for, among many reasons, finding employment in government offices in west Bengal.41 The prosperity brought by Permanent Settlement for the middle class Bhadralok was increasingly waning since the last decade of nineteenth century due to disintegration of the joint family system with increasing number of family members.42 Both these factors forced a large number of middle class Bhadralok to join clerical posts, forgetting their own family background. Around 1925-26 it was becoming clear that very soon the middle class

overcrowded bus in which he travelled almost whole life. As he want to be included in the upper section of the society he tries to forget everything which could bring back in his past. Within a very short span it is not possible for him to achieve that upper class Bhadralok culture which was the result of the cultivation of generation after generation. Because the only source of his social status is the money and on the basis of his money power he now wants to appear in election because he knows very well that politics is the sphere which is dominated by upper middle class Bhadralok. But his all attempts to be apart of upper section Bhadralok society through his power of money ultimately failed. While reflecting the desire of lower middle class the film also teach the impossibility for them to acquire the position of higher status by the only means of money at least in Bengali Bhadralok culture. But definitely through this film the director Satyajit Ray indicated about the growing value of money in respect of everything else in post partition Bengal and that is related with the more vital question of changing Bengali middle class mentality which now only surrounded by the consideration of money power. Satyajit Ray was right in this sense that after some years later and more visibly in the end of twentieth century this has become the reality of Bengali middle class. Which was seemed to be impossible for Pareshbabu at that time because the old values were yet to be exited, it is now the primary requirement for the upper section Bhadralok in society where every other factors are either depended or controlled by money.


would be divided into two exclusive sections, one would represent its traditional elite fraction and another would appear as uncultured and narrow minded whose only concern is to earn money because of their poor economic state.\textsuperscript{43} With the partition, on the one hand middle class Bhadralok lost their own source of income, i.e. land; and on the other hand, because of the increasing number of aspirants, government jobs became more and more scarce. Unemployment was the common feature haunting every middle class household. The problem for the middle class grew more severe in the sixties, before the Bangladesh war, as a huge population of Bengali community was forced to migrate to west Bengal. This vanishing economic prosperity of the Bengali middle class necessarily got reflected in the sphere of culture which was constituted as a part of their rich and highly respected position in society for the class itself.\textsuperscript{44} For finding a secure job (chakri) and income, a large section of Bhadraloks were excluded from that cultural heritage, even it was not possible for them to maintain their past tradition which their forefathers nourished in nineteenth century Bengal.

How has Bengali cinema portrayed the degrading state of middle class? Talking about the representation of middle class particularly of 1960s and 1970s we could refer two films, directed by none other than Satyajit Ray, ‘PRATIDWANDI’ and ‘JANA ARANYA’. The protagonist of ‘PRATIDWANDI’, Siddhartha, played by Dhritiman Chatterjee, is a B.Sc. graduate. Though once he was a student of medical college, after his father’s death he did not pursue his study due to the poor financial condition of his family. Ultimately he becomes an ordinary science graduate. Now, he tries his utmost to find a job; in other words like other Bengali middle class youths, he is unemployed. His sister is the only earning member for the family who works in a private firm. We find that Sidhartha travels in overcrowded buses to reach offices to appear for interviews. The ‘overcrowded bus’ suggests the problem of overpopulation of the city which is putting unmanageable pressure on poor infrastructure and transport system. This problem of overpopulation is also reflected in offices where the number of candidates for the interviews is more or less 200 against a single opening. Besides that, the selection of the

\textsuperscript{43} N. C. Chowdhury (1997) \textit{Nirbachito prabandha}, Ananda publishers, Calcutta. P. 59

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
candidate is not fair, but subject to manipulation. In one of such interviews where *Sidhartha* is an applicant, he finds that people are waiting from the morning but due to their large numbers, they have not been called yet. Even the minimum arrangement has not been made to accommodate the candidates. Sometime later, one of them falls senseless as a result of standing for a long time. Authorities did not make sufficient sitting arrangements for them. *Siddhartha* protested violently against this poor management and whatever little hope he had of getting the job was destroyed. Giving up hope for getting government jobs, he decides to take up the job of a medical representative but for that he had to leave Calcutta and stay in the district town of Balurghat.

![Figure No : 03](image)

A day to day struggle of the middle class for getting basic amenities like public transport.

*(PRATIDWANDI)*

In *JANA ARANYA* we also find ‘Somenath’ who studies history honours, but could not become an honours graduate because of the flawed the evaluation system.
Having a degree of an ordinary pass graduate, he starts job-hunting and for that he sends a number of applications to various offices. But his fate was the same as Sidhartha, because he does not find any suitable job for himself. One day a businessman of Barabazar, Bishuda, known to Somenath, advises him to start the business of order supply. After thinking for sometime he decides to do the business. But when he informs his father he is surprised because there was no one in his family who ran a business and had success, though ultimately he approves his decision. What is important is that slowly but steadily he becomes a good businessman and after some hesitations springing from his background, he is ultimately able to overcome the drag of his middle class values. So in changing circumstances, the middle class instead of securing government jobs, have to look toward non-government jobs or other professions.

Figure No : 04

The new image of unemployed middle class youth who starts business of his own (JANA ARANYA)

45 There is the article, written by Siladitya Sen in Anandabazar Patrika on 10th may 2007. In that article he tries to discuss how Satyajit Ray successfully showed the changing values of middle class Bhadralok in these films along with the ‘SIMABADDHA’. This three films were made in 70’s and in course of the evolution of Bengali middle class the decade is also to be considered as the most radical period. Because old feudal values at this period faced challenge from progressive sections but that radicalism did not able to create new outlook which could upgrade the notion of humanity. That’s the reason why all the protagonists of these films did not have any moral grudge to employ unfair means for their own narrow self interest. These films are just the indications about changing Bengali middle class from their nineteenth century forefathers.
However, the dilemma or moral panic of Sidhartha and Somnath lay in the Bhadralok aspirations to get respected positions in society. Sidhartha, son of an honest businessman, like any other middle class youth wanted to secure a better life for himself. Initially, his desire seemed to be fulfilled as he was able to get admission in medical college. When he failed to pursue his medical career due to his father’s sudden demise and had to end up with having a degree of science graduate, his only objective in life became somehow to manage a government job which could secure his family financially. Sidhartha’s preference for a public job could be traced back in the attitude of educated middle class Bhadralok who traditionally found employment in government departments. But in respect of his family background Sidhartha should not have had any hesitation to be employed in the private sector. Perhaps, he did not want to experience a repetition of the same situation in his own life which he had suffered after his father’s death. Because in business there is always an element of risk that could affect the economic security of the family. Similarly to get employment in private sector is not better than risk-prone ‘business’ as such employments are less secure than government jobs. Somnath also like Sidhartha had the same preference for government job. Even in his family there is hardly anyone who has been employed in other professions or doing business. Having such a background his failure to secure job in public office is a kind of moral defeat for him. When he started the business of ‘order supply’ and had to use other ‘unethical’ means in its course, he could hardly respect his profession thanks to his middle class professional background. Actually there was no other way for Sidhartha or Somnath except to get involved in such professions but as part of the middle class gentry they could not morally accept it because middle class values do not allow their members to do such jobs.

But for the Indian middle class in general and the Bengali middle class in particular, securing government job signifies much more than coveted economic security. A job in government holds a special appeal. It has the aura of power and authority and makes one a part of the establishment. This is of considerable importance to those who had traditionally been represented in the government hierarchy. Since the colonial period, the members of the middle class monopolised the government gobs which continued after independence as the colonial structure and institutions, both in form and substance, remained largely intact. It is clear that almost immediately after independence the
direction of the state policy was being dictated by middle class interests. This was of course not the result of a conscious or pre-planned strategy, but a consequence of the predominant position of the middle class vis-à-vis the making of state policy. In other words, in newly independent India the upper and middle classes were the most strategically placed to control state power. Middle class representatives ran the all powerful bureaucracy, they were fully represented in the legislatures. The result was that the interests of the middle class hijacked the agenda of the nation, even if its members continued to believe that the state was rightly biased in favour of the less privileged.\textsuperscript{46} Given such overwhelming influence and representation in government hierarchies, middle class youth like \textit{Sidhartha} and \textit{Somnath} felt they have a ‘natural’ claim to get employed in government offices. But the Bengali middle class was not so fortunate like their counter parts in other parts of India. Because the Partition created a grave situation where a large section of middle class \textit{Bhadralok} had to confront increasing economic impoverishment and scarcity of public jobs. So, for the Bengali middle class, looking for other kinds of jobs became a new option which they had to accept in the changing circumstances.

But this trend was clearer in the 1980s and became a prominent feature in 1990s with the introduction of new economic policy which reduced the share of government jobs while increasing the share of the private sector. In ‘\textit{PARAMA}’ which is a film of the 1980s, we find that \textit{Parama}’s husband \textit{Bhaskar Chowdhury} is a top executive of a company for which he has to visit different places of India as well as abroad. But \textit{Bhaskar} is the member of a middle class joint family and the choice of his career in a private company suggests that a section of middle class probably did realize that their own prosperity could be fulfilled even by joining in private sector. The necessity for a government job, at least, for them is secondary. The film of 1990s, ‘\textit{HEMANTER PAKHI}’, shows the character of \textit{Supratim Majumdar}, the husband of \textit{Aditi}, is a sales executive of the company ‘Lotus India Private Limited’. Like \textit{Bhaskar} in ‘\textit{PARAMA}’, \textit{Supratim} in ‘\textit{HEMANTER PAKHI}’ is not from any aristocratic middle class joint family. He comes from a very ordinary family. He joined the company as a junior employee. By

proving his sincerity and efficiency for the past 25 years, he now holds the post of sales manager. It is not only the question of his own success, because his job enabled him to provide good quality of education for his two sons, maintain his family and fulfil all of their financial requirements. So in its own way such jobs in private sector seemed to guarantee security in terms of providing the basic amenities for the family and good quality of education for the children which was believed to be possible only by doing public government jobs. For Bengali middle class now there is no other way but to depend on the private sector to be the main source of employment.

The point of contention is that the private sector above everything else, considers profit as the supreme value. The extent to which the middle class is to be a part of this world, it will create a new culture based on the principle of individual profit. In this world everyone should be concerned about his own career because it is the only way to make his life more secure. It is this culture which is totally different from the culture developed in nineteenth century Bengal. In the nineteenth century, the emerging Bhadrallok culture was able to create a discursive space where all forms of debate and mutual interactions could be possible. We may find some great debates and discussions among various middle class groups on the issues, ranging from widow remarriage to the nature of women’s education, in nineteenth century Bengal. With the growing influence of the corporate culture that legacy is gradually getting lost. We hardly find any debate or discussion these days where the middle class takes an active interest or provides any sort of support, unless it affects their own interest. A glimpse of the extent to which Bengali middle class have lost its old characteristics and values can be had from a very recent film of ‘BONG CONNECTION’, directed by Anjan Dutta. In the film an American born and brought up non-residential Bengali youth comes to visit his ancestral house in Kolkata where his uncle and his family are presently living. The youth is a musician and wants to do some new experiment which could be a fusion between eastern and western music. Gradually he finds that there is no difference between the people of New York and the people of Kolkata. Here also, people only one major concern and that is how to cater to their own self interest. His realization becomes more intense when his uncle after his grandfather’s death decides to sell their paternal house to a promoter in exchange for a couple of flats and a huge amount of money. He tells his nephew that he is compelled to
do so because the maintenance cost of the house is unbearable for him. Hearing his uncle’s decision, he rebukes him by saying that for money and luxury he chose the easiest way to avoid responsibility. The next day he leaves for New York as he understands that Kolkata and its people are same like the people of New York, having no difference at all.47 However, his condemnations was not entirely correct. Despite of his higher position in the company where his uncle is presently working, does not provide him sufficient financial support to maintain such big ancestral house which their forefathers built. But unlike him his forefathers belonged to a different generation where Bengali middle class had superior position both in economy and culture. For them, the maintenance of such big house was not a worrisome. In post-independence situation it is very difficult for Bengali middle class to maintain their forefathers property after fulfilling the basic amenities for the family and children. It will possible if there is a joint efforts by all family members to preserve their forefathers residence. When his nephew is criticising his uncle he perhaps forget that his father also did not play his role towards his ancestral house as he settled in abroad. After all for so many years his uncle was the only person who look after this house but now he is unable to do that due to his financial crisis. His decision to sell the house as a rational choice of a self centred individual which seems to his nephew as the end of difference between the behaviour of the people of Kolkata and New York is not correct. But how do these changes in the nature and characteristics of the middle class and its cultural pattern reflect in the lives of their women? Do they remain like their

47 The film ‘BONG CONNECTION’ is about two Bengali youths, Andy Sen and Arpan Mukherjee. Andy, bring and brought up in New York came for the first time in Kolkata to meet his uncle and grandfather in their ancestral house. His visit to Kolkata can be seen as a search for Bengali tradition for a musician who wants to make a fusion music based on western Rock and Bengali Baul. He met Sheila Bannerjee who happens to be the fiancé of Arpan Mukhergee incidentally is now in America for job. But visiting so many places Andy does not find any Bengali culture rather he finds the growing influence of western Rock Music. He surprised to see the changing nature of Kolkata. Though Sheila told him that the Kolkata is changed. The self-centeredness which is the feature of American life is now part of Bengali life also. People now became narrow, alienated from their culture and tradition. The biggest blow for him when he heard that his uncle is going to sell their ancestral house just for his inability to maintain it. He felt that his uncle thought about nothing except his own interest. And he decided to go back in America as there is no difference between Kolkata and New York, both are equally ruthless and self-centered.

Arpan is a bright student and got brilliant job in America. Initially he was happy but he finds also the cultural difference with Americans. Gradually he realized that in the land of justice a man has to pay value for every little thing. In the land of capitalism a man has to buy everything including human gesture and affection. Ultimately he protested against all those injustices and as a result he lost the job. Apu came back to Kolkata by taking a new job. Does the director wants to give the message that every Apu of Bengal can’t leave in somewhere else by leaving his family, friends and his own tradition?
nineteenth century counterparts or does their position within the family change in terms of the image of Lakshmi?

**THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN CHANGING NATURE OF BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS**

Let us look once again at *JANA ARANYA* and its hero Somnath. He is an Arts graduate, but starts a business as he can not manage to secure any suitable job for himself. We find that slowly he learns the tricks and strategies of doing business in the modern world. Sometimes he feels hesitant because of his family background but to get success he ultimately resorts to unethical means. He commits his biggest moral crime when he exploits his friend’s sister for securing a big order. Here we find a vague similarity with Sandip in the way he exploits Bimala’s sentiments for his narrow self interest behind the veil of nationalism. In case of Somnath such a veil was not there, though both violate the sanctity of the image of Lakshmi of the middle class women. It is not that there is no moral dilemma for Somnath when he was going to exploit that girl to get his order; he even tells her to go back and wants to give her money because he was aware of their financial plight. But necessity was more important than sheer morality and it is also true for that girl also, who had joined this profession of being a ‘call girl’ to earn money for herself and her family. So, when Somenath wants to favour her and tells her ‘no need to go there’, the girl Kana, known in the prostitution world as Juthika, rejects it because for her it is not simply a matter of only one night; she would have to face the same fate again. There is no meaning for her to be an object of pity. Rather it is better for her to consider Somnath just like any other customer. As a result Somnath got that big order but at the expense of a woman, one whom she closely knew. But Kana, known as Juthika who chose this life, whatever the reason for it, belonged to that section of middle class women who came out from their family. Apart from Juthika, those who came out in public to maintain their life, the general attitude of the middle class Bhadralok for them remained the same. The common understanding about these women was that they were definitely involved in some wrong profession beyond her sanctity.
In nineteenth century Bengal those who were the first generation of actresses, appearing in Bengali theatre were mainly prostitutes. Naturally at that time to appear in theatre was a matter of shame for the women of respected Bengali families. It was ‘Bengali Theatre’ which first introduced female actresses on stage. Before the introduction of female actresses in the end of eighteenth and early nineteenth century male actors played female roles. In ‘Bengali Theatre’ four actresses were taken, the person of Elokeshi, Jagattarini, Shyamasundari and Golap… and they all in their lives were prostitutes. Among four, two of them, Elokeshi and Jagattarini performed in Michael Madhusudan Dutta’s written play ‘Sarmistha’, which happened to be the first play for ‘Bengali Theatre’ on 16th August, 1873. The introduction of female actresses was a revolutionary act regarding the development of modern Bengali theatre. As ‘Hindu Patriot’ comments on this occasion “the actors performed their parts very creditably, the two actresses, who were professional women, we are informed, were most successful. We wish this dramatic crops had done without these actresses. It is true that professional women join the jatras and natches, but we had hoped that the managers of the Bengali theatres would not themselves go down to the level of the Jattrawallas.” Despite their social status of prostitutes they were the first generation of women who appeared in the public sphere. It was the common belief that only prostitutes appeared in the public sphere. Because of this background, when women in the post-independence era for sheer economic necessity came out from their families, the same feeling inherently worked in the minds among the middle class Bhadraloks, especially among their family members.


50 Hemendranath Dsgupta in his ‘The Indian Stage’ comments “To turn theatre into a school of art, it is necessary to introduce female artists on the stage, as male actors cannot do it for any length of time? Boys from the respectable classes cannot be available and the standard is not reached even by the best boy artists. It was not possible at that time to secure decent or respectable woman for this purpose. Actresses had, therefore, to be secured from the women of the town and until and unless cultured women of broader views come forward from respectable families, theatres have no other potion but to go on with actresses of the present status only.” Hemendranath used the remarks of Khetranath who wrote, “The more such theatres are started, acting will be improved and dramas composed in competition. The present theatres had no female artists on the staff. This will be soon considered as a defect. And means will be sought to remedy this defect. Some of the prostitutes are trying to receive education. If a few of such educated women are secured, happy consequences will outweigh any mischief done. Maitra, Amit (2004) Rangalaye Banganati, P. 06
So being a prostitute \textit{Kana} in a sense confirms the nineteenth century perceptions about women who come out in public life. As a middle class youth \textit{Siddhartha} is not free from such beliefs. It is reflected when an evening his sister takes him to the roof and shows him western dance which she has learnt. Seeing his sister dance, \textit{Siddhartha} suddenly identifies her with a young and charming ‘call girl’ to whom he had visited with his friend. Such identification becomes more acute when his sister tells him that she is thinking about modelling as a career option as many girls of respected middle class families were doing. To stop her from falling in such a trap, \textit{Siddhartha} goes to her boss’s house and tells him that the job which his sister is doing in his company does not suit her because she often returns late at night and feels tired due to the workload. \textit{Siddhartha} knew very well that he is unemployed and his sister’s job is the only hope for the family. Still, he could not take any chance to let her sister participate in the public domain by which she would be spoiled, for example, like \textit{Juthika}. \textit{Siddhartha’s} anxiety originates from his own stereotyped understanding of middle class women who maintain their home, bring their children up and remain confined in their private sphere. In a way he shares the \textit{Goddess} image of women in the middle class discourse as he belongs to this section. It is also evident from the fact that his girlfriend, who is educated enough, does not try to find any job but wants to maintain her image as a traditional middle class girl. When \textit{Siddhartha} gets the job of a medical representative and goes to Balurghat, she prefers to wait for him till he marries her. It also indicates that \textit{Siddhartha}, a middle class youth of the revolutionary age of the 1970s who strongly believes that the struggle of the Vietnamese people for their independence had the greater significance than landing in Moon, but still cherishes the image of the nineteenth century Bengali women who followed all qualities of ideal wifehood, like \textit{Goddess Lakshmi}.

But we could find the existence of female actresses in Lebedeff’s theatre in 1795 and Nabin’s theatre of 1833 though they were very short lived. However, the emergence of the new Bengali middle class and it’s various sections opposed the introduction of female actresses in theatre as it would be harmful for the youth’s mind. The question of female actresses was linked with more vital aspect of social morality. The most renowned person who opposed it was the Vidyasahar himself. It is said that he , who was one of the patrons and supporters of Saratchandra Ghosh, the pioneer of Bengali Theatre, severed his connection with it, at the introduction of females. But when prostitutes became the part of Bengali theatre it further closed the possibility of women of respected families because now it was held that the world of theatre is the domain of prostitutes. It was even held for those actresses who belonged to the first generation of film actresses. For middle class \textit{Bhadramahila}, to taka part in any kind of performing arts were equivalent to the inferior position of prostitute.
But as an ordinary human being, Siddhartha is helpless because that girl is his own sister. Whatever he does to stop her from going to work is because of his sheer affection as a brother to his sister. If Juthika was Somenath’s own sister, he could not have exploited her for his own profit. It is also true for Sandip; if Bimala was his own cousin or relative, he might not have been able to exploit her. For Sandip there is no question of moral panic because Bimala is the wife of his friend Nikhilesh. How men will react when their own women, if not being exploited, appear in the public world? We witnessed the reaction of Siddhartha, but in that case she was his sister, not wife. We would never know his reactions if his wife came out from the family to work in an office to support the family. But such a situation is portrayed in another film of Satyajit Ray called ‘MAHANAGAR’. In the film, Subrato has a big family, consisting of his parents, wife, sister and a little son. It is very difficult for a mere clerk like Subrato to maintain such a big family. To support the family he decides to let his wife Arati look for a job. She gets the job of a sales girl at a company with a monthly salary of rupees 100. It was not primarily her willingness, but the situation that forces Arati to take such a job. How do the other family members react to it? When Subrato informs his father that Arati has taken a job, he does not say much, except that his daughter-in-law has changed which is enough to understand that he could not accept the decision. It is more evident when, after getting her first salary, Arati goes to her father-in-law’s room to give some fruits and some money for his own expenditure. He tells her that he can take the fruits but not the money and said that they were free to choose different ways for their own happiness, he would not obstruct them; but he could not be a part of those affairs as “he is too old to change”. When she gives spices to her mother-in-law from that same first month’s salary she tells her that she needs nothing, but requests her to take care of her father-in-law and not to neglect him; only that much she expected from her. This kind of remark from her mother-in-law originates from the fear that if a woman comes out from her family and takes a job, very soon she will start to disobey elders as she no longer depends on them. And within the middle class mentality, Arati’s job is a violation of the image of housewife in a Bhadralok family who spends her whole life staying at home as Arati’s mother-in-law did.
Most surprising is the reaction of Subrato, her husband, because he himself finds her job through a newspaper advertisement and takes all initiatives for that. A month later when Arati tells Subrato about her salary and also about the commission she earned, he realizes that his wife has become smart enough to learn all the rules and terms of the sales world. Moreover when she informs him that the boss has praised her for her good work he suddenly feels that his own wife is turning into an unknown person for him. He even tells her that it is quite difficult for him to recognize Arati compared to her earlier image. Though Arati assures him that she remains the same as ‘Gharer Bou’ or house wife, he cannot overcome such anxiety, and tries to arrange an additional part time job and tells her to resign from her job. Actually Subrato, was brought up in a conservative middle class family and was unable to give up his own understanding of middle class women whose place is in the family. Before Arati started working as sales girl, she seriously asks Subrato whether he really wants her to do a job or not. Subrato replies at that time that like his father, he also believes that a woman’s place is in her home. It was not just a casual remark but he firmly believed it, which we find later when he asks his wife to resign from her job. It does not happen, however, as Subrato loses his own job following the collapse of his bank. Now Arati becomes the only earning member of the family. The situation is more painful, signifying a deeper crisis for Subrato because it completely reversed the popular perception of the middle class household system where the husband earns and the wife looks after the family. But for Subrato, his wife earns money and run the entire family; while he sat idle at home. Arati works to maintain her family but in the eyes of the common middle class man, her appearance in the public domain is a violation of the Goddess image handed down from nineteenth century Bengal.

Arati is fortunate enough because whatever be the reasons, she is able to participate in the public life through her job as a sales girl. It is not possible for Parama who has to maintain her Goddess image in the family. Parama is a member of higher middle class family and there is no need for her to do any job. Her husband Bhaskar Chowdhury’s income is more than enough to uphold the entire financial responsibilities of the family. Since there is no pressing necessity, there is no question of Parama to appear in public world like Arati. But participation in the public sphere need not be subjected to one’s financial needs; rather it is necessary for its own sake, to realize one’s
own identity. We should remember that ‘PARAMA’ is the film of 1980s but like the nineteenth century middle class outlook, efforts were still on to maintain the traditional Goddess image of Bhadramahila and any kind of violation of the image was beyond toleration. According to the narrative Parama violated the Lakshmi image at least twice. First, when she fell in love with Rahul which was an extra marital affair. It is a violation in the sense that Lakshmi always remains faithful to her husband, symbol of Lord Vishnu. When her husband knows of the affair between his wife and Rahul, he ostracizes her from the family. But her relationship with Rahul made her aware about the need to find her self-identity. After her suicidal attempt she decides to take the counter-sales job with the modest salary of Rs. 600. Here comes her second violation of the image of Lakshmi because the image does not allow a woman to appear for a job in public life but to maintain their four walled confinement. Naturally her family members become surprised to hear it and her husband becomes furious.

What all this brings out is that whatever changes may have taken place regarding the socio-economic position of the Bengali middle class, their attitude toward their women remains the same. The overwhelming importance to preserve the Goddess image created a situation where all attempts to appear in the public sphere for establishing their identity becomes difficult for women; they were even forced to maintain their image as is found in many cases. How Bengali women are forced to keep up her image as ‘Goddess of family’, we can find in the film, ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ in which Aditi is a housewife and mother of two sons. In such a family an old man Hemendra Narayan Mallick, played by Soumitra Chatterjee, appears who used to be a friend of her maternal uncle and had visited their house several times before her marriage. This man, as he belonged to the world of literature, reminds Aditi about her literary talents which surfaced in her student life. He inspires her to re-start writing which she had lost touch with after her marriage due to familial responsibilities. According to him, talents which were the gift of God should not be wasted in any case. So Aditi starts writing again and like all authors it soon becomes an avenue of her self-expression. But because of her new preoccupation her husband and sons gradually feel that she is neglecting her responsibilities towards the family, though initially they did not raise much objection about it. ultimately under the pressure of her family members she decides to give up writing. She surrenders because
her husband made it clear that it was a home, a place of peace and happiness and she should not disturb it while satisfying her own literary talent, which he bluntly conveys to her ‘mentor’ Hemenmama too. Aditi goes back to her usual life of a housewife where she makes everyone happy, the most important feature of Lakshmi. What her husband does suggests that the Bengali middle class even in the age of globalization and the ‘liberal’ environs is very much keen to preserve the notion of Lakshmi of their home.

Figure No : 05
The image of middle class woman in late twentieth century who is not allowed to participate in public domain despite major socio-economic changes in Bengali society.

(HEMANTER PAKHI)

It cannot be said very clearly that the image of Lakshmi was only a ‘male project’ in which women were passive recipients. There are plenty of instances where women criticized their fellow beings for failing to live up to her image even in their own family. Perhaps one appropriate example is found in the film ‘UNISHE APRIL’ which portrays the relationship between a mother and daughter; in other words the film represents the relation between two generations of women. In the film Sorojini Gupta is an internationally acclaimed classical dancer and her daughter Aditi is a doctor. Aditi lost her father at an early age and she was brought up from childhood in a hostel. She loves a boy
and wants to marry him and for that she can make every kind of sacrifice, even her medical career. It is astonishing to see that a modern girl of this age thinks in such fashion. But if one tries to find out the reason for such thinking, he might see that it is rooted in her imagination of the ideal housewife, so commonplace in middle class Bengali families. But she never finds it in her own mother Sorojini Gupta. For Aditi her mother is a career conscious person who seeks only fame and glory and is less caring towards her husband and daughter. She thinks that because of her mother’s self-centric personality her father had to live an unhappy life with her. She was not even present at the time of her father’s death but busy with her dance performance. Thus in every way her mother violated the sanctity of the image of housewife in Bhadralok middle class family. In her assessment she does not recognize the fact that her mother has upheld all financial responsibilities after her husband’s death. Rather she thinks that if her father had been alive he could do all that her mother has done. She firmly believes that for the sake of peace and happiness her mother should abandon her dancing career and carry on just as an ordinary housewife. If this is the mind-set of a highly educated girl at the end of the twentieth century resulting obviously from an internalization of the values generated by a ‘male project’, how could we say that women do not play any role in shaping the image of middle class women in the family?

Actually, representations of the image of middle class women Bengali films strongly suggest that the Goddess image of Bhadramahila was not confined to the nineteenth century Bengali society. In fact Bengali films reveal how the Goddess portrayal of Lakshmi very much prevails even at the end of twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium as part of the middle class family values. To keep such family values intact, Bengali middle class does not afford to compromise with the Goddess image of their women in spite of some visible changes in the outside world. The changing position and characteristics of middle class does not indicate any major shift in the notion of Goddess in Bengali society. Before going to the next chapter we would take a look at how this image appears again and again even in the twenty first century. In the mega serial ‘BANDHAN’ we find the characters of Sohini and Ipshita, both of them are daughter-in-laws of Sukhomoy Bannerji. But for the mother-in-law her younger daughter-in-law Sohini is like a witch (Daini) because with her arrival lot of problems
arise in the family including the elder son getting murdered. On the contrary the elder daughter-in-law, Ipshita, played by Srilekha Mitra, is considered to be the Lakshmi of the family because she brought peace, prosperity and happiness in the family. To save the family she can sacrifice everything, in fact she does it. To save her in-laws from eviction from their own home due to financial bankruptcy, she agrees to marry someone else and prepares herself to face the consequences as her new husband is a drunkard and sadist; indeed far from a normal being. What is disturbing is that to get popularity the serial needs to portray a traditional image of woman who brings happiness and is ready to sacrifice even her life for the well being of her family which obviously tallies with her image of Goddess Lakshmi. It indicates that society, especially the Bengali middle class section, still loves to see this kind of images. Theoretically speaking, Ipshita’s sacrifices were part of her ‘duties’ towards her family. If she did not marry into that family she would not have needed to make such compromises for marriage brings about changes in a woman’s status in terms of her relations with her in-laws. Thus, the identity question of middle class women is primarily dependent on her role which she performs as part of her familial relationship. For a genuine understanding of the individual identity of middle class women it needs a detailed study of women’s roles in family as part of her familial relations and to what extent such familial relations provide space in search of individual identity. We have addressed these questions in the following chapter.