Chapter Five

FAMILY AND SPACE: IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIP

The actual state of women in middle class family cannot be assumed without defining the nature of relationships which binds her to her family in terms of her image of Bhadramahila. According to the traditional family system in India, we can point out at least three kinds of familial relationships around which every man and woman spend their life. As Bengali cinema usually portrayed middleclass life, there is no dearth of cinematic representations of such familial relationships. From nineteenth century the family remained a site of class identity for the Bhadralok, and women have been entrusted with the vital task of preserving it. While looking at the representation of the familial relationships in Bengali cinema, one can very well find that in some of the acclaimed films these representations have close link with the social reality of the land. Analyzing the representation of familial relationships in Bengali cinema, we would look at the aspects of conjugal relationship between husband and wife; next to between mother and child; and finally, relationship of the women with other members of the family, mainly mother and father-in law. But to discuss familial relations, we cannot escape the event of marriage on which every familial relation is formed and legitimized.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘MARRIAGE’ IN INDIAN SOCIETY

For Indians, to what extent marriage plays an important role, is evident in the film NEAL ‘N’ NIKKI. Nikki, who is the daughter of an NRI family living in Canada, met with the boy Neal, who has that same kind of family background. Gradually they have become close to each other, both mentally and physically. Now Nikki wants to marry Neal to legitimize this relationship as she lost her virginity to him. However, in terms of her life style she is a typical western girl visiting nightclubs and doing lots of other
things. But her western life style couldn’t wash away the necessity of traditional Indian marriage that maintains women’s chastity in society while brought up in foreign land.\footnote{Neal before meeting Nikki felt that among his other girlfriends there was no one who could have the quality of being his wife. Even he was ready to accept the Indian girl, from Vatinda as his mother chose her. But incidentally that girl happens to be the cousin of Nikki and she also loves someone else. So after lot of drama Neal and Nikki finally knot with each other.}

Actually marriage converts personal relations into familial one but mainstream Hindi cinema which culminates in marriage usually does not deal with the nature of post-marital familial relations.\footnote{Shoma, A Chatterjee (1998) \textit{Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman: A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema}, Parumita Publications, Calcutta. P. 78} If any popular film deals with marital discord, the film, as if automatically seems to distance itself from being labelled “mainstream” simply because it demands a different treatment, a different style, a different exposure to an audience which also begins to define its atypical slot.\footnote{Ibid P. 80} Otherwise films want to maintain ideal nature of post-marital relationship suppressing conflicts and echoing the conservative tone of Indian tradition. Popular Bengali cinema follows this same pattern.

In the glorious period of Bengali cinema, most of the popular Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen films viewed marriage as the happy ending of their romance but stayed silent on the question of post-marital familial conflict whether the film is set up within middle class, joint, or nuclear family. From sociological point of view, marriage is by definition a heterosexual institution and is usually thought of as a relationship between two equal partners based on love, intimacy and companionship.\footnote{Introduction: ‘Marriage And Intimate Relationships’, in Jackson Stevi and Scott Sue (edited) (2002) \textit{Gender : Sociological Reader}; Routledge, New York P. 203} Love is commonly assumed to form the basis of a mutual caring bond created by romance and sexual
attraction cemented through physical and emotional intimacy. This love story culminated in marriage almost in all Bengali films of 60s.

But marital relations do not always live up to this ideal, gender inequalities pervade the most of personal relationships, and what happens within the private life of each couple cannot be understood as separable from wider social inequalities and cultural mores in which it is embedded. In Indian society marriage means a girl leaving her natal family to join another family. This shift of place seriously diminishes her status as a newly married woman. This is the actual realization of Sanaka, the mother-in-law in the film ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’. After spending so many years as a married woman she lamented for never being able to see eye-to eye with her husband when she heard from her daughter-in-law that she was divorcing her son Biresh. Her most important remark is that before her marriage her brothers took care of her on every little thing in her natal family, but after her marriage she lost that position and became almost a maid servant for the family. She cautioned her daughter-in-law, Paromita that her married life might not be happy but it did not mean that her marriage with Rajeev (the documentary film maker would be happy one, as all men are the same. Actually Sanaka tries to make her aware about the place of women in men’s life which only degrade them into a servant of the family and this is done in a very legitimate manner through marriage, both socially and culturally.

How do women view their marriage while being brought up in traditional Bengali society? In nineteenth century Bengal, Sarada Sundari, mother of a great Brahma reformist leader Kesab Chandra Sen, said that when she heard about going to in law’s house, it seemed that someone was going to confine or hang her. It reveals that after marriage freedom of a woman is completely lost which she enjoys in her natal family and becomes confined into four walls. In those days marriage of a girl was decided by her family members, her opinion was hardly asked for. Marriage was considered as the ultimate destiny beyond which there is nothing for her. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, we find that in his letter to Annapurna, Asha’s uncle (father’s elder

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brother) expresses his anxiety over Asha’s marriage for otherwise she will remain as a spinster (Arakshaniya). What is interesting is that her uncle could not think beyond the destiny of marriage as she belonged to a traditional Bengali family.

If this is the situation in nineteenth century Bengal what kinds of changes have taken place in twentieth century, especially in post-independent India? The attitude of society towards women’s marriage remained same as in nineteenth century which practically excludes other possibilities for her. Satyajit Ray in his film ‘JANA ARANYA’ points out this attitude in a different manner. In the film, the leading character Somnath, who just passed B.A. but could not secure honours, was informed by his girlfriend about her marriage with a doctor despite all her initial resistance and finally she accepted her parents’ decision. Because her parents argued that Somnath was too young and he needed more time to be established which she also could not reject. What came out from it was that even in the decade of 1960’s, women had no other alternative beyond marriage and that was also not decided by herself but by her parents. Not exactly in the same manner but the film ‘SAAT PAAKE BANDHA’ which portrayed the character of ‘Archana’ tells this same story though her marriage with ‘Sukhendu’ was organized with her own consent that had been cemented by her father. But Archana belonged to a highly educated and progressive family, she herself was also studying in college but after marriage she abandons everything - even her education - and sincerely tries to protect her marriage, in which she was ultimately a failure. Surprisingly, she takes the job of a school teacher not for any other reason but to involve herself in some way or other. One may conclude from this observation that since Archana is a divorcee that is why she put herself into the profession of a school-teacher. Even at the end of twentieth century and the beginning of twenty-first century the thing did not seem to have changed. In DAHAN, we see that Romita was married with Palash arranged by her father and initially she was quite satisfied in playing the role of a house-wife. But when she realized that her married life cannot be a happy one, she asked her sister to arrange some job or some educational course abroad.

But the situation for men is different because marriage is neither the only option nor it reduces his position in family. Rather, despite being married he can enjoy his dominating status. The characters of Mahendra in ‘CHOKHER BALI’ and Palash in
‘DAHAN’ can be this of kind examples. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’, it is the dominating position of Mahendra vis-à-vis the position of Ashalata which allowed him to involve in extra-marital affair with Binodini, and leave home with her. In ‘DAHAN’ it was the domination of Palash which ultimately resulted in marital rape of his own wife. One of the basic differences between women’s and men’s marriage results from the lifestyle – namely, the almost complete change in the nature of work that marriage brings in her life but not in his. Until recently and for most women even today, every woman becomes a housewife. The point is that all is being born female in a culture which not only denigrated women but by virtue of their gender they are diminished and constrained in society. We do our socializing of girls so well, in fact, that many women not only feel that they are fulfilled by marriage, they have been completely shaped for their dependency and passivity. To follow feminist understanding, the institution of marriage can be viewed through the equation of 1+1=1. In this formulation 1+1 basically represents man and woman where the value of man is 1 while the value of woman is 0 which explains the end result of the equation. In a way, this initial discussion on marriage can provide us an important link to understand the nature of familial relationships, particularly for middle class women.


NATURE AND IDEOLOGY: THE RELATIONSHIP OF HUSBAND AND WIFE IN BENGALI FAMILY

Marriage heralds sweeping changes in a woman’s life like changes in her residence, her kin affiliation, the rights and responsibilities of being a wife and bearing all kind of duties of household while maintaining kin relations within the conjugal family. In women’s narratives these changes account for the more troubled part of their early married lives. Many women feel the constricted freedom after marriage and the constraints of living in conjugal families. With marriage, the bride is suddenly thrown into and expected to deal with a range of things including running a house, family relationships, and sexual relations. In our society, the bonds of marriage have religious and social sanction, thus any sexual liaison that defies this bond is a defiance of social norms, a violation of the sacred marriage vows which are religiously and morally held to be sacrosanct. But, men having polygamous relationships are tolerated and adultery among men is still socially accepted. Aparna Sen’s film ‘PARAMA’ is an example of how modernity acts a hypocritical mask that veils the double standards of an urban, ‘progressive’ family which otherwise allows their daughter-in-law for photo shoot before an outside photographer. Such fragile surface cracks under the expose of the middle-aged daughter-in-law’s brief but torrid affair with the friend of a nephew years younger to her. In the film, Parama who does not feel at all guilty, asked her husband about his loyalty toward his wife. But he cuts her out completely — from household responsibilities, from her children, from money to run the household, from sharing the bedroom and the bed, from commanding the household staff. He humiliates her by saying

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16 Ibid P. 113
“I don’t want my children to be brought up by a whore!” At one stroke, the ‘queen’ of the household, the ideal wife, daughter-in-law, aunt, mother, is reduced to a prostitute.\(^{17}\)

Prostitution is a binary term of chastity. This notion of ‘chastity’ or ‘satitva’ is built around the principle that the wife will always remain faithful to her husband. Every Hindu woman is expected to follow this principle like a religion which is much more important than her own life. So, when a woman gets involved in any kind of extra-marital affair that is considered to be a violation of this sacred principle. In the ‘Husband-Wife’ relationship the ideology of chastity or satitva plays a very important role in shaping the nature of it. But we should remember that chastity is the ideology for women not for men. Any personal relationship involves a good deal of interdependence of emotions and thoughts evolving through a negotiated set of disclosures.\(^{18}\) But the ideology of chastity affects the most personal relationship between husband and wife where the woman is put into subordination and the husband is granted superior position in the family. The Indian family system in general and the Bengali middle class family in particular, cannot be understood in terms of the Western notion of family. Because what we understand as nuclear family actually is an extended family system for us which usually consists of three generations, under one roof. The joint family is constituted of more than three generations and other close relatives. Thus, in the Indian family system there is a difference between extended and joint family, unlike in the West.\(^{19}\) Whether the family is nuclear, extended or joint, the life of a middle class woman does not seem to be different. In PARAMA, the film begins with the celebration of Durga puja in the Chowdhury family. We find her being called upon every now and then to meet a demand or another. Like, “where should I keep the item for the bhoga?” asks one and she tells her where. Another person calls out to inform her that a visiting aunt with a headache is asking for an aspirin. She brings a glass of water to her mother-in-law and asks her to


\(^{19}\) Godwin argues, there can be two types of family forms : the elementary, or nuclear family and joint, or extended family. The nuclear family consists of three social positions : husband/father, wife/mother and children. The joint/extended family usually consists of three or more generations under one roof. *Personal Relationships Across Culture*, Routledge , London. Pp. 112
down the pills, which she hands over to the older woman. All images suggest that Parama is the wife of a joint family who performs all these duties. However, she lives in the office quarter of her husband who is the youngest son of the family, along with her mother-in-law. But even in her own home, she does the same household duties: she gives her husband his ‘garlic pears’ capsules and holds the glass of milk for her younger son Tutul before he leaves for school. She attends her mother-in-law at lunch. Though, it is not a joint family Parama’s responsibilities remain as usual. Whatever she performed for the family sincerely, could neither save her from being labelled as a ‘whore’ by her husband nor help her get any support from other family members, when her ‘adultery’ got revealed.

Figure No : 06
Looking after the household was the destiny of Parama
(PARAMA).

Thus, chastity is an ideology which made all other qualities of a wife secondary. Though in early nineteenth century, chastity was one of the elements in the social construction of ‘Bhadramahila’, which in the age of nationalism after 1870’s arguably became the only sign for ideal wifehood. The efforts of the enlightened bhadarlok to modernize the middle class women is reflected in Satyajit Ray’s ‘CHARULATA’ where Charu’s husband requests her cousin brother Amal to inspire her about writing, which he feels to be one of her inborn qualities which needs to be developed. Otherwise, she is a housewife who takes care of her husband, performs household responsibilities, at the same time aware about his newspaper ‘Sentinel’, which deals primarily with political affairs. Since the modernization efforts were projected by the western educated men for their own requirements, the women had to develop some refined qualities, which was essential to their class identity. In ‘CHOKHER BALI’, Mahendra despite being a married man is attracted to Binodini. Perhaps because she was educated by a lady English teacher, she knows modern housewifery which he cannot find in his own wife Ashalata, as she is not at all educated, and she believes that a woman who learns to read will become a widow like her maternal aunt.

In the second half of the nineteenth century when the reforms movement was consolidated, we find the emergence of new values among the English educated Brahmo youth. They refused to accept that marriage was important only for reproduction. For them, if the goal of marriage was only to give birth to a male-child then marriage could not be considered a bond, based on mutual love. They held that this kind of marriage should be rejected as ‘Devilish’. Some women of that time were also influenced by this kind of values. For example, Krishnabhakini Das, a highly educated woman who while living in England witnessed contemporary women’s movements and other events. She opposed the view that the life of a woman was for the fulfilment of man’s enjoyment and interests. 21 To what extent do their husbands love them’ was the most important question for these women, both in nuclear and joint families. In some cases, the wives were able to

get more prestige and position in the family due to the generosity of their husbands.\textsuperscript{22} We find this attitude of the educated ‘Bhadralok’ in Bhupati in CHARULATA. In the whole film, we do not find any comment which accuses Charu for being a childless by her husband. Rather he wants Charu to be a part of his world of politics. Mahendra, also in CHOKHER BALI, never accuses his wife for being childless. However, Asha on her own accord feels ashamed in front of her husband as she remains childless even after a year of marriage.

After 1870’s, surprisingly we find in journals like ‘Bamabodhini Patrika’ which was considered to be the mouthpiece of the reformist Brahmo section, large articles emphasizing ideal wifehood. Some of these pieces were written by those women writers who earlier had propagated a reformist agenda. Nagendrabala Dasi in her manual ‘The True Wife’ wrote that a woman has four different relationships with her husband and because of it a husband can claim from her four different kinds of love: ‘devotion’; ‘passion’; ‘affection’ and ‘true love’. Among these four kinds of love, ‘true love’ is the most important of all. Only when love is separated from worldliness, that is, when it lacks self-interest, it is called ‘true love’. The first relationship of a wife with her husband is that of a ‘partner’, the second is that of a ‘wife’, the third, a ‘friend’ and the fourth is the ‘spiritual’ relationship.\textsuperscript{23}

For the Bengali Hindu wife, ‘partnership’ means the sharing of precious things such as fame, respect, wealth, knowledge, happiness, peace, pleasure, dharma, and so forth. The husband and the wife together earn these riches in the world and they make each other happy by sharing what they have earned. But the wife should be devoted to her husband as he is the wife’s sole protector, provides her with food, clothing and shelter; he takes care to always keep her safe. All this was in the husband’s domain. The ‘wife’ relationship existed for the creation of an offspring and for that husband-wife involved themselves with ‘passion’.\textsuperscript{24} The third kind of love, ‘affection’ signified the


relationship of a friend who gave good advice, wished well as much in prosperity as in danger. The spiritual relationship that expressed the ‘true love’ connected the souls of the husband and the wife which would last forever. The manual emphasizes that the body is destroyed but the soul is not. The relationship is sacred because in this relationship alone, a husband is worthy of worship by his wife, that he is like a god to her and has the right to receive her heavenly selfless love. That is why the position of a true wife, like Sita, Savitri, was very high and worshipped as Goddess.25

As a devoted wife, Charu does not object to Bhupati’s spending for the newspaper ‘Sentinel’ and his interest in liberal politics. She gives consent by saying ‘we are not going to starve’. From her end, Bhupati is doing a good job, by which he could earn fame and respect. As a life partner she shares these precious things with her husband. Though, it does not suggest that the husband would share the household responsibilities with his wife.26 In CHOKHER BALI, when the camera focuses in the bedroom of Asha and Mahendra, we see the ‘passionate love’ between them and Asha does not seem to object any more, as she knows that it is a necessary part for having their own child. That is why she says that after a year of their marriage they have remained childless. Here, we should note that in nineteenth century Bengal, husbands regarded themselves as benevolent teachers of their wives. The wives of course should not have any moral right to give their husbands any advice, they were not considered as equal to their husbands. Asha can only ask her husband whether he will go to college or not, but cannot advice him by saying that otherwise it will affect his study. The ideal of ‘friendship’ and ‘affection’ between them are hardly realized. The idea of ‘spiritual’ relationship that is for ‘true love’ is a matter of two souls which might be realized only in ‘Heaven’. In performing ‘true love’, wives try to fulfil their life’s purpose by reaching the


26 Nagendrabala writes, ‘partnership’ does not imply that the husband should help his wife in preparing food or share other household activities. Only those works which seems to be difficult, husband and wife help each other and share them as partner. Bharati Ray (Edited) (2002) Nari O Paribar : Bamabodhini Patrika, Ananda Publications, Calcutta. P. 198
highest position of a true wife.\textsuperscript{27} When \textit{Asha} had separated from her husband to make him happy with \textit{Binodini} and living in Kashi, was trying to follow this ‘true spiritual love’ which puts one beyond the worldly affairs.

![Figure No: 07](image)

As a traditional wife, Asha knows only about passionate love being totally ignorant of other aspects of modern housewifery. (CHOKHER BALI)

A woman of nineteenth century Bengal claimed that the relationship between husband and wife was never close. The parents became unhappy if they felt that their daughter-in-law was getting more love and more attention from their son. In these cases they considered their son as henpecked and the daughter-in-law as witch.\textsuperscript{28} The mother-

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid  P. 199

\textsuperscript{28} Golam Murshid (2001) \textit{Nari Pragati : Adhunikatar Abhighate Banga Ramani}, Naya Udyog, Calcutta. P. 95
in-law, Rajlakshmi in ‘CHOKHER BALI’, expressed this same kind of agony when she saw that her daughter-in-law was getting more affection and love from her son. She lamented by saying, ‘a witch turns her son into a sheep’. Mankumari Bose writes that decent behaviour is necessary for both the husband and the wife. They should not express their amorous feeling except in lonely place and it should to be remembered that the husband-wife relationship is not only physical, it is also spiritual. If they can’t maintain their decent behaviour with each other it could invite problems in family life. In that case, the unhappiness in their conjugal relationship will be expressed.  

Even in second half of nineteenth century, in some modern progressive families, the couple could neither meet during day nor even speak with each other. In ‘CHARULATA’, Bhupati, passing by the corridor, does not look at Charu who stands there in the evening. He attends his wife only at dinner. Mahendra directly goes to his wife’s room, which is not a show of good manner on the part of an educated son to his mother. Since, this is the accepted pattern of behaviour both in joint and nuclear families, the newly-wed couple could not enjoy their conjugal life.

There were of course some writings and images which may be termed dissenting voices. The writing of a woman in “Satitva O Patibratya Dharma” suggested that whatever the duties of a wife are towards her husband that is called patibratya dharma. It seemed that other qualities were not so essential for her. If she had been celebrated as sati, she felt proud for that, despite having so many other vices. It is the duty of a wife to avoid any practice of adultery, but other duties towards her husband are also important. Unfortunately, in this country satitva dharma implies only to reject adultery. In another piece of writing, it is argued that to make a happy family, three other things are needed along with love – liberty, education and pleasure. Without these four things, a family seems to be a prison. The image of Mrinal in ‘STEER PATRA’ exemplifies this spirit when she leaves her home for the inhuman attitude of the members of her in-laws family, including her husband towards an orphan girl. In that way Mrinal

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30 Ibid. Pp. 63-64

31 Ibid. P. 98
is not satisfied with the status of ‘patibrata ramani (a devoted wife)’ if that demands of a wife to follow whatever her husband says and she violates this sacred principle of ideal wifehood. Cultural nationalism later fails to emancipate women from this situation as we can remember that in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’, Sandip, told Bimala that she was the ‘Makshi Rani’ (Queen bee)’ of their group and acted as the source of inspiration but did not involve her in active politics beyond the private sphere. Since in the age of nationalism ‘private – public’ dichotomy was asserted in a more rigid manner, it only provided a sense of public spirit for middle class women but at the same time rejected the question of emancipation in public sphere.

In post-independence India, the middle class continues to carry the burden of national identity and its reformist role within the nation-state.\footnote{32 Madhav M Prasad (1996) \textit{Ideology Of Hindi Film : A Historical Construction}, Oxford University Press, New Delhi. P. 163} But due to the Partition and economic pressure, majority of the middle class members now got relegated from higher officials to the level of clerks (kerani). Notwithstanding, the husband-wife relationship within the middle class family did not seem to have changed much. ‘SAAT PAAKE BANDHA’ which depicts the character of Archana who is the wife of a poor college teacher but despite being an educated girl and coming from a progressive family, she plays the traditional role of a housewife for whom, running the household is not an easy task because of the husband’s low income. For that same reason Arati is allowed to find a job in ‘MAHANAGAR’, though her husband seems to be unhappy along with the other family members. At the same time husbands remained ‘benevolent’ teachers for their wives like Avijit in ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ who has the progressive image in a conservative joint family. He has made his wife conscious about meaningless customs and rituals which degrade humanity itself. However, his wife Bandana maintains herself as a typical housewife which does not change, despite the efforts of her progressive husband. The starkest evidence we find in the film ‘ANU’ who is a political activist of the 1970’s and loves one of the leaders Sugato, of her group. Once she gets raped as a part of repressive tactics. Later, she marries Sugato but when he knows that she was raped, he cannot accept her and starts to maintain distance. ‘Chastity’ is so important for him that
Sugato feels that after being raped Anu has nothing to give him. In one stroke he denies her true love for him.

In ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’, a film of the 1990’s, we can recall Sanaka’s reaction, when she heard about the affair of her daughter-in-law (Paromita) with Rajiv Srivastav and also that they were going to marry: “you should be ashamed for talking about your second marriage in front of your present mother-in-law”. She called Paromita a wicked woman, who she suspected went frequently to the spastic school to meet Rajiv. And in this way she actually betrayed her son Biresh who thought that his wife was going to that school for their son. This is the typical reaction of any woman who has spent her whole life in a middle class family and for whom chastity is ‘the’ important value. Otherwise, there was a close bond between Sanaka and Paromita. Another image is Sarojini Gupta of ‘UNISHE APRIL’ who faces criticism from her relatives for not taking proper care of her husband which causes his early death. She is always busy with her own dance career unlike other housewives. So, ‘satinva’ and ‘patibratya’ remained as strong at the end of twentieth century among the Bengali middle class families.

To end the discussion, we can look at the lives of Anusua and Dipak in ‘JUGANTO’ directed by Aparna Sen. As husband and wife they do not live together because of their different professional commitments they have to live in different cities. Anusua aborted her child for her dancing career. According to the narrative, the director wants to show that the incident of Anusua’s abortion in the film is significant. It is the reason behind the growing distance between them. After seeing this film, it is well understood that the director is somehow critical about their pattern of relationship. The film had the potentiality to present an alternative image of the ‘husband-wife’ relationship as well as of motherhood for the middle class in the twenty-first century but the director apparently missed that opportunity. Perhaps the director herself believes in middle class values which do not allow the husband and the wife to live in different places because of their professional commitments or avoid a child because of the wife’s career.33

33 As a filmmaker Aparna Sen is quite successful in representing a kind radical posture in her films. But despite her bold attempts in portraying women characters, ultimately she had to compromise with middle class values. In the film ‘PARAMA’ she portrayed the lead character in a radical manner. But Parama’s attempt to commit suicide was an obvious compromise by the director with the age old middle class
MOTHERHOOD: IDEAL RELATIONSHIP OF MOTHER-CHILD

Anusua avoids being a mother but it is not that she does not believe in motherhood. As she said, she wished to become a mother like any other woman but for that she wanted planning. Ultimately, when she decided to conceive it was too late. And she remained deprived from realising the glorious event of motherhood in her life. Yet what was ‘glorious’ for Anusua, may not have had been the same for all cases. In ‘KEYA KEHENA’, the educated modern girl (Priya), played by Preeti Zinta confessed, “it is a great fortune for any woman to be a mother but only for those who are married. If she is unmarried, the glory of motherhood is turned into a curse for her.”

Thus, the glory of motherhood always needs to be validated by the society through the institution of sensibility. It suggests the supremacy of the notion of ‘Chastity’ as the essence of the image of middle class women what Parama is. Since she had lost her chastity through her involvement with Rahul, she has no right to live. There is no scope for violating such norms in middle class discourse. So the apparent radicalism in the beginning of the film ends up with cherished middle class ideals like chastity and sexual fidelity. Also in her recent film ‘ITI MRINALINI’ she portrayed the character of Minu, who is a film actress, who dared to become an unmarried mother but such radical portrayal gets marred when we find that she was constantly persuading her partner to marry her. Even she could not muster the courage to bring up her child on her own. The child was treated as an adopted daughter of her brother and sister-in-law. In portraying such characters Aparna Sen avoided certain other important aspects which reduced them just to other stereotyped images. On the other hand such contradictions in characters make it clear that she could not altogether reject middle class understanding as part of Bhadralok intelligentsia.

34 ‘KEYA KAHENA’ is the story of an innocent girl Priya who otherwise bold and courageous falls in love with Rahul. He is the son of the most affluent family of the city but the unfortunate part is that he does not believe in love. He flattering with so many girls and after some time he leaves them. Priya is the latest among them who has become a victim of his play boy image. But the worst part of it that she becomes pregnant because of her physical relationship with Rahul. Following the general pattern of other Hindi films Rahul’s family does not accept her as their daughter-in-law and Rahul also rejects to marry her. But when her father appeals him for the second time he agrees to marry but put a condition that the next day of their marriage he gives her divorce. Obviously it is unacceptable for them and they have decided that they abort her pregnancy. But Priya does not agree to do that so she leaves the home. Ultimately, her parents accept her decision. But it was a hard decision because from her locality to her college and among friends she becomes targeted of having violating the sanctity of womanhood. But she remains firm in her own decision.

There is another man in the film, Ajay, who is the childhood friend of Priya and silently loves her. Now knowing everything about her he proposed to marry her. With some hesitation Priya agreed for it. In the mean time Rahul realizes what he did and prayed her pardon which she did but she refused to marry him. Because Rahul may be her child’s father but now she does not love him. She now loves Ajay who accepted her as his love partner unlike Rahul who left as irresponsible man. The message of the film is that one’s husband may not be the father of her children because fatherhood might be possible in void of love which can be found in some other person. It is very radical from our traditional point of view.
marriage. To our common understanding, motherhood and marriage are related in some way or the other.

To discuss mother-child relationship, what is taken for granted is that the mother-child relationship is necessarily a relation between mother and son because the common understanding is that daughters after being married have to take the responsibilities of the in-laws of the husband’s family. Daughters are usually brought up in such a manner that she can perform all her duties not only for her paternal home but for another family as well where she will be married. Sons are mainly expected to take the responsibilities of their parents and that is why sons are preferred to daughters in India. It is believed that only a son can provide the much needed protection and security to his parents. There may be some exceptions but in general this is the common belief in our Indian society. We find a depressed father, in ‘LAAGA CHUNARI MEIN DAAG’, who unable to solve his family problems, feels that if he had a son rather than two daughters, they could support the family. Though, in the film the elder daughter provides support but for that she has to become an escort, a ‘sophisticated version of Tayae’.35

35 ‘Laga Chunri Me Dag’ is the story of Bibhabari, an innocent girl of Benaras who turned into an escort for upholding her family responsibilities. As the film unfolds itself, we find that Bibhabhory is the elder daughter of the family and she has another sister. Her father is a retired person but deprived of his pension. There is no son in the family who could take the responsibilities for them. Moreover there is a legal dispute over their house with her uncle, for that they need lot of money to carry on the court case. They just maintain themselves by stitching cloths. In this situation Bibhabari comes to Mumbai looking for job but as she merely has a secondary school level qualification there is no suitable job for her. One day a rich man, seeing her condition offered her a job but for that he wanted to have physical relationship and he called her to a hotel room. Since it was her only hope she agreed for it but after enjoying her company that person refused to give her job in his concern. Now for her the only profession remains is the prostitution and she becomes Natasha who in public eyes is an event manager but in reality is a high-society escort. Though her mother comes to know everything she cannot tell it to anyone. Being in that profession she is able to perform her responsibilities for her family even as her sister completes her MBA course. After getting the MBA degree her sister Subhabari comes to her place in Mumbai and joins a reputed Ad-agency. There she finds a nice boy Bibhan and they get close together and decide to marry. When Bibhabari informs her parents about their marriage and they would soon come to Benaras her mother tells her that in their locality a rumour has been spread about her profession and it is better that she should not come to her sister’s marriage otherwise the marriage will be affected. Following her mother’s advice she decides not to attend her sister’s marriage. Meanwhile Shubhabari becomes aware about her sister’s profession but instead of hating her she tells that without her presence she will not be going to marry because she is the person whose sacrifice makes them happy. The family as a whole should be grateful to her for ever. On the occasion of their marriage they come to Benaras where she finds Rohan who happens to be the elder brother of Bibhan with whom she met in Zurich when she was visiting with an industrialist as his business manager. On that occasion of his brother’s wedding that same Rohan proposes to her which she initially rejects because she thinks that he did not know about her real profession. But Rohan assures her that he knew it from the very beginning. Ultimately in the film Bibhabari gets justice in her life. What is important that in this film we find the liberal image of Indian men which is somewhat surprising in the eyes of tradition.
Family members usually do not expect support from their daughters. But, we know, there are many daughters in our society who perform their duties towards their parents, even after their marriage.

Though motherhood can’t claim its legitimacy without the sanction of marriage the bond between the mother and the child is much stronger than that of the husband and the wife. Through mutual separation the couple can break their relationship which is not possible in case of a mother and child even now. A woman becomes a mother through the physical act of having one of her eggs fertilized, carrying it in her womb, and giving birth to a child. This biological aspect is an important factor in understanding why the mother-child relation is stronger than other bonds. But ideal motherhood is intertwined with other ideological and social aspects which go beyond the biological fact of it. The image of a good mother shows her to be endlessly patient, forgiving, nurturing and most important of all, unfailing in her love towards her children even when the latter did not belong to her in the biological sense. The image of an ideal mother indeed, is more than an ideological construction. We know that everywhere there is a set of beliefs that operate in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity. Only its forms vary socially as well as culturally and the notion of motherhood is not an exception of it.

While looking at the representation of motherhood in films it should be noted that there was a common thrust towards portrayal of the sacrificing mother figure. The films made on Ellan Wood’s novel ‘East Lynne’ from 1913 to 1931 are examples of the idealized mother who remains pure and untouched. In portraying this image of motherhood, we do not find Isabel’s (the main character of the novel East Lynn) desire for Levision and her sexual pleasure, which played a central role in the original novel. No doubt, it was an attempt to present an idealized virgin mother and retain mythic purity.


37 Ibid.

The portrayal of the ideal sacrificing mother image, it may be noted here, is also to be found in nineteenth century England where the Victorian ideological construction represented the mother as the angel of the house. What this meant was that the mother had to be unfailingly self-sacrificing, devoted to the care and service of others; only able to see her fulfilment through marriage and its desired end, motherhood. The domestic angel was always described as beautiful, loyal, compassionate and forgiving – yet she was sexually passionless. In Victorian England this ideal motherhood was very much related to the notion of white middle class Gentle Woman.39

Unlike the image of the Victorian lady in nineteenth century Britain, motherhood was not the part of the image of Bhadramahila for the Bengali middle class though the former had a direct influence on its social construction.40 All the major films which portrayed nineteenth century domesticity remained quite silent about the question of ‘motherhood’. Even in early nineteenth century Bengali literature, the mother figure was totally absent. It first appeared in the writings of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, but in these writings we find the ideal mother, whose affection may not only be directed towards her own offspring but to the other members or cousins of the family too.41 For example, in the story of ‘MEJODIDI’, the protagonist extends her true love and affection to an orphan child with whom she had no formal bonding. The boy used to live with her mother. But after his mother’s death, to find shelter he came to her elder sister’s family. There he found Mejodidi who happens to be her sister-in-law. But she did not hesitate to look after him just like her own mother. This story was later made into a film where the famous actress Kanan Devi played the memorable character of Mejodidi for which she is remembered even today. Through this writing Sarat Chandra suggests that to become an


40 Himani Banerjee argues, the largest bulk of social reforms and discussions addressed women and gender relations prevailing in the family. The middle class, to ameliorate the living conditions of Bengaly women, to improve their minds and morality, put a significant concern for upliftment of Bengali society as a whole. The idea was to bring the women of propertied classes within the purview of ‘civilization’, ‘progress’ and ‘utility’. But in her study we do not find any evidence so that the notion of motherhood was in anyway part of the construction of ‘Bhadramahila’. Banerjee, Himani (2001) Inventing Subjects : Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism, Tulika Books, New Delhi. P. 100

ideal mother-figure, it is not necessary to have one’s own child. In other words, the ideal image of a mother is not biological but social. The mother-figure which we find in Sarat Chandra’s literary creations was part of our own tradition. The portrayal of ‘Jasoda’ as an ideal mother-figure of lord ‘Krishna’, who was not her offspring, is a splendid example from Indian mythologies. The bond of love, affection and care developed in such a manner between ‘Jasoda’ and ‘Krishna’ that the Lord is often called ‘Jasoda Nandan’ (the loving son of Jasoda).

It is evident that the debates concerning women somehow did not address the issue of motherhood in early nineteenth century Bengal. Motherhood remained a natural and sacrosanct event of a woman’s life, corresponding to the beliefs of the traditional Hindu family. But no attempt was made by the middle class intelligentsia and social reformers to change the image of motherhood as it was done in the case of wifehood. It became the matter of a public debate when nationalism gathered momentum in Bengal. Thus what Nikhilesh tells Bimala (i.e. “the people of the country portrayed the nation as mother goddess and worshipped it”) is the appropriate depiction of the nationalist sentiment which can also be found in the writings of Bankimchandra.42 The anti-colonial nationalism replaced older patriarchy with a new tradition: new because it challenged indigenous patriarchal traditions – by allowing women’s literacy and education; yet, it still remained ‘patriarchy’ because it continued to stress the women’s dependent and subordinate status within society and firmly located their place within the home.43 In ‘GHARE BAIRE’, Bimala is not only an educated person but she has knowledge of western music and is aware of the nationalist swadeshi movement but she does not actively join in the movement. Despite that she is subordinated to her husband and that’s why Nikhilesh rejects her request to stop foreign goods in his area to help the movement. Her subordinate position is reflected once again when Sandip, the nationalist leader seduces her for his own interest which clearly shows that whatever was the nationalist

42 ‘Anandamath’ is the novel where Bankim presents his nationalist image of motherhood. The novel was written at the background of ‘Sannyasi Bidroho’ which took place in nineteenth century eastern Bengal. The nationalist hymn ‘Bandamataram’ was found first time in this novel which later sounded during the age of ‘Swadeshi’ movement by swadeshis as well as revolutionaries.

perception of the ‘nation’, the actual status of a woman was not more than that of an object that can be used in different ways and manners.

In late nineteenth century ‘Bamabodhini Patrika’, close to moderate Brahmo section of the Bengali middle class, echoed the argument that of all other works, ‘child rearing’ was the most important and an ideal mother should bring up her child in a manner so that he could become an ideal member of the society with the best conceivable qualities. Discussing the role of the mother, it asserted that she should perform at least two important roles – first, to look after the child’s health; second, to inculcate good habits in the child. Those who have become famous in this world, like George Washington or Sir William Jones, had all learnt their first and basic lessons from their mothers. Again, it is mother’s responsibility if her son gets spoilt. She should be confident to raise her child and take appropriate measures to that end. Even Brahmo leaders like Shibnath Shastri expounded in his ‘Grihadharma’ that the home and the family should be the stepping stone for the attainment of humanity and greatness. Describing the role of women, he argued that it was for women that the home and the habitation were created and that they occupied the highest position within these environs. Elaborating on the function of the family and the role of women, he linked the family with the well-being of the nation. While addressing the notion of motherhood one of the early manual writers, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar stated ‘because of the flaws of the mother the child is ruined, when the child is ruined the family is ruined, when the family crumbles society decays, and when society is polluted no nation can advance’. In this way, a vital link was established with the duties of mother towards her child and nation’s progress.


47 Ibid. P. 21
The most important writing in this context is ‘Santaner Charitra Gathan’ (Building the Character of Children) by Satischandra Chakraborty. This pedagogue argued that the child should be regarded as a person with distinctive attributes – impressionability, vulnerability and innocence – which required a ‘correct’, ‘protected’ and prolonged period of nurture. It was only through certain practices and strategies that the child’s character building exercise was to be pursued which would help the gradual and gentle unfolding of his nature. In the text, ‘Charitra’ (or character) the same was defined as proper moral qualities, following the right conduct, self-discipline and self-restraint; and a ‘charitraban’ person is one who can subjugate or is able to control his worldly passions. For that, the mother should have maternal instinct, self-sacrifice for the propagation of the species and values superior to mundane self-interest. As a bride or a daughter-in-law, she has to satisfy and look after the specific needs of every member of the husband’s family, while as a successful mother; she is expected to raise her son, so that he grows up to be an ideal member of society. In all literature on motherhood, the male child became the repository of the new cultural model expected to fulfil the needs of the nation.

It has already been mentioned that the image of motherhood is very difficult to find in films which portray nineteenth century domesticity. Still, in ‘CHOKHER BALI’, there are some reflections which touch upon the great bond between mother and son. In the film, when Binodini asks Rajlakshmi that whether her son and daughter-in-law would come to visit or not, she laments that Mahendra (her son) could not eat unless she fed him, but now after marriage that same child does not care about his mother’s well being. Here, what is significant is that ‘she was feeding her son’ which indicates that Mahendra was fortunate enough to get full love, care and attention from his mother according to the broader sense of the term ‘feeding’. It is quite expected because the

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49 Ibid. Pp. 126-127

image of *Rajlakshmi* in the film has been set in the background of the nationalist era, particularly the age of the *Swadeshi* movement.

Before the advent of nationalism some men of the moderate Brahmo section felt that women were not just as an agent of reproduction. But such radical views did not get any attention within the middle class gentry. Other instances suggest that in the domestic sphere, women’s respectability depended on whether she was the mother of a child or not and male child was more preferable than a female child. Every woman craved for male child so that she could get more respect in the family. The only difference was, in early nineteenth century the desire for male child was a private affair; but with the emergence of nationalism the demand for male child was publicly advocated as was done by Satishchandra Chakraborty.\(^\text{51}\) The question of rearing a girl-child featured only in the context of training her as a mother and a wife. Girls were thus looked upon as the nurturer of the future male citizens of the nation. Therefore, whenever the texts were addressed specifically to middle-class women, the question of the male child and his upbringing was highlighted as the principal obligation and responsibility of a good housewife and an ideal mother.\(^\text{52}\) In ‘CHOKHER BALI’, had *Rajlakshmi* been the mother of *Asha*, it would have been very difficult to say whether she would have extended the same kind of love and affection as she did for *Mahendra*. She might have been an ideal mother figure for her son, but that may not have been true for her daughter, if she was at all there.

The close bond between the mother and the son was somewhat different in early nineteenth century Bengal, at least in Tagore family of Jorasanko. Rabindranath’s ‘*Chhelebela*’ is a reflection on childhood experiences which offers insights into the nature of the colonial household, the practice of child rearing and most importantly the role of the mother within the household. In ‘*Chhelebela*’, Rabindranath takes us straight into the heart of nineteenth century Calcutta and talks about how he and his other siblings were raised, the kind of education he received and the intense emotional encounters that he often went through. The individuals who occupied the foremost space in his tales were


\(^{52}\) Swapna, M Bannerjee (2006) ‘Child, Mother And Servant : Motherhood And Domestic Ideology In Colonial Bengal’ P. 21
the domestic workers such as ‘Brajeswar’ and ‘Shyam’ under whose care and supervision he grew up. He wrote sarcastic but hilarious accounts of their head servant Brajeswar, who disciplined, controlled and regimented him. Rabindranath spent most of his evenings with Brajeswar and it was through him that he first got introduced to the world of Krittibas Ojha’s ‘Ramayna’, the Indian epic. Shyam, the caregiver, was much more mellow and lenient than Brajeswar, and would introduce Rabindranath to the stories of dacoits and robbers. What is revealed from this narrative is that the mother appears only to play the role of a rescuer from the rigid regular schedules of education. Rabindranath tells about the way she spent her leisure time by playing cards and chatting with other women but we do not get any evidence of her directly engaging with her children in terms of caring for them and bringing them up. No doubt that the servants occupied the most important place in household activities in general and child rearing in particular. The stories of intimacies and close affection with servants are phenomena of the Tagore family. This family had an exclusive position within the society. The members of Tagore family maintained distance with other members in nineteenth century Bengali society. Even Rabindranath himself admitted that because of the lack of knowledge about the greater social environment they remained ‘lame’ in social terms. Clearly, in the majority of families the image of traditional motherhood prevailed in that particular period, more evidently in the nationalist period. The role of domestic servants in rearing children was severely criticized. It was argued even in Bamabodhini Patrika that it would be wrong to let the children in the hands of servants because in that case children could adopt their behaviour and receive bad instructions. What lied common between the nationalist discourse on motherhood and the image of women in Tagore family as mothers was that, in both cases, the only form was the ‘stay-at-home’ mother. No other

form was considered while making the portrayal of motherhood; as if the housewife alone can be an ideal mother.

E. Ann Caplan comments, in the West, three major economic/political/technological events affected the historical ‘mother’ and produced corresponding changes in the mother discourse. These are Industrial Revolution, First World War and the recent Electronic Revolution following the Second World War. In the Bengali middle class it is hard to find any change in the ideal mother figure in the post-independence period. The ideal mother figure as represented by Sarat Chandra in his writings maintained its glorified position as usual. Similarly ‘Pishima’ in ‘SAAT PAAKE BANDHA’ is such kind of a mother. She brought up Sukhendu like her own son, though he is the son of her brother. The best portrayal is found in the film ‘SAPMOCCHAN’ where Aparna regards her brother-in-law Mahim as more than her own son. To save his life she ultimately offers her own life to God. The bond between Aparna and Mahim reminds us the story of ‘Ramer Sumati’ by Sarat Chandra where this kind of relationship is found between the elder sister-in-law and the brother-in-law, which signifies the relation between mother and son.

Beyond this mother image, the status of women as mothers in middle class Bengali family does not seem to have changed in post-independence India. It is through motherhood, that attempts have been made to secure positions as wives and daughters-in-law by the middle class women. It is a matter of pride for her because a man cannot give birth to a baby. It is an integral part of womanhood which makes her complete.

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58 ‘Ramer sumati’ is the story set in the background of rural Bengal in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the story Narayani loves her brother-in-law Ram no less than her own son. Though, Ram is very naughty and irritate everyone in the village, but that couldn’t stop Narayani to offer her care and affection towards him. The story later pictured both in Bengali and Hindi. In Indian traditional family the elder daughter-in-law is conceptualized as equal to mother-figure. There are several films which deal with mother-like-figure both in Bengali and Hindi.

‘SAPMOCCHAN’ is the most popular film of the Bengali matinee-idol Uttam-Suchitra. In this story Suchitra Sen was the daughter of most affluent family of Calcutta. Mahim’s family was their family friend but living in an immense poverty in the village. Once they were also considered to be the most respected family because of their superior talents in classical music. But that respectability was lost because one of their forefathers due to his arrogance did not recognize his teacher and as a result he cursed him by saying that after him if anyone in his family would try to practice singing and take it as the profession he would have been died. The curse became true for them in generation after generation. So they practically stop of
independence India, women’s status in terms of being a mother, as the primary care-giver of the children remains unchanged. The point being made is that in the post-independence period the mother image of all forms has been greatly neglected in Bengali cinema from the 1950’s onwards. We do not find films like ‘MOTHER INDIA’ which reflects the nationalist image of the mother figure who sacrifices her son for her nation’s interest. Instead of that, for Bengali cinema, it was the time of Bengali matinee idols Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, and their films dealing with romantic love stories where mothers were marginal. This pattern of Bengali cinema was influential up to the 1970’s, though there were some films of Mrinal Sen (apart from Satyajit Ray) which addressed the question of new challenges and radical politics where the middle class was deeply involved like KOLKATA 71, PADATIK.

From middle of the 1980’s motherhood gets importance in Bengali film and in this sense, ‘PARAMA’ is an example where the director dared to show that in spite of being a mother of two sons and with a college going daughter, she could fall in an extramarital affair with a man who was younger than her. Indeed, in these films we find a shift from the image of stay-at-home mothers to that of working mothers. Films like ‘UNISHE APRIL’ and ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ represent this image of working mothers. In ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’, Bandana works in office whereby she maintains her family and raises her child. Sarojini is a professional dancer who shares financial responsibilities along with her husband. After his death she takes the whole burden of the family and raises her daughter. While performing their role as working mothers, women are equally concerned about their own self which is why they cannot ignore the importance of men in their life. Even Bandana allowed Sudipto, the painter, in her life towards whom she had

singing classical music and started to depend on other means for their livelihood. They lost their earlier position and had to remain in acute poverty. In this situation of their family Mahim the youngest brother came to Calcutta in the house of his affluent family friend Umesh Chandra Bhattachariya. There he finds his daughter Madhury who realizes the immense talents of music in Mahim and motivate him to take music as the profession. Gradually Mahim and Madhury attracted to each other. But knowing Mahim’s profession his family members, his elder brother who brought up like his father and his elder sister-in-law who is like his own mother became fearful to remembering the outcome of it which every generation faced for that curse. Under this circumstances his brother fall in illness and after couple of days he was died. Hearing this news Mahim got a huge shock which causes prolonged illness that lead him almost in a state of dying. Ultimately Madhury, as a would be wife, recovers him and also his family from that great curse.

developed affinity. The view of man towards motherhood, however, has not changed. Sudipto in ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’ wants to portray the image of Bandana, not as a mother, but ultimately in terms of an old woman. He feels that every mother is old in the eyes of her child. Later, he portrays her according to her wish to see herself but that is the portrayal of a woman with whom the artist himself falls in love. Ultimately to remain as an ideal mother Bandana despite having an independent mind with a strong personality finally rejects Sudipto since her son doesn’t accept their relationship. Sudipto comments to Bandana that “it is very difficult to portray the real image of a mother-figure, even impossible”. By building the character of the woman in this fashion, the director, strictly speaking, was not fully able to overcome the image of stay-at-home mother. Bandana, would not have been a working lady had her husband been alive, who died in an accident. So, her participation in public life was not a free choice but one made under compulsion.
Also, Sarojini, in ‘UNISHE APRIL’ suspended her dancing career for two years and decided to remain as a housewife and mother for her daughter; but ultimately came back to her own world of dancing. At the same time it is also true that Bandana is working at the office to maintain her family and bring up her child after his husband’s death. But economic necessity of the family was not a major factor behind Sarojini becoming a classical dancer. Her status as working mother was part of her desire to build an independent career.

Figure No: 09
A different mother image, bold and confident because she has established her identity as a classical dancer over and above her motherhood status. (UNISHE APRIL)

In the new millennium motherhood retains its position among women even in Bollywood films. In ‘SILSILAY’, the story of a famous actress reveals that she wants to be a mother but never asks her boyfriend to marry her. In the film, we see that she finally fulfils her desire and becomes a mother of a child without any botheration about her marital status. It is not clear of course whether it was maternal instinct or the glory of
motherhood that provokes her to take such decision. The character might have been inspired by the real life experiences of Nina Gupta, who is a Bollywood actress and an unmarried mother. To the Bengali middle class, however, portrayal of the mother-figure

60 ‘SILSILAY’ is a film composed of three different stories of three different women but there is something common which could identify themselves with one other despite the fact that they never meet each other. The first story which we mentioned in our study, is the story of Zia, the famous Bollywood film actress who is now living as a single woman but she had her own man, Neal Kashyap, who leaves her because he feels that their worlds are different which can’t be matched. However, Zia still loves him and thinks that he would come back to her. Each time after returning from shooting she expects his phone call, checks caller list from caller ID but she gets frustrated. They were living together for quite a long time but Zia never asks him to marry rather what she wanted to be a mother of his child which Neal rejected because society does not easily accept an unmarried mother. Finally Zia called him in her house to meet for the last time and due to Zia’s insistence they physically met. As a result she becomes pregnant. But giving this news to Neal she does not ask for help because that will be the matter of losing her self-respect to a person who left her. On the other hand Neal gets to know that his new girlfriend Nandini had physical relationship with another man. The whole story of Zia and Neal reveals the fact which Zia herself says to her sister that a man like Neal, so called modem, upright, progressive needs woman who is pure, untouched, domestic and traditional as a wife. These persons could relax with these actresses but can’t accept them as wife.

The second story is of a young girl Anuska Verma who comes to Mumbai and working at a private firm. She likes Nikhil, a rich boy, but his behaviour some how surprises her. Often she confuses about Nikhil’s true love for her and she fears to get cheated by him. Nikhil like any other rich boys, has a playboy image and wants Anuska just like any other girl for physical relationship. It becomes true when he calls her in a hotel and insists her. She realizes that she is wrong to know Nikhil, but she does not reject him from her life. On the other hand in her office there is another upright boy Tarun who silently loves her but she made it clear to him that she loves someone else. Tarun tries to tells her that Nikhil is not fit for her as he involves with lot of other girls. One day it becomes clear when Anuska and Tarun gets Nikhil with another girl in the same hotel room. To see this Anuska totally broke down, but when Tarun asks her to marry him she acknowledges him as a true lover. But she refusing marriage because she feels that her new relationship with Tarun makes her aware about her own self. Here comes the importance of Tarun in her life. From the very next day she starts a new life as a more confident and self-conscious being which may not be possible if her relationship with Nikhil would be continued.

The third story is about Rehana, Rehana Ahmed Bhow. Rehana is the second wife of Anwar Ahmed Bhow who is a building contractor. In their family there is another person, who is the son of Anwar’s first wife, Enayet Anwar, being a building contractor often visits different places, as a result Rehana spends her days lonely. Her loneliness causes sometimes depression. The story begins with the return of her husband from Dubai. As the story continues, we get to know that apart from his business, the trip involves something else which his son realizes when an attractive air hostess see off him. We become sure about the extra marital affair between Anwar and that air hostess, Preeti, when they meet outside of their house. In the date of their marriage anniversary when Rehana asks him for returning home as soon as possible he tells her that there are lot of works in his office. But his son who understands everything suggests Rehana for protesting. At last Rehana goes to Preeti’s house where she find her husband and tells that from the very beginning she knew about her husband’s affairs with other women but now she could not tolerate it further. That’s why she will leave the home and going to Surat to her mother. She will not come back as it is against her self-respect.

This three women are unknown to each other but as Shah Rukh Khan says while introducing this stories in the film that a kind of invisible link is there which connects them. In the film when Zia met with an accident while going alone to hospital for her delivery Rehana who at that moment was going to Surat in a car came to rescue her and she found another helping hand in form of Anuska. With their help Zia finally reached in a hospital where she gave birth a son. This is the film of those women for whom self-respect and self-dignity is above everything else.
still does not seem to accommodate this kind of experiences. We can cite an advertisement of a mobile phone service provider, where we find that the mother attends

Figure No : 10

Contemporary Image of Bhadramahila: Acquiring some dynamism, yet remaining firmly within the Traditional Values

her son at the breakfast table while talking on her phone. This mother is a housewife who must manage the family budget efficiently. The advertisement wants to give the message that those who are housewives and mothers, and are within the family budget, should use this cell phone service because it is more economical for them. When any advertisement uses this kind of portrayal to address a large section of consumers, it is to be accepted that the society is more or less the same to portray the image of the mother, who at the same time must have the wifehood status also. Both are closely connected to each other as if, they cannot exist without one another which is true at least in our case.

Before ending the discussion, let us look at the interview of choreographer turned film maker Farah Khan who gave birth of triplets at the age of forty two. What she
revealed was: that as a teenager she had to take care of her younger brother since her parents were separated and her mother had to work. She feels that she had always been a woman and a hands-on maternal figure. While it was her responsibility towards her brother, being a mother is sheer joy for her. She never worries about her film but after being a mother she cannot stop herself from worrying. Twice a day, she read a little Kalma over her children’s head, because it is her belief that a mother’s prayer is the best natural repellent to any negative energy.\textsuperscript{61} If a celebrity like Farah Khan expresses this kind of sentiment, it is to be admitted that motherhood is still considered to be a moment of fulfilment in women’s life.

**WIFE AND IN-LAWS: RELATION BETWEEN MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW**

In the beginning of the film ‘PARAMA’ we see that she brings a glass of water to her mother-in-law and asks her to down the pills. In another scene, we find Parama attending her mother-in-law at lunch. Both images show the actual place of mother and daughters-in-law in Bengali middle class family. To begin the discussion on mother and daughters-in-law one should remember certain important aspects. First, this relationship in its own way is the unique feature of Indian family system, whether joint or nuclear, which is quite uncommon today in the west. Even in western literature on family and domestic life, it is very difficult to find the presence of the mother-in-law in the nuclear family set up. Second, in spite of the presence of other in-laws in the family the relationship between mother and daughter-in-law deserves special attention from the wife’s point-of-view because this relationship is basically the relation between two generations of women within the family. Today’s mother-in-law was the wife of yesterday and today’s daughter-in-law is tomorrow’s mother-in-law. This relationship signifies two different moments in women’s life. According to the public-private dichotomy, the family/private sphere is the actual sovereign sphere for women; naturally the question of shifting of authority from one generation to another in domestic life

\textsuperscript{61} The Times Of India, Title : “Mom’s The Word” interviewed by Sudesna Chatterjee, 24\textsuperscript{th} August, 2008
practically determines the nature of their relationship because the public sphere is for the male where women have no real space.

Except some autobiographies, no references can be found in early nineteenth century Bengali literature which deal with this particular relationship. One possible answer could be that, like the notion of motherhood, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship was not part of the reforms project which shaped the nature of husband-wife relation and excluded other related issues. In her autobiography of ‘AMAR KATHA’ what we find that Rasasundari Debi had pleasant experiences with their mothers-in-law. After being married in very early age, Rasasundari was fortunate enough to get love and affection from her mother-in-law just like her own mother, to the extent that she brought lots of toys for her daughter-in-law. Gyanadanandini Debi got married at the age of eight and since she was thin among other daughters-in-law of the Tagore family, her mother-in-law fed Gyanadanandini with her own hand. But, Saradasundari, the mother of Kesab Chandra Sen was not so fortunate like them and faced lot of problems. Her mother-in-law always believed that her age was much more than ten and in every little matter she suffered rude treatment. Despite having a lot of servants present, she had to do all household works and yet she failed to get love and affection from her mother-in-law. One of the problems of these autobiographies is that, these writers had expressed their emotions from a wife’s position, but the viewpoints of the mothers-in-law regarding the relationship are absent. Not only in these autobiographies but also in the literature on domestic life concerning this relationship, voices of mothers-in-law are very difficult to find,

Coming to the representation of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship in Bengali films, there is no dearth of authoritarian – at times brutal – images of the mother-in-law (often recalling typical performances by Gita De). Yet the point to note is that Bengali (and Hindi) films still left some space where a kind of negotiation could take place between two generations of women. The popular perception suggests that this relation always involves conflict which neglects other aspects that may lead them toward mutual affection. To what extent Bengali cinema is able to portray other dimensions of

this relationship will determine how close it could come to the actual nature of the relationship. In Ashapurna Devi’s *Pratham Pratisruti*, the mother-in-law initially maintained her own domineering position and was not ready to accept the new values brought by her daughter-in-law in the family. Later, realizing the importance of those values, she changed her behaviour towards her daughter-in-law, Satyabati.63 The relation between *Sanaka* (mother-in-law) and *Paromita* (daughter-in-law) as portrayed in the film of the 1990s, ‘*PAROMITAR EK DIN*’, in which we find conflict as well as cooperation, quarrel as well as friendship, is obvious in any kind of relationship between two adult individuals. Except some reflections in ‘*CHOKHER BALI*’, in portraying nineteenth century domesticity the Bengali cinema represented the main thrust of the reform project – to redefine the role of wife and mother, and did not engage in any kind of serious negotiation with the relationship between the mother and the daughter-in-law.

In the nationalist age, there were different views on both mothers and daughters-in-law. The important point is that these differences were reflected mainly in the writings of women authors. Two most prominent names were Nagendrabala Dasi and Mankumari Bose. In the nationalist era, the husband became the new and the ultimate authority for the wife. Her devotion towards her husband was most important.64 Echoing this new patriarchal tradition, Nagendrabala conceives in ‘*Women’s Dharma*’ a domestic world, ruled by the husband and wife, where the mother-in-law appears only to behave badly and to threaten family solidarity, peace and harmony.65 Though she begins with the ideal

63 *’PRATHAM PRATISRUTI’* is the adaptation of the Ashapurna Devi’s first part of her trilogy. *Satyabati* is the leading character in the film who from her childhood was vocal against absurd customs, rituals and other social practices imposed on women. But *Satya* was married in her childhood though she is living in her parental home as her father decided to sent her girl to her in-laws home after she would become youth. Ultimately she goes to in-laws house but there also she cannot tolerate injustice against her. She protests her father-in-law’s habit of drinking, and she is successful as he, under the criticism of her daughter-in-law gives up his habit. But surprisingly she finds that her husband is not like his parents who are typically by nature conservative and believing in maintaining in traditional life. So unlike other girls *Satya* is fortunate enough of getting broad minded husband who could share her feelings, desire and recognize her personality.


65 Ibid. P. 28
that a daughter-in-law should be as devoted to her father and mother-in-law as to her own parents and comments that unfortunately in modern times many joint families are destroyed by the inability of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to get along, she puts the responsibility squarely on the mother-in-law. She writes it is most essential for the mistress of the house to watch out for anything that might cause strife in the family. In the final analysis she states, if she (the daughter-in-law) is not noble hearted and impartial, there is more reason to fear that the family will come to harm. Criticizing this view and opposing the modern outlook of the daughter-in-law Mankumari Bose emphasises that they must carry out all household duties. She also says that wives now paid little respect to their mothers-in-law and did not hesitate to criticize them for every little matter. They always remain busy with their own selves, and do not have any time to care for their families.

In the late nineteenth century context, we do not find any representation in film which suggests that the mother-in-law is detrimental to family solidarity, peace and harmony. In ‘SUBARNALATA’ we witness that when a member of the family counts how many of them help in household activities, Subarna’s mother-in-law suggests that she also should be counted, as she is not more than a servant. Saratkumari Chowdhurani on the other hand makes an important point when she suggests that the conflict between mother- and daughter-in-law remains largely rooted in the different attitudes exhibited by the former toward her daughter and daughter-in-law. She extends her argument by saying that the mother-in-law does not mind to do household work for her own daughter but is not ready to share even a small part of it with her daughter-in-law. In ‘CHOKHER

68 Based on the second part of Ashapurna Devi’s Trilogy ‘SUBARNALATA’ basically follows its literary form. The portrayal of the protagonist Subarna maintains its close proximity in film with the written portrayal of the novel as done by Ashapurna Devi. In the film what we find that Subarna protests against every kind of wrongdoing within the family which seems to the sign of her insubordination in the eyes of elders. But at the same time she could sacrifice in every way to the benefit of her in-laws. As she is ready to provide her own jewellery to her sister-in-law’s marriage without bothering about the future of her own daughter’s marriage. Likewise she, though critical about her mother-in-law’s conservative attitudes, could well understand her pain and agony. Even she also understands her husband who cannot overcome of his
we see that though there were a number of servants and maids in the household, Ashalata, the daughter-in-law told her husband if she did not share in any household work that would become an object of criticism. She had woken up quite late which obviously annoyed her mother-in-law. For that she left the house and went to her ancestral home. Perhaps Rajlakshmi, the mother-in-law, would not have been so much critical of Asha’s behaviour and her negligence about household work, if she was her own daughter. In ‘Bamabodhini Patrika’, it was argued that in every case the mother-in-law held that her daughter-in-law would take all household responsibilities and respect her more than her own mother. She did not understand that her husband was the only person on whom the daughter-in-law could depend and that obviously annoyed the mother-in-law. She should consider her daughter-in-law just as her own child; only in that way she can claim respect from her.\(^7\) Here, we should underscore the point that like the daughter-in-law, the mother is also dependent on her son and when she finds her son and daughter-in-law becoming closer to each other that obviously worries her about her place in the family. Whatever critical views Rajlaksmi expressed against Asha arose no less from of her anxiety to maintain her own place of authority as she had noticed the closeness between her son Mahendra and Asha.

Perhaps the only male writer who took part in this debate, Bhababhuti Vidyaratna, tried to point out the responsibilities to form a happy and peaceful relationship. He asks the daughters-in-law that they should give up their self-interest and arrogance. The mother-in-law also should not be excessively possessive of her son just because of the fact that she is his mother. She should not be cruel to her daughter-in-law and to some extent tolerate her little mistakes and behaviours as she has come from a different environment.\(^7\) Yet things have not changed in the perceptions about each other even in traditional mindset and she feels sorry for him. She is also aware about it that her husband loves her despite of his authoritative personality and conservatism.


\(^7\) Ibid Pp. 285-286
second half of twentieth century. In ‘MAHANAGAR’, the mother-in-law who lives a traditional life wants to retain her position in the family. When her daughter-in-law, Arati begins to work and later takes the main financial responsibilities of the family she urges her to show some respect at least to her father-in-law. It reveals that if a daughter-in-law becomes an earning member of the family, possibilities will arise for her to disobey the elder members especially mother-in-law and father-in-law – the main symbols of authority in the traditional Indian family.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, we find two different kinds of images of the mother-in-law in Bengali cinema. In ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’, the mother-in-law imposed all sorts of rituals to be performed by a widow on her daughter-in-law after her son’s death which Bandana (the daughter-in-law) as the daughter-in-law of a traditional joint family was expected to follow. Bandana refused to perform all those rituals and ultimately she came out from that family with her uncle and took a job in her husband’s office to run the family and raise her son. In ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’, there was a liberal shift in the image of mother-in-law and her attitude towards Paromita. When Biresh accuses her for bearing a spastic son, Sanaka comes to the support of her daughter-in-law, and did not
join with her son, just like a traditional mother-in-law. Perhaps, in late twentieth century, some kind of consciousness had developed which suggested that whatever status was being conferred, in reality they were under the all powerful patriarchal set up which treats both wife and mother-in-law as not more than the maid of the house who had no right to claim any wage like other maid servants. It is further confirmed when Sanaka tells Paromita, that before her marriage, she was the loving sister of her brothers, but after marriage she became the maid of the house. What Sanaka says probably expresses the realisation of every woman who reaches the state of motherhood, passing wifehood.

In the 21st century, whatever changes may have taken place in reality between the mother and daughter-in-law relationship, popular perception remains as usual. In the context of women’s movements and certain other legal measures, Bahus are now more secured, regarding her status in the family. Now, it may be expected that the rivalry or conflict whatever was there, should be on the decline, but the ground reality is quite different. One of the television channels telecast a programme called, ‘Saas Vs Bahu : Kaun Kisse Nachayega’ which was a dance competition where performers were those who had acted either as ‘Saas’ or ‘Bahu’ in popular T.V. serials. What is significant in this reality show is the title, because the word ‘Nachayega’ in its colloquial sense implies who will dominate: the suggestion in this case is whether it will be the mother-in-law or the daughter-in-law. This indicates people still conceptualise this relationship in terms of rivalry and conflict. What is most objectionable is that these ideas are spread through the popular media which is unable to substitute any modern outlook in its place. Going beyond media projections and the relationship between Saas and Bahu, the bigger question of the nature of familial relationship prompts us to ask is: ‘is there any space remaining for women while carrying this relationship throughout her life’?

**TOWARDS SUBJECTIVITY: SPATIAL ASPECT OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIP**

We are familiar with the much quoted verse from the ‘Laws of Manu’, ‘Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her son guards her in old
A woman is not fit for independence. According to this verse, women are not allowed to live beyond the status of daughter, wife and mother. One does not have to be a feminist to see that every kind of relationship for women or men is structured in terms of the patriarchal order. The diary *Parama* begins to write in the nursing home after her suicide attempt, describes her relatives who come to visit her everyday but to see their mother, their aunt, their daughter-in-law. This indicates that, for them *Parama* is not an individual; rather she is defined by them in terms of their relationship with her. She continues, ‘*Dr Dasgupta* and my relatives have decided that I need psychotherapy. So that my life can come back and flow in the same direction it flowed’. It means there is a constant pressure even from a doctor to maintain familial identities over a woman’s quest for her own individuality. Here comes the vital aspect of space as a condition for realizing of one’s subjectivity and the extent to which these familial relations provide space.

Theoretically, space has been conceptualized as an autonomous sphere with independent rhythms where social relations and practices play an important role. Representations of space, particularly in sociology, are often expressed in terms of context, where it serves as a mere locale or passive prop that allows history and social processes to play themselves out. ‘Space’ is not to be mixed up with ‘place’. As space is a more abstract concept than place, space is seen in distinction to place – a realm without meaning, a ‘fact of life’ which produces the basic co-ordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way it becomes a place. Although it is confused somewhat by the idea of social space which in many ways, plays the same role as place. When we speak of space we tend to think of outer-space which has areas and volumes, so that if there is any change to the concept of place by its nature or structure that is bound to reflect at the sphere of space also.

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middle class cinema, particularly in Hindi, takes up the construction of space for the emergence of subjectivity. The film which could be mentioned here is ‘DASTAK’, where Hamid and Salma, a newly married couple find an apartment in Bombay where a tawaif (courtesan) called Shamshad Begum was living. Her customers, unaware about her absence, come and knock on the door and disturb this young couple. Two youths living in an opposite apartment watch Salma as she bathes and dresses. Before marriage she was living in her parental home, which is an extended feudal family. 76 This change of place, from extended joint family to nuclear family set up, for Salma seriously affects her own space in terms of her privacy. From this standpoint, we could examine the question of space within familial relationship in different points of time, with the changing family structure.

FROM ‘ANDARMAHAL’ TO ‘HOME’ : ‘SPACE’ IN CHANGING FAMILY SYSTEM IN BENGAL

In the beginning of ‘PARAMA’ there is a scene where the women of the family, ageing aunts, sisters-in-law are busy with preparations for the pooja – chopping fruits and vegetables, and chatting with Parama’s mother-in-law. It is not very difficult to understand that this is the feature of a joint family where particularly women share part of their household responsibilities. After this scene, we find Parama in her husband’s flat but there are no other women who can share household responsibilities. Parama alone performs all responsibilities as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. At the breakfast table, she gives her husband his garlic pearl pills and holds a glass of milk at her youngest son Tutul’s mouth before he leaves for school, she attends her mother-in-law during lunch time. In plain words, she is the mistress (kartri) of this nuclear family. 77 If we place both the images in the context of nineteenth century Bengal, the first one is very close to the

‘space’, called ‘Andarmahal’ and the second, to ‘Home’. It will be wrong to suggest that ‘Andarmahal’ and ‘Home’ always corresponded with the joint or nuclear family system. Because ‘Andarmahal’ conceptually had been devised as a secluded sphere from the outside male world, but in this sense ‘Home’ represents a state of mind that later became the inner domain in nuclear family system, more vulnerable to the outer space. This can be found in ‘CHARULATA’, as the film is set in nuclear family system where other relations are absent, but despite that, Charu’s world resides in the Andarmahal which is completely detached from outside world (bahir).

The andarmahal or antahpur, in nineteenth century Bengal, known as the inner quarters for women, seems to have an entrenched formation just as the bahir or the public was the domain of men. As Himani Bannerjee observes, the andarmahal, which expresses the middle class sense of family ‘honour’, a woman’s public presence continues to be an inversion of the norm, just as a male presence in the kitchen, in child rearing.\(^\text{78}\) It was quite impossible for an outsider to meet women in antahpur. There is an interesting story in the life of Gyanadanandini Devi which reveals the rigid norms of andarmahal. Her husband Satyendranath Tagore wanted a meeting with his friend Manmohan Ghosh along with his wife, but the meeting was fixed at late night and they had to come into the bedroom like thieves because had anyone known about this meeting it could have created unrest in the family.\(^\text{79}\) What kind of idleness or loneliness does Charulata suffer while confined within antahpur? Things would have been somewhat different had there been the joint family environment. In a joint family, andarmahal is a sphere where women in-laws chat with each other, spend time playing games; in other words andarmahal is a personal space for women, enriched with multiple familial relations. Tagore family is an important instance which Rabindranath himself has spoken about.\(^\text{80}\) If we place Asha of ‘CHOKHER BALI’ in joint family set-up, we notice that

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after marriage, Asha along with her mother-in-law, finds her aunt Annapurna, even Binodini as a friend in their andarmahal. So unlike Charu, there is no scope for idling time away for Asha. Although andarmahal was a space for women themselves, that should not be considered as an individual space for them. Whatever we find as the collective identity of women in andarmahal, all of them have their distinctive familial identities, not individual. In other words for Asha her space in andarmahal is pervaded by her familial identities. There is hardly any scope for her to enjoy her own space within the family.

If ‘home’ is more vulnerable to the outside world, then ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ provides the most important cinematic example towards the transformation of andarmahal when Nikhilesh attempts to bring Bimala out in public. It is true that in the nationalist age, the separation between ‘andar’ and ‘bahir’ was rigidly followed; however, it provided women with an opportunity of symbolic representation in the public domain. That is why Bimala’s appearance in public is incomplete but at the same time andarmahal also lost its exclusive character as the domain of women as Sandip infiltrated there. Before her public appearance she shared moments in andarmahal with her widow sister-in-law. When Bimala meets Sandip in public, her relationship with her sister-in-law gradually loses importance which implies that the burden of relationships at ‘antahpur’ in the joint family is much greater than at ‘home’ in the nuclear family system. In joint family a woman has to take care about all other relationships that to perform her role as mother and wife in nuclear family set up. Here lies the question of individual space for women, which may be relatively wider in the sphere, known as ‘home’. Though, in the nationalist era, the question of women’s public appearance was welcomed to achieve its projected nationalist goals; in reality women remained in between antahpur and home.81 With the decline of the joint family system, the transformation of ‘andarmahal’ into ‘home’ seems much more visible, which poses a serious question namely does the ‘home’ provide more space for individual identity?

Analyzing the films, particularly after the 1980’s, the answer is quite in the affirmative. In films like ‘PARAMA’, ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ and ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ the characters like Parama, Paromita, Aditi attempt to realise their selfhood as they enjoy more individual freedom in their home which may not be found in the joint family system. As home is much more open to the outside male world, it was quite easy for Rahul to enter the life of Parama and this plays a vital part in her life – in finding her own individuality beyond the status of mother- and wifehood. For Paromita, as the film reveals, the separation of the elder son and his family and the death of her father-in-law provide room for her writing as the expression of her selfhood. Aditi who is a housewife and mother of two sons, inspired by her ‘Hemenmama’ once again starts writing – what she did in her student life – and it is largely the reflection of her desire and personality as a woman. Had all these women belonged to the joint family and lived in a secluded space like andarmahal, without any contact with the outside world, it is very difficult to say whether they would have had any individual space or not.

However, even this space is extremely fragile as it remained under the constant threat of male encroachment. Whatever space she enjoys by virtue of her status as wife or mother and related to some man who can deny that at any time. When Aditi’s husband feels that his wife’s literary activities were providing her exposure, he forces her to abandon writing, her own space, and she remains confined to the given status of wife and mother. It is also unfair to say that there is no scope for individual space in the joint family, within the domain of antahpur. Mrinal in ‘STEER PATRA’, while living with her brother and sisters-in-law, having no relation with outside people finds her space through writing which is also an attempt at her self-revelation. However, this particular narrative may be treated as an exception, considering the overall atmosphere of andarmahal, the domain of women. This narrative leads us to consider the cultural aspect, which is equally important with respect to women’s self-identity.

82 It seems to be incorrect to compare Charu with Paromita because Charu representing the second half of nineteenth century Bengali domesticity but Paromita belongs to last decade of twentieth century. Still we can identify Charu with Paromita as both of them attempt to express her self through writings. Whatever the literary attempt of Charu to find her self expression would not be possible if she was the member of joint family which also evident in case of Paromita. Apart from such family background they have the conscious state of mind, other wise they could not express their self despite of the absence of other relations.
Sumanta Banerjee while talking about the cultural aspect of women of rich and middle station who stayed in the secluded andarmahal, informs us of most of the main forms of popular culture and their different subgenres or types, such as Kirtans, Panchalis, Kathakatha recitals, Basar songs at weddings. In all these forms we find the use of feminine idioms and dialects which express women’s day-to-day experiences and problems. In such songs the Hindu divinities brought down from their ethereal abodes to the earthly homes of the Bengal countryside and appeared in the familiar figures of truant lovers, or shrewish housewives or idle, worthless husbands. In one of such Panchali songs of Dashu Ray, women characters called kula-kalankinis (or fallen women) come out with a long list of the heroines of the Hindu epics – the progenitors of Pandavas and Kauravas – who through several generations have birth to the future heroes out of wedlock, by mating with a god or a saga. They then ruefully sing:

When it comes to the gods, it is drummed as mere sport.
But when we do the same thing, it is called sin.
And lash out at all the so-called virtuous heroines who are expected to be worshipped:
They all fell in love and got the name of Sati (chaste women)
With ease they earned both virtue and wealth, as well as love.
But when we fall in love, there’s endless anguish for us.
We can’t bear it any more. What else can we say?83

In this context a particular group of songs – Agamoni and Vijaya – was very popular among women in nineteenth century Bengal. Agamoni was sung on the eve of the annual Durga puja, welcoming the arrival of the Goddess and the Vijaya sung at the end of four days of festivities lamenting her departure. A peculiar feature of both types of songs is the imagery in which the goddess is presented. The singers through the use of familiar descriptive terms, domestic Uma – the goddess Durga – who is turned in to a typical young Bengali bride. The arrival of Durga from the Himalayas once every year is visualized as the homecoming of the bride. In the agamoni songs, the devotees longing

for an audience with the goddess becomes the palpable craving of a lonely mother for the company of her long lost daughter. Similarly, the Vijaya songs express the mother’s sorrow at the departure of her daughter: the immersion of the goddess Durga becomes an excuse to give vent to the pangs of separation that every Bengali mother suffers when her daughter leaves for the home to her husband. With the efforts to modernise the society where women’s education became the major issue, women’s popular culture suffered a decline. By the end of the nineteenth century the system of education had produced a new breed of women in bhadralok homes, who, by their writings cultivated patterns of behaviour which displaced women’s popular culture from Bengali middle class society.84 One could find this absence of the traits of popular culture in ‘CHARULATA’ where her husband Bhupati belongs to the progressive section of Bengali society and under his influence Charu also develops a cultivated mind. With the emergence of the nuclear family this popular cultural traits were completely wiped out. In ‘PARAMA’ or ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’, there is no place for women’s own culture which can contribute to their search for self-hood. The space they enjoy may be their personal space but that is born out of a sense of void. For them, beyond wife and mother there is nothing, every space has been occupied, leaving no possibility to realize their collective consciousness as women. Some scholars now began to argue that in nineteenth century Bengal, the andarmahal or women’s quarters, an autonomous domain, was actually a sphere of happy women’s culture which separated female morality or consciousness.85 If we wish to consider space as constituted by relationship, then in cultural terms ‘andarmahal’ had the advantage over ‘home’ in current nuclear family system in twenty-first century.

Associated with tradition, marriage brings different kind of changes in women’s life. For men marriage do not affect his self identity but it is interesting to see how marriage changes women’s existence and status in terms of her relation with other members of husband’s family. In other words through marriage women’s own existence turned into familial identities, constituted by husband-wife, mother-child and daughter


and mother-in-law relationship. Each relation is attributed with fixed role and responsibilities for women. While representing such familial relations for women, Bengali cinema with a few exceptions, successfully asserted how the marriage and familial relations still hold an important position in Bengali women’s life. But in attempt of finding space within such relations Bengali films show that in joint family system women enjoyed more space than nuclear family but there is a greater possibility to find self-identity than that of joint family which is consisted by members of more than three generations.

To sum up we could turn our attention to the Bengali’s great festival, ‘Durga puja’ which symbolizes Bengali culture and tradition. Many of us ignore that Lord Shiva also is present and placed above the idol of the Goddess. As mythology defines, the Durga puja is the festival where the Goddess visits her parental home for four days. But there too she feels the presence of her husband. So in her paternal home, she cannot have her own space because that has been swallowed by her husband ‘Shiva’. The image of the Goddess along with her four children also suggests that there is not a single moment when a woman can forget about the role and status of the mother even while visiting her paternal home. This symbolic representation of the image of Goddess Durga teaches us about the fact that it is useless to find space within familial relationships, even if one finds it that doesn’t exit forever. Does it indicate that women should find out their space outside of family? In other words do women find out their space in the public domain? The general belief provides hardly any scope to think about women’s place beyond her family and private sphere because public domain is historically held as the sphere of male supremacy.