Chapter Six

WOMEN IN PUBLIC: HER IDENTITY IN THE
MASCULINE SPHERE

While criticising the mainstream political theory scholars like Whelehan points out to existing dichotomy between public and private which does not allow thorough politicization of women’s existence in the home environment including such issues as marital rape and domestic violence. In other words the public-private dichotomy acts as a major factor behind women’s subordination in society.¹ For these writers, women’s emancipation lies in putting an end to such dichotomy. Theoretically, the public is held to be the sphere of reason and rational activities and men are regarded as the sole possessors of the virtue of reason. As reason is higher than emotions and appetite, male dominated public sphere is superior to private sphere of family. In view of such understanding one can raise serious doubts about the role of public domain to facilitate women’s self-identity in terms of their feminine attributes. But simultaneously it is also to be remembered that public is the only domain where women could find her own space beyond her familiar relations. Symbolically, a woman may feel that she represents the all powerful image of Durga, full of courage and bravery, but in reality such powerful image is a male imaginary which does not have any significance in the public domain. But this image is so attractive that even for Sandipta Sen, an actress of contemporary times who played the lead in the Bengali mega-serial ‘Durga’ admits that while playing this role, she feels she is vested with the powers of the Devi.² According to mythological understanding all powers of ‘Maa Durga’ (the Mother Goddess) was conferred by male deities and that way Devi Durga appears not more than an ordinary Bengali woman who is one’s daughter or wife or mother. This is evident even in popular perception about the


² This interview was published in the page of ‘Calcutta Times’ in ‘Times Of India’ on October 18, 2008. This interview was taken by the Times correspondent Ruman Ganguly. What is notable about this interview that it has been published just after the end of annual festival of Durgapuja in Kolkata. In that sense this conversation is well placed because of the festive mode which yet to be ceased among Bengalis.
Devi who is just like our own daughter Uma who annually visits her parental home for four days with her children. This popular image of Devi Durga is arguably born out of the daily experiences of Bengali women in such particular roles. We love to see them in these roles and do not like any deviation from this stereotyped image. Actually such Goddess image is part of the stereotype understanding of Bengali middle class women based on the notion of ideal wife or motherhood. There is no reason to think that these stereotyped images of middle class women have lost its relevance in twenty-first century, it still holds its influence among educated Bengali society because this stereotype is an integral part of the development of the middle class itself.

‘BHADRAMAHILA’ AND STEREOTYPE OF WOMEN

In ‘UNISHE APRIL’, the character of Sorojini Gupta is a famous classical dancer and obviously a public figure. In other words, she is not totally confined to the stereotype image of mother and wife which is true for the majority of middle class women. Though she equally performs her all responsibilities towards her family, her relatives do not desist from criticising her as she is pursuing her dancing career simultaneously. Her own daughter also feels that she is not a good mother, but an internationally acclaimed dancer. Sorojini ‘deserves’ it because she violates the stereotype image of women which is difficult to accept for society in general and for her relatives in particular. Actually people tend to perceive women as selfless and more concerned for others. People who are higher in status and authority have been observed to behave with less selflessness, less concern for others and more self assertion and urge to master than those who have lower status and positions. From this logic, we can easily observe that women occupy lower status and positions than men and behave in a more selfless and supportive way toward others because of the differing distributions of women and men into roles of homemaker and employee where homemakers enjoy lesser status and positions than employees.3 If there is anything besides these stereotype roles of men and women, we call him as

‘Nancy’ and her as ‘mannish’ which is somehow intolerable for us. In that case we put our all efforts to remind them about their respective roles and duties, so that they maintain their appropriate positions. In the film, ‘SALAM NAMASTE’ we find Nikhil played by Saif Ali Khan and Ambar, played by Preeti Zinta. By nature they are quite opposite in terms of their sexual stereotypes but when Ambar becomes pregnant, Nikhil takes all responsibilities that every man does. In the end of the film we find leaving his ‘Nancy’ attitude and behaviour Nikhil achieves his masculine traits and at the same time Ambar becomes more feminine. What this film tries to assert is that the significance of our life lies in performing one’s own role according to masculine or feminine identity. Not only this film, but all kinds of media remain very much active in disseminating the stereotype female identity. As Betty Fridan points out that columns, books and articles by experts tell women that their role is to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. Experts brief them on how to dress, look and act more feminine and make marriage more meaningful and exciting. They learn that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education or even political rights. She is healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, children and her home. As a housewife and mother, she is respected as full and equal partner to her man in his world. In nineteenth century Bengal, we find a particular kind of stereotype image constructed for women that was best reflected in educational proposals for women in various magazines and written manuals. It was argued that man and woman are different in terms of their physical and mental attributes and the education system should take that in account. The moderate ‘Bamabodhini Patrika’ even propagated the belief that women were incapable to acquire 

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4 In ‘SALAM NAMASTE’ the Ambar is a radio jockey though actually she is a medical student who had come to Australia for higher studies. Her parents once had arranged her marriage which she rejected. As a result they had cut all relations with their daughter. After that she is living in Australia alone. Ambar is not a typical Indian girl rather she is courageous, rebellious, symbolizing men qualities in her personality. Nikhil on the other hand in his childhood preferred to spend with her mother in kitchen rather to play with his fellow boys. Though he had come to become an architect but he joined in a restaurant as sheaf. In his personality, there is nothing like courage and manliness. Not only that, he is always afraid of playing responsibilities even he denied to play his duty for Ambar. When he knew that Ambar is going to be a mother of his child he rejected of playing any responsibility as a would be father for her and also to his child. The film gets stereotype ending when Nikhil becomes the epitome of the real man who does not fear about performing duties and Ambar becomes perfect Indian woman who seeks the protection in the arms of a man. In a way this film does not able to reject the stereotype of men and women.

scientific knowledge because modesty, shame, kindness and ‘patibratya’ were the main qualities for Hindu women. The education system for women should address this. The male could take secular or scientific knowledge but women’s education should cultivate self-morality and self-righteousness through which they can acquire feminine qualities and can become an ideal wife and mother in an ideal family. From this standpoint, the question of higher education for women was opposed because it is irrelevant, considering their feminine attributes. It was apprehended that imparting higher education to Hindu women would lead to loss of their characteristic virtues. Reformers like Kesab Chandra Sen who championed the cause of women in his reformist agenda in large way did not seem to be sincere on the issue of higher education for women as he himself arranged his daughter’s marriage at a very early age. This suggests that despite much rhetoric, reformers wished to see women as traditional, stereotyped characters as they did not take much initiative to change institutional arrangements. In a way, the reforms movement was marked by an inherent conservatism. Charulata, a nineteenth century character had a cultivated mind but her status did not match that of her husband Bhupati who ran a newspaper, ‘Sentinel’. Instead of that what we find at the beginning of the film is that Charu is stitching a handkerchief for her husband, she also knitting an exercise book for Amal.

With the growing influence of nationalism, women were pushed back further to their traditional stereotyped image as the public-private dichotomy was more rigidly asserted. Qualities achieved by women through the efforts of modernisation, such as new housewifery and knitting, appeared incompatible with the new circumstances in Bengal of the second half of nineteenth and early twentieth century. All these were denounced as memesahib- like behaviour. Even women writers of nineteenth century, including those at the forefront of the reforms movement, justifying the importance of the so called feminine virtues. Radharani Devi, for instance, wrote in 1875 that of all the subjects that women might learn, housework was the most important. Whatever knowledge she might

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acquire, she could not claim any reputation unless she was proficient in housework. It was argued that it was not enough to become a Bengali housewife; the need for an educated woman was to develop such womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love. Unlike the early reformers from Rammohun to Vidyasagar, nationalists of late nineteenth century in general opposed any attempt which could threaten the stereotyped ‘nature’ of a Hindu Bengali woman. The extent to which nationalist sentiments influenced the inner domain of middle class Bhadralok is found in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’. Nikhilish, after the arrival of Sandip in his house, asks his wife how she could sing a western song, especially after hearing a fiery nationalist speech from Sandip. Bimala replies with a counter question that then what should she sing, a ‘Kirtan’! (traditional Bengali devotional song) and begins to sing one. Otherwise she learns western music from a foreign lady teacher and the English language too. The growing influence of Sandip over her, however, makes Bimala start thinking in terms of the nationalist image of women, though nationalism, based on the revivalism of ancient Hindu tradition and culture, did not allow women’s entry in active politics; it was rather their bounden duty to protect their national spiritual identity, while residing in the inner domain of the family. Mrinal in ‘STREER PATRA’ is a rare exception in the whole discourse of middle class women. The film is set in the background of the Swadeshi nationalist movement but Mrinal neither follows the modernisation efforts of the propertied middle class which constructed the image of Bhadramahila to elevate their class status nor the nationalist project of women to consider themselves as the preserver of nationalist identity. She took up the cause of a minor orphan girl but she failed to get any support from her family and ultimately in protest to that injustice she left her home to find out exactly what was the value of women in the society.

Discussing about cinema and the representation of the stereotyped image of women Claire Johnston comments that there is a far greater differentiation of men’s roles than women’s in the history of the cinema which places men inside the history and

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portrays women as ahistoric and eternal. It talks about the repressive and manipulative cultural products of Hollywood in which the image of man underwent rapid differentiation while the primitive stereotyping of women continued with some modifications. Within sexist ideology and a male dominated cinema, women are represented as what she represents for man. It is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent. In other words her stereotypical image gets priority over her quest for self-identity as woman. In Bengali cinema we find the same stereotyped representations which follow the common societal beliefs about women’s nature. In post-independence Indian cinema and Bengali cinema in particular, we have been habituated to see men as the bread earners and women are the home-makers. The film MAHANAGAR is one of the examples of how such stereotype understanding plays an important role in men’s life.

Figure No : 12
The image of stereotype Bengali Bhadrolok who does not accept his wife working in public as it could help her to find her own identity despite poor financial conditions. (MAHANAGAR)

In the film though her husband allows Arati to take up a job as it will help the family financially but within a couple of days, realising her changes, he asks her to quit the job. In the meantime her husband Subrato loses his job and now he must allow Arati to work for maintaining the whole family. Day by day he becomes depressed and suffers from anxiety over losing his wife, the one he knew. Indeed, Arati’s husband didn’t imagine that his wife could become an earning member of the family where the husband is traditionally assumed to be the bread-winner. His family background also does not allow him to think about such a situation. His mother spent her whole life by performing her role as ideal mother and wife who still maintains all familial and household responsibilities. But Arati his wife, a woman of his generation breaks such norm and he has to accept that because of financial necessities. Most important that the common, stereotype understanding about men and women’s roles gets upset when Arati becomes an earning member of the family and the husband, Subrato stays at home as he has been removed from his service. Society does not like a man whose wife is taking the burden of the family. We get disturbed once again when we see Arati put her resignation letter in protest of her boss’s discriminatory attitude towards one of her colleagues, which is surprising as she is the only earning member of the family. ‘MAHANAGAR’ in that sense presents a different text compared to other films of that period in dealing with stereotype image of middle class women.

Sheila in ‘PARAMA’ is another non-stereotype character who makes the favourite dish for Parama’s mother-in-law. What the old lady finds surprising about Sheila is that how could such a lady who is good at stitching and tailoring, also in housework and cooking, she became a divorcee.\(^\text{10}\) For the old lady, all these qualities help a woman to make her family a happy one, not to break it. For Sheila, the opposite happened because she had refused to go with her husband to Bombay and their marriage broke up. It is difficult for common people - even for Parama - to ignore that a man has to have a working life, but not necessarily a woman. But in case of a woman, not her work but family is most important. In ‘SWET PATHARER THALA’, to maintain her family

Bandana takes a job in her husband’s office after his death but there she faces criticism from her colleagues, especially from women colleagues as she does not believe or engage in customary practices that a traditional Hindu widow woman is supposed to perform. But Bandana is not identical with Sheila because Sheila rejected her family to maintain professional commitments but Bandana took the job in her husband’s office to maintain her family. Again for the family Bandana ultimately rejects Sudipto, the new found love in her life and remains as an ideal ‘sacrificing’ mother – the popular stereotyped image of women – for the sake of the happiness of her only son who could not accept the growing relation between Sudipto and her mother. Thus ultimately she could not overcome the stereotypical understanding of self-sacrificing mother image which she performed in her whole life. Even Sarojini, in ‘UNISHE APRIL’ at one time considered putting an end to her dancing career forever and spending her life just as one’s wife or mother like other women. These thoughts were attributed to her husband’s behaviour who could not accept the atypical image of his wife who wanted to pursue her dance career.

Stereotype women characters still remain important in the new millennium for we find that the society is not yet prepared to accept other non-stereotypical images. Faced with any violation of that image, there is always an effort, on the part of various sections of our society to bring things back to the ‘normal’, standard image. In one of the most popular films of mainstream Hindi cinema ‘KUCH KUCH HOTA HAI’ Anjali and Rahul, played by Kajol and Shahrukh Khan respectively, are best of friends, but Anjali also loves him. In the film though Anjali is a girl who behaves like a boy in terms of her attitude, dress, manners and so forth. When Rahul falls in love with another girl, she feels the need to look more feminine; but because of her apparent masculine gestures, Rahul does not understand her feelings for him and marries his new love. They reappear in the film after eight years with Anjali looking like a beautiful girl, possessing all feminine qualities and Rahul this time makes no mistake in falling in love with her. With some other dramatic events, they get married. Thus stereotypes are necessary to make such a successful love story. Then the immediate question is, is there any scope to think beyond this stereotype image even as women do appear in public?

11 It is one of the most popular films in the history of Mumbai film industry. In the film ‘Rahul’ played by Shah Rukh Khan is a college student where his best friend is Anjali played by Kajol. But Anjali is not a
TOWARDS EMANCIPATION: APPEARANCE OF ‘BHADRAMAHILA’ IN PUBLIC

Another Hindi film ‘ASTITVA’, portrays the life story of a housewife, Aditi who after spending twenty seven years as the wife of Srikant Pandit, gets divorced. The main reason behind this separation is Aditi’s illicit relationship developed with her music teacher in the absence of her husband twenty five years ago. The result was the birth of a child Aniket who was brought up as the son of Srikant Pandit. It was just for a moment that she had lost her control over her own physical yearnings. Except that incident she had always loved her husband and remained a dutiful wife. Yet for that single mistake – of which her husband was not totally innocent – she lost everything what she painstakingly built for twenty seven long years. But her husband who had frequent affairs with other women does not bear any loss. Before leaving, she announces that all these years she spent as a wife of Srikant Pandit, under which she has lost her own identity. Now, she could start once again start afresh to find out that lost self which implies, that it is the sphere beyond the family that could be the place of self-emancipation, not only for typical girl as she plays basket ball and behave like just another boy. Suddenly another girl, Tina took admission in that same college who happened to be the daughter of the college principal. With the arrival of Tina the story took a new turn. In the college Rahul is the most popular boy among girls but he strongly believes that love is identical with friendship and on finding Tina he feels that she will be the perfect friend with whom he falls in love. On the other hand coming to know about Rahul’s understanding of friendship and love Kajol finally realizes that she actually loves Rahul. But when she finds that Rahul is paying more attention to Tina because of her pronounced feminine qualities, she now starts to make up herself, so that she could turn into a ‘beautiful’ girl which ultimately ends up in a big joke as Rahul and her other friends laughed at her for her attempt to become an attractive girl. Finally when she got to know that Rahul really loved Tina she left the college though Tina somehow came to know Anjali’s feelings about him. After the marriage with Rahul and giving birth of a girl Tina died very soon but in her letter to her daughter she told her about the relationship between Rahul and Anjali and urged her to bring back her in her father’s life as he is suffering from loneliness. Eight years later they met again but now Anjali looked as a most glamorous, beautiful girl. But in her life there is a man Aman who wants to marry her and because of her mother’s insistence Anjali also reluctantly agreed to it though she still could not forget Rahul. To see the changes in Anjali, Rahul for the first time gradually got attracted towards her. In the end of the film we find that coming to know about their relationship Aman leaves from Anjali’s life and Rahul marries her. What is interesting is that as part of the popular Hindi film genre, the film consciously (or otherwise) asserts that femininity still is an important factor for Indian men to choose his wife or girl friend. This is a film of 1998 which suggests that the femininity of women is celebrated even at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium.
women but for everyone. To what extent the public sphere can play an emancipator’s role, particularly for women, needs therefore to be examined.

Coming back to Bengali cinema, in ‘STREE PATRA’, hearing about the suicidal death of Bindu an orphan girl having been married off to an insane man, Mrinal, the younger daughter-in-law leaves her family because she held none other than her own family members responsible for her death. She is now free to begin a new life by placing herself beyond the domestic world. The question of emancipation, which Mrinal seeks in other spheres beyond the family, brings us back to the debate which took place in nineteenth century Bengal over the issue of allowing the women in public. Historically, Bengali women’s first public appearance took place probably in 1862, when the reformist leader Kesab Chandra Sen, decided to visit the house of Debendranath Tagore along with his wife. This singular instance had stirred up the conservatives; his own family members became annoyed with him. They tried to thwart Kesab by deploying guards at the front gate but that did not stop him to visit the place of Debendranath with his wife. In early nineteenth century England also, even women writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis believed that women should not regret the fact that her sphere of action was one adopted to the exercise of the affections where she may love and trust, hope and serve to the utmost of her wishes. She should not regret about that she was not called upon, so much as man, to calculate, to compete, to struggle, but rather to occupy a sphere in which beauty and order are expected to denote her presence and where the exercise of benevolence is the duty she is most frequently called upon to perform.

In Britain it was held in the second half of nineteenth century that voting rights for women was most important in terms of their public participation. Another writer Barbara Bodichon pointed out that in order to enhance their public spirit, women should be allowed to enjoy voting rights which was the part of direct and conscious participation.


14 Ibid. P. 59
in public political affairs.\textsuperscript{14} In nineteenth century Bengal, voting rights was not an issue under the colonial dispensation. Rather appearing in public itself was a crucial issue for Bengali middle class women who at that time were not allowed to visit outside their family environs. Gyadanandini Debi was the most prominent name in this respect. She went with her husband Satyandranath Tagore to Bombay where he served as a Magistrate. In those days, living with one’s wife at the one’s place of service was not taken to very kindly. After two years, when she came back to Kolkata, she went to Jorasanko in an open car. Her family members became angry with her and as a result both Satyandratath and Gyanadanandini remained isolated for their whole lives in their own family. Another historical event was the meeting organized by Kesab Chandra Sen in Kolkata on 20\textsuperscript{th} January, 1871, in which women appeared to listen to his speech and it was the first instance of women’s appearance in a public meeting.\textsuperscript{15}

Among Bengali films which portrayed nineteenth century Bengal, none exclusively addressed the issue of public appearance of women, except ‘\textit{STREER PATRA}’. At the same time it would be wrong to say that these films represented women as confined beings, though the main thrust of these films was to reflect women’s position within the family. As the image of Bhadramahila was necessitated to stabilize the gender relations in nineteenth century context it did not allow women to appear in public sphere. In a way public-private dichotomy was maintained and such participation in public sphere was seemed to be a threat against the existing gender relations. In this respect there is not much difference between educated Charu and illiterate Asha in terms of their confinement in the private sphere of family. Although in the films we find that Charulata and Asha visit different places along with their husbands and other family members, these visits cannot be portrayed as part of their public appearance which actually happened in the nineteenth century context for the women like Gyanadanandini Devi. In ‘\textit{CHARULATA}’ we see Charu, and Bhupati spend holidays in Puri. In ‘\textit{CHOKHER BALI}’ both Asha and Binodini attend a picnic in their garden house. Later, after knowing the relationship between her husband and Binodini, Asha leaves her home with her aunt Annapurna for Kashi. Yet, these films are more occupied with the domestic world than

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rather than portraying public appearances of women. Thus, the search for self-emancipation for these women remained limited within the scope of their familial space, and never crossed over into the public sphere. In early twentieth century Bengali literature also, we find that the women writers like Anurupa Devi or Giribala Devi even respected their confinement within family which suggests their firm believing in notions like 'satitva' (chastity) or 'pratibratya' (devoted to her husband).  

The extent to which the ‘stereotype’ was powerful in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal becomes clear when we see that those very few women who had been able to become successful in public life, however remained unmarried throughout their lives. One of such women was Jamini Sen who achieved L.M.S degree in medicine from Calcutta University and even secured diploma from England for more than once, but remained unmarried. Some women ended their professional careers when they got married for it was strongly believed that women who traversed the public space would not be an ideal wife. Kadambini Ganguly who became a doctor, had to face scurrilous attack in the popular magazine ‘Bangabasi’. In Saratchandra’s works too, educated female characters do not think finding jobs in public sphere even when living in immense poverty. In Sarat-Sahitya most of the portrayals of independent female characters making public appearances are either maid servants or tayef or prostitutes. Rabindranath himself, though sympathetic about the public role of women did not seem to be too much radical on the question of their professional role beyond the private sphere. Still, Tagore family was famous for their progressive outlook in nineteenth century Bengal. Thus, it was possible for Swarnakumari Devi to form women’s organization for the welfare of widows and her purpose was to educate them. She also felt that if they had become self-sufficient, their conditions would improve. Though,

20 Ibid. P. 159
Swarnakumari Devi was not much successful her attempt was a revolutionary step in view of women’s confinement, even in Tagore family.\textsuperscript{21}

![Figure No: 13](image)

Appearing public domain by the initiative of her husband (GHARE-BAIRE)

None other than Rabindranath himself seemed to have embraced a conservative position especially in ‘GHARE-BAIRE’, as we see in the film that Bimala appears in public under the initiative of her husband Nikhilesh only to be seduced by a public figure like Sandip. The viewpoint which comes out from this film narrative as well as from the original story is that the public sphere is fraught with threats in the form of people who could jeopardise women’s morality and integrity as virtuous beings. Swadeshi nationalism was in a way more flexible though it remained firm on socially approved

\textsuperscript{21} Chitra Dev (2005) \textit{Thakurbarir Andarmahal}, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata. P. 29
male and female conduct. The essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of culturally visible spiritual qualities, though nationalism allows them to share the spirit of public political movement outside the private sphere.\textsuperscript{22} Women could participate in the public political movement but it was to be symbolic in keeping with her celebrated public spiritual image of \textit{Goddess}. Women were part of the nationalist movement without actively participating in it because in terms of their spiritual qualities they had to maintain the native’s sovereign domain the \textit{Andar} or home. Since this was the position of the nationalists on women’s question, \textit{Bihari} in ‘\textit{CHOKHER BALI}’ could approach ‘\textit{Binodini}’ for signing a public petition against the decision of British government of Bengal Partition. What is to be remembered is that \textit{Bihari} asked for a signature from a widow who was educated by an English lady teacher and \textit{Binodini} was the kind of woman who was equally aware about the public world while maintaining her feminine spiritual qualities. By signing the petition \textit{Binodini} becomes part of that same public movement, without actively participating in it.

The view presented in ‘\textit{GHARE-BAIRE}’ on women’s appearance before the public continued its hold over middle class society regarding their women. However, economic necessity was also fast becoming a vital part of the reality, notably in post-partition era of Bengal. So the question of public appearance gradually came to be connected with the more general concern of increasing economic stress in middle class family. The film ‘\textit{MAHANAGAR}’ is a classic example of the inner contradiction between class mentality of Bengali \textit{Bhadrolok} and their need to survive in post-partition era. Due to his poor family condition, \textit{Subrato} gives his consent on wife’s proposal to join a job, though he deeply feels that women’s place is in her home and she should not be roaming around in the outside world. Her father- and mother-in-law also do not approve of their daughter-in-law going out to do a job. She faces the greatest shock when her own husband asks her to resign her job as he had the assurance of a new part-time job. Such changes in his decision about \textit{Arati}’s job can be attributed to \textit{Subrato}’s realization that his wife is changing especially when he sees that his wife becoming smarter not only about

her salary but also about the commission which she could earn. He becomes much more anxious after hearing that her boss praised her with the compliment that ‘she is too good at her job’. This is perhaps a big problem for Subrato because he saw in it an attempt of seduction and exploitation of her wife. Ultimately he could not stop her to go for work as he has lost his job of a cashier at the bank. Yet he is now helpless in allowing her wife Arati to work outside in the ‘corrupted’ world as he has lost his job of a cashier at the bank.

From this aspect, Arati’s public participation does not have any emancipatory significance as it was necessitated by the poor economic condition of her family. What we can say is that Arati’s job in the outside world satisfies women’s desire to be independent, but there’s no emancipation as she continues to have faith in traditional role of women as ‘Gharer Bou’ and ‘Maa’ (housewife and mother). With the growing influence of the feminist movement, the question of women’s emancipation has, after a particular stage been connected with the concept of her sexual liberation. It is argued that women’s sexual desire on which society imposes various restrictions, should be expressed freely and be a part of the project of her emancipation.\footnote{Sutapa Bhattacharya (2005) \textit{Meyeli Sanlap}, Papyrus, Calcutta. Pp. 34-35}
The sexual urge of Parama which she fulfils outside the confines of a convention-bound marriage through her relationship with Rahul helps her to find new dreams of her own, outside the image of a daughter-in-law of Chowdhury family. During the passionate romance, Parama expresses her dream of going away in a caravan with Rahul where he would do his work and she would play the sitar. These traces of ‘self’-realisation takes a final shape during her stay in the nursing home. Now she no longer needs to be a wife; what she aspires for is a life lived on her own terms, to free herself from marital and emotional bonds that had in subtle ways repressed her individuality.\footnote{Shoma, A Chatterji (2002) \textit{Parama And Other Outsiders : The Cinema Of Aparna Sen}, Pp. 93, 99} The most important step in this direction was of taking an across-the-counter sales job at the \textit{Khadi Gramodyog} because that is the place where she is not a wife of a respected family, there she is only Parama, a mere individual.
Figure No: 14

Fulfilment of sexual desire is a part her emancipation! (PARAMA)

The journey towards this discovery of individuality and the image of middle class women in public remains unresolved even in the twenty-first century. ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ is a comedy film but it represents the actual reality in contemporary times of the popular perception about women. The story is of three girls who are friends. Among them Mukti has completed her masters, Maya is a state kabbadi champion who wants to start a kabbadi training centre and the third one Alo wants to be an actress. When they fail to pursue their own individual dreams, they start business in joint partnership, but here too they fail to get a bank loan in addition to facing humiliation. Wherever they apply for loan, they are rejected as people including a woman official as well doubted their potential for success. Most significant remark comes from a bank official who happens to be a man and tells them flatly that business is not for women because they do not have
that kind of competency in comparison to men. In support of his view, he mentions that a foreign scientist was going to prove that women are sub-human species. This whole narrative of the film prompts us to consider the public sphere as a place of masculine domination where women should follow male code of conduct to get proper treatment as individual beings.

**NATURE OF PUBLIC : AN EXCLUSIVE DOMAIN FOR MEN?**

If these women chose professions like school teaching or service, perhaps they would not face much problem. There are some areas where women have some space within public sphere which does not disturb the power matrix in the traditional masculine domain. It is obviously expected that women should be satisfied with that space. In case, however, any woman is more ambitious then she is supposed to acquire *masculine* qualities. That is why, as Beauvoir points out, women are always compelled to band together in order to establish a counter-universe, but that always has to be set it up within the frame of the masculine universe. Hence the paradox of their situation, they belong at one and the same time to the male world and to a sphere, in which that world is challenged, shut up in their world, surrounded by the other they can settle down nowhere in peace.\(^{25}\) In the film *HEMANTER PAKHI, Sujata* belongs to that fragile world where she could not challenge at all the male dominance while working at the office. On the whole she has to remain satisfied with whatever space has been given to her in a male dominated sphere. And like *Sujata*, most of the women want to be a part of this fragile, challenged ‘counter universe’. But in the film, ‘*TEEN EKKE TEEN*’ the three girls from the very beginning rejected being a part of such counter universe; rather they wanted to participate in an exclusive domain of male supremacy by forging their own business plans. When these three women prevented a bank robbery with their intelligence and courage they have been able to come out from that allotted counter sphere and place themselves in the sphere where only male code of conduct prevails. To stop the robbery they fought like action heroes and ultimately they were able to capture the culprits. For their bravery they won a Rs 50 lac award from the government. And yet such brave girls

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earlier did not get financial loan for their business because of their gender identity. Even in the press meeting they told the media as well as to the public about their experience while seeking financial aid to start their business. By thwarting the bank robbery they proved themselves – but only in terms of the most exclusive masculine quality of physical strength. Now people had no problem in believing in their ability to run a business and later we find that people provide them financial assistance by raising donations for their business. What comes out at the end is that there are two ways to get entry into public sphere, either to qualify in masculine terms or to accept masculine hegemony and remain satisfied. No doubt most women remain satisfied with that little space that is provided to them. In other words there is little scope or ground for celebrating feminine qualities in public domain. Here again Beauvoir is relevant when she observes that women are not familiar with the use of masculine logic. Masculine reasoning is quite inadequate to the reality with which she deals. And in the world of men, her thought not flowing into any project, since she does nothing, is indistinguishable from daydreaming. She has no sense of factual truth, for lack of effectiveness, she never comes to grips with anything but words and mental pictures, and that is why the contradictory assertions give her no uneasiness, she takes little trouble to elucidate the mysteries of a sphere that is in every way beyond her reach. After all, to see things clearly is not her business; for she has been taught to accept masculine authority. So she gives up criticizing, investigating, judging for herself, and leaves all this to the superior caste. Therefore the masculine world seems to her a transcendent reality, an absolute. Man knows that he can develop different institutions, another ethic, a new legal code; is aware of his ability to transcend what is; he regards history as a becoming. The most conservative man knows that some evolution is inevitable and realizes that he must adapt his action and his thinking to it, but as woman takes no part in history, she fails to understand its necessities, she is suspiciously doubtful of the future and wants to arrest the flow of time.  

26 In the film MAHANAGAR we find *Arati* as an housewife does not know the nature of public masculine sphere. Even when she appeared in the public domain by taking the job of saleswoman there was no question for her to make something
new or create a new history for women themselves. What she did that was part of her responsibilities toward her family. In other words, to follow Beauvoir, *Arati* belongs to that generation of women who do not have the courage or intention to qualify in terms of superior masculine qualities. She has to satisfy herself within the allotted sphere for women in a masculine domain where her feminine qualities could be accommodated. But in twenty-first century the three women, *Maya, Mukti and Alo* in their attempt to start their own business want to write a new history but it is not possible unless they exhibit their qualities in terms of masculine attributes.

Figure No : 15

Bengali woman of new millennium who are ready to qualify in masculine attributes in male dominated public sphere. (TEEN EKKE TEEN)

Masculinity is situated within a structure of gendered hierarchies, in which particular social practices are used to reproduce social divisions and inequality. In the process, known as socialization, males and females are conditioned into appropriate roles of behaviour. Polarized norms and expectations between genders are central to the
definition of masculinity. If a woman performs a traditionally ‘masculine’ activity, her work nonetheless is considered to be less prestigious in the sexually inflected value system; she remains a woman in the prestige hierarchy and a female in her own sexual identity. We should make a difference between masculinity and masculinism. The term ‘Masculinism’ refers to an ideology which men use to justify and legitimize male positions in society that also stresses the natural and inherently superior position of males, which serves to justify the oppression and subjugation of females. As men seem to possess the virtue of reason and public seems to be the domain of rational activities, the public holds superior position over the private which satisfies the biological needs. By that logic it should be the sphere for masculine domination. And it is found everywhere, even in India’s most popular game, cricket. Each and every member of team India is among the most popular and celebrated public figures but if we look at the women’s cricket team the situation is radically different. The members of women’s team are hardly considered to be celebrities, they do not get media attention – not to the same extent at least – and their lives and image cannot be distinguished from any other ordinary woman. This is true also of the captain of the team, Jhulan Goswami who happens to be the best woman cricketer of the world in the year of 2007. What is most humiliating is the paltry sums they receive compared to any and every male cricketer. It is not that the record of success of women cricketers is any worse than their male counterparts. The only reason behind these discriminatory practices is that they are playing a game which is traditionally considered a male sport because it is supposedly more compatible with male physique and attitude. Once women entered into this sport there is hardly any scope to maintain their feminine image. On the contrary society wants to see a woman in terms of her feminine qualities. Since there is a hiatus between what they are and what they ought to be, the society does not bother at all about what they do or what is their contribution. Society is more concerned of women’s femininity which they cannot maintain because of they are in a sport like cricket. Despite being one of the best woman cricketers of the world in 2007, Jhulan does not get the kind of attention that

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28 Ibid P. 10.
Sania Mirza enjoys even after poor performances in tennis. Part of the explanation is that in spite of being a tennis player she looks more feminine than Jhulan. Maintaining her femininity Sania actually accepted male domination, as a result she is a celebrity in our society which is not the case with Jhulan. Women’s Tennis is now also being considered as a glamorous part of the tennis world where women’s participation with their all feminine attractions is the necessary condition. Jhulan’s ‘masculine’ attitude, appropriate in cricket, in a way challenges the male preserve.

![Figure No : 16](image)

Another Bengali middle class woman of new millennium who seeks entry into traditionally male dominated profession like business. (TEEN EKKE TEEN)

29 It is not only the case for the Indian sportswomen like Sania Mirza and Jhulan Goswami, even in the West we find that tennis stars like Williams sisters and others enjoying more popularity that other sportswomen. For example, we hardly know the names of Australian women cricketers including their captain who also won the world cup. What happened that in sports like tennis or badminton feminine virtues and images have been accommodated unlike other sports where masculine attributes prevail.

30 It is an article written by Nibedita Dey in most popular Bengali newspaper ‘Anandabazar Patrika’ on 26th October, 2008. In this article she tries to argue that while Jhulan won the title of best woman cricketer of the year of 2007 with Australian Cricket Captain Ricki Ponting should get equal status and recognition as her achievement was as same as that of Ricki Ponting. But Jhulan does not get it, not only Jhulan women cricketers in general are far behind to be recognized as equal as male cricketer. In this situation their only requirement is to get more space in media for women players besides male cricketers.
Since men enjoy the dominant position in society, it is more problematic for them to leave their masculine role because what we expect from a man like physical strength, power, sexual competence form the basis of male roles which are necessary for the understanding of masculine identity. Feminine identity formation deserves opposite qualities, so it is not possible for women to claim a just share in the public sphere unless they discard their femininity. That also is not an easy job as we find in the life experience of Jhulan, but still, this appears to be the only way to get proper recognition in equal terms with men. In ‘TEEN EKKE TEEN’ to thwart the bank robbery by showing their bravery and courage those three women proved that they are equal to any man and when people were convinced about their ability, they ultimately got successful in their business project. For that they did not need to violate feminine appearance which is inevitable for a woman cricketer like Jhulan. If these women also violated their feminine appearance it is very difficult to say that to what extent they would get public support and sympathy. Their act of masculine courage and bravery was more symbolic than their usual way of life. Here it is to be noted that unlike femininity, which is in a way practically useless in the public sphere, masculine qualities are equally strong in the private sphere of family too. Once again the family which is often referred to as the place for women is not beyond the control of men’s power and influence. In HEMANTER PAKHI, Aditi maintains her family and performs her all duties as a housewife and mother for more than twenty years but while taking the vital decision of higher education of her elder son she is not involved. That decision remains a matter between her husband and her son because the cost of his higher education will be borne by his father and not by his mother. so that there is hardly any need for her to take in part in such decisions; she is in fact informed about it only at the eleventh hour. This scene gives us an important message about the total male domination and influence irrespective of public-private dichotomy. Family is not a sovereign place of women as it seems to us. Women’s sovereignty within her family is defined in terms of her commitments and duties towards the family members. But in case of taking vital decisions, she is nowhere; she has no right even to participate in the decision-making about the future of her own child. The male members have the sole right

to take such decisions by virtue of his dominant position in public domain and because the public enjoys the superior position over private.

Masculinity cannot be conceived irrespective of social and cultural contexts. We find different types of expression of masculinity within and between different cultures. Considering different social and cultural realities, there is not one uniform cast of masculinity but we must refer to masculinities. In the nineteenth century context two different forms of masculinity existed in Bengal. To study these forms in the nineteenth century public sphere, we should keep in mind that in a traditional society like India, women’s role was restricted within the space of the family; the public sphere was naturally held as the exclusive domain of men. Until the advent of cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century no serious discussion had taken place on masculinity which could throw light on its form and nature. To follow Sumit Sarkar’s argument, there were mainly two forms of masculinity at that time, one representing its aggressive form and another is its alternative, the reformist conception of masculinity. What is really significant is that these two forms stood against each other in the crucial moment of the Swadeshi movement which in a way reflected the two different viewpoints about the nature of nationalism itself. Among the two different forms, the first one, the aggressive notion of masculinity was a reaction against the British imperialism and its cult of manliness, while the reformist understanding of masculinity represented adoptive nature of Indian tradition, in that sense, it did not hesitate to accommodate some ideals of the British as nation. Most importantly, both forms charted out their arguments related to the women’s question where women themselves did not have any participation, but only remained passive recipients in constructed ideals of femininity.

The debate or conflict between the two different forms of masculinity became significant as they were represented in two different sections of the late nineteenth century Bengal, Hindu revivalists and moderate Brahmos, represented by men of genius, Swami Vivakananda and Rabindranath Tagore. In favour of the aggressive form Swami

21 Ibid. P. 09


34 Ibid.
comments, ‘our men may be impolite, rude but they are the only real men. When our women do throw away effeminacy from every man just like their counterparts of Europe, where women have been secured by men and they hate men’s effeminacy’.\textsuperscript{35} This view was further extended when Sister Nibedita, Swamiji’s disciple, directly comments on Tagore’s personality by saying ‘he has a naive sort of vanity in speech which is so childlike as to be rather touching. Day-night, he was singing or chatting – loved to entertain or to be entertained. But for all this Mr. Tagore’s is not the type of manhood that appeals to me.’\textsuperscript{36} In the film ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ the concept of masculinity which Nibedita wants to emphasize, could be witnessed in the image of Sandip. On the other hand, \textit{Bimala} as a woman feels that her husband is too calm, especially in his response to the raging \textit{Swadeshi} movement. Naturally she gets attracted to a man, who, in Vivakanaanda’s words is impolite or rude, and at the same time reflects true manliness in the public political sphere. The closeness of \textit{Bimala} to \textit{Sandip}, despite her husband’s consent does not allow her to become active in public life but keeps her only as ‘Makshi Rani’ within the private sphere. But definitely such a version of cultural nationalism make women aware about the outside world which is confirmed in the words of Nikhilesh himself when he observes that from now on \textit{Bimala} will be more interested in the outside world and that cannot be stopped because we cannot control one’s thoughts.

Despite her feelings for \textit{Sandip}, \textit{Bimala} at no point forgets the qualities she finds in her husband, \textit{Nikhilesh}. Had \textit{Sandip} not arrived in her life at that turbulent moment in Bengal’s history, the story or the film narrative could have taken a different course. As we find in the film, it is \textit{Nikhilesh} who sincerely wishes to give his wife proper liberty: he arranges for her English education or training in western music under a European lady teacher. Even her emergence in the outside world could not be possible had her husband not taken an active interest. Through the character of \textit{Nikhilesh} Rabindranath projects an alternative ‘reformist’ concept of masculinity which seeks to move, through self-examination and auto-critique, towards recognition of the autonomy of others. It suggests


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. P. 95
that masculinity believes in women’s own subjectivity by developing their own autonomy. The form of masculinity represented by Nikhiles could be found in Bhupati in the early nineteenth century context, who wanted to encourage his wife’s writing skills and asked his cousin brother Amal to take care of it. Indeed, we find the true embodiment of the masculinity which Nikhiles propagates in Gandhi who refuses to accept the cult of manhood of British imperialism which in a way simultaneously rejects the aggressive masculinity that emerged as a reaction of it. The death of Nikhiles in the film suggests the defeat of the reformist understanding in the hands of aggressive masculinity which came alive when Gandhi himself was assassinated by the same aggressive masculine man.

In spite of differences, both understandings of masculinity held that the public sphere was the exclusive domain for men because, the reformist agenda equated women’s public appearance with attainment of their subjectivity, and the other form emphasized women’s role in the outside world while maintaining their femininity. The triumph of the ‘aggressive’ form at the end of the day marginalized the reformist attempt to transform the nature of the public sphere, whereas the aggressive form as it emphasised on to maintain the feminine qualities, restricted women’s participation by imposing moral-ideological notion on them. So the public domain remained as usual the masculine domain, and if women somehow made an appearance, they would reflect the lack of masculine virtues as they possessed the ideal image of femininity within the periphery of middle class. We could recall the scene in ‘MAHANAGAR’ when Arati and her husband find an advertisement seeking lady sales girls for which she finally applies. Apparently it may suggest that with changes of time, the masculine public sphere begins to include housewives like her, having only feminine virtues. As the film unfolds, however, we get to know that her job is to demonstrate a product which is made mainly for upper class

37 Sumit Sarkar (2002) Beyond Nationalist Frame, P. 121


housewives; so she has to interact with women customers and not general people. Here too, the most important customers are dealt with by her boss himself. In other words, men remain in their dominant position which ultimately shapes the nature of the public space, although it accommodates women. *Arati*, while going for work with her husband on the first day could not escape remembering her day to day activities at home e.g. at 9.30 a.m. she gives a bath to her son, *Pintu*. Realizing her condition *Subrata* told her that, with this mind-set she could not continue with her job for long. These sentiments do not get any attention in office as all activities are performed in terms with the masculine code of conduct.

*Arati* is getting nervous on her way to office on the first working day; in fact, it is the second time she feels she gets nervous in her life. The first occasion was her marriage which transformed her identity – from a girl to the wife of *Subrato Mazumdar*. Similarly, going for work would also change her status from the wife of *Subrato Mazumdar* to *Arati Mazumdar*. Yet this apparent shift of her identity cannot overshadow her own image of the wife and mother, the core ideals of femininity. As Connell puts it, mothering or wifehood is an ideology which is embedded in a social relationship; in contrast, fathering is popularly understood simply as a biological category.\(^40\) The conflict *Arati* was facing between her identity in public and private domains, seems to be continuing in post independence Bengali middle class family even in the late 1990’s and early 21\(^{st}\) century. In ‘*HEMANTER PAKHI*’ *Aditi*, the main protagonist of the film meets her college friend *Sujata* in a shopping plaza after twenty three long years. Sitting in a restaurant *Sujata* makes a highly pertinent observation before *Aditi* on women’s liberation in relation to her public appearance. After graduation, she too did her LL.B. and started practising at the High court. After her marriage and the birth of her son she had to give up her ambition to be a lawyer. On the one hand she suffered criticism from her own family members as her

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Recently in western societies we find the notion of fatherhood. Arguments have been made that like many women, men also have the desire to be a father of a child. Even if they are not married they are adopting child to fulfil their desire to be a father. It is unclear whether such notion of fatherhood will challenge the mother’s status of primary care giver of her child but the idea definitely raised some questions about the importance of mother in child’s life if father takes all cares even at the stage early childhood. Though the notion of fatherhood may get popularity in the west but such notion can hardly be found in third world countries, including India.
profession demanded time, on the other hand, her senior lawyer under whom she was practising, also became critical of her as she did not able to give enough time for her career. Here, we should note that any person, who is committed to his work, cannot stand any other person neglecting it. In that respect her senior is quite right who did not like his junior’s lack of commitment, even if that was on the ground of her familial obligations. It also reiterates the point made earlier i.e. professional demands of the public life do not make much allowance for feminine values related to the private sphere. Under the circumstances, it is better for women to be less ambitious and satisfied within the little space provided for them if feminine values have to be upheld at all. *Sujata* does the same thing and takes up a job with the Indian Railway. At the same time she bears every responsibility for her family but like her legal career she cannot lose this job now because there is an economic necessity in the family. Apparently it may seem that working women live a free life and enjoy a greater degree of freedom but for Sujata, working women are more bound up with their families. Because even today in society women enjoy freedoms only to that extent which men allow them. If one cannot agree with that, she has to live alone and leave her family. *Sujata* describes the basic rule of the public world for a woman like her who possesses feminine values and cannot reject familial relations for the sake of her ambitions like a man.

For Bengali middle class women, the *purdah* system has ceased to exist, and there is no formal restriction on appearing in public, but the public sphere by its nature is not a domain of her liberation. There still abound invisible obstructions which prevent a woman to freely enter and become a part of that sphere. If the public domain is not a sphere of her emancipation, then is the question of public participation only a matter of sharing the masculine sphere? If it is accepted then it would again raise a serious question about her quest for self-identity. Actually in our society the overall atmosphere is such that does not allow feminine qualities in a traditionally masculine dominated sphere. There is perhaps not a single film that suggests any change in this normative aspect of the public sphere. In order to become an appropriate space for women’s emancipation towards self-identity, the public space has to change its nature so that it could

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accommodate both masculine and feminine values beyond the categories of male and female.

Figure No : 17
There is hardly any difference between a housewife and a working woman in male dominated society (HEMANTER PAKHI)

If the public domain could not provide a space for women’s emancipation in a substantive manner does it suggest that they should go back to their traditional domain of family? Betty Fridan notes that in such cases women will be depressed and dissatisfied which is a problem that doctors or psychologists are helpless to diagnose. \(^42\) From this observation of Fridan it can be said that under changing circumstances the middle class women are now getting good quality of education – indeed higher education – which quite expectedly makes them more conscious regarding their social position. Unless a woman voluntarily accepts her status as a housewife, it is quite difficult to bring them back into the private realm. In ‘MAHANAGAR’ when Subrato asked his wife Arati to resign from her job as it disturbed their family peace and happiness, she became depressed. Her husband tried to convince her by saying that her job would even affect her health. But Arati in a defiant mode replied that she did not feel that her job was affecting her health; rather she felt happy doing the job and she enjoyed her work. We should remember here that Arati is not an illiterate person, she has the secondary level

qualification. Such woman cannot accept the decision of her family members to remain at home and perform her traditional duties as mother and wife especially after having an experience of public life. It was also true for Bimala of ‘GHARE-BAIRE’ in early twentieth century context. After appearing in public and meeting with Sandip for the first time she could not resist the urge to go in public and meet him more frequently. For Bimala, Sandip was not only an another man but representing the public domain. Bimala is educated and she developed all other qualities which suits modern outlook. As in Arati’s case, after Bimala’s appearance in public it was not possible for Nikhilesh to bring her back to the familial fold. When his sister-in-law advised him to stop her by force he replied that he could stop her physically to appear in public but he could not control her mind. He understood that if Bimala did not come back by her own, it was useless to force her not to appear in public. Whatever be the observation of Brett Fridan that was even true in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Since there is a close correlation between education and opportunity, so when an educated woman gets such opportunity to appear in public it is very difficult to brings her back home. Generally an educated person can prepare himself to participate in public domain in a more effective way. It is evident in case of Paromita. In the film ‘PAROMITAR EK DIN’ we see that Paromita from the very beginning was satisfied as a housewife of a joint family despite being highly educated. However, when she joins an advertising agency, she slowly develops her own personality which leads her to leave behind her old relations and start a new life with a more appropriate male partner to whom she is closer, both mentally and physically. Such changes in her life also suggest that only the public domain could provide a woman an opportunity to shape her life in a new manner.

Whatever be the limitations, the public sphere is the only place where women’s liberation can be possible because within the family, her identity is trapped within familial relations. When Sujata tells her story to Aditi, she accepts the fact that her job is the only source of strength for her. In ‘MAHANAGAR’, when Arati gets her first month’s salary her face becomes bright and for a moment she realizes her own worth reflected in her pay packet. Such realisation about their strength and potentiality suggest the inevitability of the public sphere which may not be able to emancipate women but definitely provides a platform on which they can negotiate their familial relations even if
they do not reject them. The qualitative changes which necessarily conditions for substantive participation of women could be the next step towards their self-emancipation.

Bengali cinema successfully represented how the stereotyped image of Bengali women does not allow them to claim the full participation in male dominated public sphere without having masculine attributes. Put in a different way, women’s effective and meaningful participation in public sphere depends on the extent to which feminine attributes are accommodated. But while portraying the conditions for middle class women’s substantive participation in public sphere, these films do not suggest bringing women back into private domain of family. Thus, the film like ‘MAHANAGAR’ and ‘HEMANTER PAKHI’ share the theoretical understanding that establishment of individual identity could only be possible in public sphere. But in view of the marginality of women in public domain, there is a need to change the nature of it so that their participation could be substantive. To end the discussion for this chapter we can cite an article in a popular Bengali daily which claims that attributes of masculinity can be equally harmful for women as it creates more mental stress for them. The author also points out that, with the increasing participation in a male dominated sphere women are now gradually internalizing such masculine attributes so the end result is, they also face similar mental stress like men. In a way this piece suggests the hegemonic nature of masculinity which is equally capable of influencing women. The solution, according to him is that men should adopt some feminine attributes whereas women should retain their own qualities. Beyond this mutual exchange we could bring the wider category of ‘human being’ to include both feminine and masculine virtues, especially in the context of the outside world.