Chapter Five
THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES: THE DECADES OF 1980s AND 1990s

The Context of Film-Making

As far as creative filmmaking is concerned, there has always been an attempt to critique the stereotype. But in the conventional mode of construction of woman the icon has always been woman embodying and sustaining tradition. In the first decade after independence the promise of modernity and its tussle with tradition is narrativised, with the female protagonist providing the site for such ‘negotiation’. To represent the modern woman, during the 1960s, at least the boundaries of patriarchy and male-order are stretched out. ‘Modernity’ is allowed to adjust with ‘tradition’ or ‘tradition’ is made to adapt. The web of social network, the normative structure of a transient society is further exposed in the 1970s. All these indicate a gradual unfolding of an alternative image of woman. So, over the decades, even though patriarchal orders are moulded and reshaped to restrict female subjectivity, by emphasizing the areas of ambiguities and ambivalence the possibility of an alternative has been brightened up.

Post 1970s, due to the reasons discussed in Chapter 3, there has been a downslide in Bengali cinema as far as aesthetically and thematically accomplished films are concerned. The dazzle of the spectacle of the mainstream Hindi movies is seen to be the key to box-office success. Such attempts in Bengali cinema miserably failed to satisfy the intellectual aspiration of the literate class who hitherto formed the backbone of Bengali cinema as loyal audience. Paradoxically, around the same time there is an intensification of cinema-studies in Bengali cultural field. Along with it, there is an emergence of new youthful filmmakers. The whole scenario is in
resonance with the new cinema movement of the '70s and '80s in the international film-world.¹

The new cinema movement critiqued the conventions of reducing 'real' women to images and tokens functioning in a circuit of signs the values of which have been determined by and for men.² Attempts were made to explore the interiority of woman as a subject. Her familial and civic role are also subjected to closer scrutiny. The concern is that "women as women" are not represented in the cinema, that they do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard. To image woman as an autonomous individual, as a person in her own rights demands a probe into her everyday life experiences. To throw light on women's self-experience, her interior life is to be acknowledged rescuing her from all imposed identities as a mother, or a daughter, or a sister, or a daughter-in-law and so forth. In other words, the female aesthetics has to be recovered from being a principle for realising male objectives.

Around the same time, the women's movement gained strength in India and highlighted women's oppression and struggle for an egalitarian society.³ In the preceding chapter we have noted the inadequate response in film-making with respect to socially emergent feminist agenda in 1970s. Small in numbers yet emphatic in its depth woman-centred films start gathering a lot of critical as well as public response during 1980s. A number

¹ Datta, Sangeeta, 'Globalisation and Representation of Women in Indian Cinema' in Social Scientist, vol.28, no.3-4, March-April 2000, pp.71-82.
³ Earlier, Indian Women's movement used to be essentially tied to a left tradition. In the 1980s there is a radical rethinking of theory and practice with respect to women's movement. The idea of the 'feminine principle' is introduced as something that men and women both could unite around. The slogan mooted is "the liberation of women and men through the awakening of women's power". See Omvedt, Gail, Reinventing Revolution, (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1993).
of film makers start bringing women from the margins to the centre of their texts. The female voice is heard and no longer fetishised.

Also it is significant that, around the same time women around the world have increased their roles behind the camera as producers, directors, and technicians. It has been argued that behind the camera roles for women are significant, because women's voices need to be heard. Telling women's stories and expressing a female point of view are important, both of which would otherwise go ignored. In this context films made by Aparna Sen acquire added significance. Aparna Sen, as an actress has been the discovery of the master Satyajit Ray, in the film *Samapti* (a concluding film of a three-part treatise *Teen Kanya* dealing with three distinct female characters of Tagore). Full of life and mischief the teenaged Mrinmoyee of Samapti actually blossomed in the Bengali cinema into an image of a freewheeling autonomous individual. Ready to take on the world as an enlightened educated modern woman – such a cinematic image Aparna Sen evoked through many popular box-office hits. These films might not thematically being built to project women as emancipated, but Sen in her 'reel-life' brought in a whiff of fresh-air as far as female persona is concerned in Bengali popular films.4

In a way, Apama Sen's characterisation in the image-world is a sort of an extension of her real-life background. She inherits essentially the legacy of the rational enlightened cultural ethos of 'modern Bengal'. She definitely bears the imprints of her illustrious father's intellectual frame of mind. Chidananda Das Gupta, Aparna Sen's father has been one of the torch-bearers of cinema movement in this part of the world.5 He, along with

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5 Roy, Rajat, op.cit.
Ray, Nemai Ghosh, Harishadhan Das Gupta et.al initiated the serious cine-club activities in Kolkata and advocated emphatically the need for liberal realist film-making in India. Such liberal-realist legacy along with Ray’s humanist treatment of reality shape Aparna Sen’s sensibilities as she takes up the role behind the camera. Not to forget her real-life personality, we can anticipate that the ‘desire and right to decide one’s own life’ would be the undertone of the female voice that her film are going to implore. Aparna Sen starts off as a film-maker with an English film, 36 Chowringhee Lane. In a la Ray cinematic treatment she brings an old anglo-Indian woman (teacher), marginal in more than one sense – being a member of a marginalised community and as an old helpless lonely lady, to the centrestage of her film. She draws out quite lyrically the vulnerability of a working woman and the deceit inflicted upon her by her own students. Although the film is made within a Bengali ambience and locale, 36 Chauringhee Lane remains an English film. Sen’s directorial debut was highly acclaimed across the world.

That Sen is to raise the female-voice within a male-dominated order could well be anticipated given her maiden film in English. In 1985, Sen comes up with Paroma based on her own story/screenplay. She makes the film amidst the overwhelming (both, the mainstream Hindi movies and the imitative Bengali movies) cinematic images that present the body of woman as a spectacle for the erotic male gaze and at the same time rendering her as ‘non-male’. In a brazen style Aparna Sen explodes the freedom of female sexuality on the Bengali screen through Paroma. She works on the theme of

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6 ibid.

7 Aparna Sen confides in a personal interview that she never thought that the University/college examiners or examinations could really assess her. Confident of her profound readings of English Literature, she dropped out from the Honours course from Presidency College to get married at a very early age.

8 Vaidyanathan, T.G., Hours in the Dark, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996).
female subjectivity relentlessly and if she begins with the theme of vulnerability of the human beings in 36 Chowringhee Lane, she narrativises the arrival of a self-realised woman in Paroma. And Sen winds up the 20th century with a representation of woman daring to desert her 'home' and decide her 'home' in Paromitar Ek Din (literally tr. A Day in the Life of Paromita, 1999; English sub-titled as House of Memories).  

As our primary source, we take up the two films of Aparna Sen – Paroma and Paromitar Ek Din. Alongwith, we select the other two most successful films of the 1990s -- Unishe April (The Nineteenth Day of April, tr. mine 1994) and Dahan (The Burn, tr. mine 1998), both the films are made by Rituparno Ghosh. Prior to Unishe April, Ghosh has had a very limited exposure to the film-audience with just one children’s film to his credit. With Unishe April Bengali cinema experiences a new lease of life in an otherwise listless 1990s. Working with his own story Rituparno brings in a sort of an Autumn Sonata (dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1978) type of intense human drama invoking primarily female characters in Unishe April. The expectation that Rituparno raises through this film is not belied, his second major film Dahan too attracts critics and general audience because of its very neo-realist and at the same time liberating notion for women. We would take up our findings in terms of the thematic content from the four films – Aparna Sen’s Paroma and Paromitar Ek Din and Rituparno Ghosh’s Unishe April and Dahan, one by one in chronological order of their making.

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9 To seek the female-voice (no doubt restricted to a white-collared and privileged literate classes) in every social-cultural field, Aparna Sen since mid 1980s edits the most popular Bengali woman-centric glossy magazine Sananda in earnest, and not as just name-sake glamour editor.


Paroma – a Rediscovery of Womanhood

Aparna Sen initiates us into her film with a passage on images – the camera as an actual object on screen identifying its images from one culture to another: a photographer from abroad, Rahul looking at a reality through the lenses of his camera on the occasion of Durga Puja – the traditional mother goddess icon in Bengali culture. The camera catches Paroma’s face immediately after the focus on the goddess’s face. Paroma is fixed into a predetermined set of relational roles with specific service obligations. She is seen as one who responds one after another to the different role names which people call her by and which at once underlines an elaborate and binding code of obligations. Who is Paroma? She is a middle-aged upper-class housewife. She is a mother of three children. Her husband is a well-established professional.

Rahul, the expatriate photographer is a friend of Paroma’s nephew-in-law. He is almost 10 years younger than her. Rahul, the photographer looking for an image of the traditional Indian housewife draws a different Paroma out of herself. A Paroma who once played the sitar and read Premendra Mitra, a Paroma not simply submerged under a pile of domestic chores. They feel attracted to one another. Gradually, overcoming hesitations, doubts and guilt-feelings Paroma enters into a physical relationship with Rahul. This apparent adultery is the axis of the elaboration of female subjectivity in this film.

The relationship is a short-lived one and in the euphoria of the discovery of her individual volition, of herself, Paroma does not realise that for Rahul it has been more of a liberal adventure than an emotional involvement. Rahul leaves for his photo-journalism trip abroad.

12 Premendra Mitra is a popular novelist of modern Bengali literature.
The affair outside marriage is finally exposed to the family as Rahul sends a glossy Life-Magazine carrying a close photograph of Paroma (shot by himself) signifying quite obviously their physical intimacy. At the first instance, Paroma surrenders and calls it a mistake. She apologises to her husband. But the family turns away from her. ‘Abandoned’ by Rahul and rejected by her husband, she turns to suicide. The horrendous act of the attempted suicide can only give the family a sense of guilt. The male-ordered family would not dare to carry the responsibility for a death on its conscience. She is ‘rescued’ and on the advice a psychiatrist recovers in a nursing home. Initially, on her recovery she gives an indifferent stare to all the familial relationships she once belonged to.

Virtually the recovery underscores the ‘liberation’ of Paroma. She rejects the family. A long held close-up of a face that looks different with the cropped hair records the withdrawal into herself which turns into a process when she recalls Sheela. Sheela, an old friend of hers earlier advised her at the point of crisis that, she (Paroma) had to decide things for herself and take responsibility for them. And that, Rahul was not bound down in any way whatsoever to her needs or demands. Now, she starts looking for a job with Sheela’s assistance, and most significantly starts writing a diary, a dialogue with herself. Such a dialogue helps her to liberate herself from Rahul. This crucial ‘liberation’ is cinematically captured when a newspaper clipping about Rahul is thrown away like a scrap of news by Paroma with a deliberate concentration on the act of throwing away.

In a subsequent encounter with the family, a series of close-ups capture the guilt and discomfiture of the family. Paroma takes control of the situation and asks them to sit down. The last sequence builds up resolutely from Paroma’s self-assertion, and reaches the point where she lays down her own terms and her choice – a choice of economic/emotional independence.
This is turn leads to the real climax where Paroma visually leaves the frame that contains her family and comes to identify the potted plant that she had known in her childhood and forgotten. In a clearly epiphanic moment she recalls the plant’s tell-tale name – ‘euphoria’ or Krishnapallabi. It is a simple symbolic moment of rediscovery of the old self, and it is at this point that her younger daughter too leaves the old frame and joins her mother in the new frame. A new relationship is forged between daughter and mother, the daughter acknowledging herself in her mother, cherishing the woman liberated at last.

*Unishe-April* An Inter Generational Realization of Femininity

Rituparno Ghosh’s *Unishe April* (1994) encounters an audience which is already captured by intense family-dramas of television serials and ‘megaserials’. The satellite television boom of 1990s not only shapes the audience’s preference for crisp familial drama with social-critical content, it also draws them away from theatre-halls to confine them in their cosy homes. *Unishe April* with its visual stylistics matches the challenge of the television serials and content wise explores a very critical relationship between a mother and daughter—both professionally successful. Such a theme not only lays emphasis on the female roles but offers on off-beat subject to the audience. So, the film regains that class of audience which apparently has made an exit from popular film viewership.

Based on his own story Rituparno scripts *Unishe April* as a melodrama, not stereotypical, focussing on the differences between a famous mother, the dancer Sarojini, and her daughter Aditi (nick named Mithu), a doctor— who very recently finished her medical study in Delhi.

Male characters are hardly in focus in the film and as against the conventional melodrama that problematises man-woman relationships,
unfolding its various dimensions of negotiation ending almost certainly with a restoration of the 'home', this film essays female subjectivity entirely on the basis of contesting female identities. The male characters are invoked only to serve as catalysts to women’s reawakening and/or realisation of their own independent identities. That there is a redundancy of the male is made clear in the very beginning of the narrative with the death-scene of Sarojini’s husband, Aditi’s father.

It is the 19th day of April – the film takes its title from this significant day. Almost entirely the plot of the film takes place in a single day, the 19th April, this day years back Sarojini lost her husband and Mithu (Aditi is referred to by this nickname throughout the film by her mother) as a kid lost her father.

The drama unfolds on another 19th of April as Mithu, who studied medicine in Delhi and has become a doctor, returns to her Kolkata home to be back with her father’s memory. In a reticent mood she wants to spend the day. It is a posh upper-class home of Sarojini, her mother. She is a famous dancer and incidentally on the same day she receives the news of her being awarded the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academy Award. The glamour world of the media chases her, there are accolades from all corners but the daughter is indifferent. She is indifferent even to her mother’s ‘lover’, an admirer and support of Sarojini’s artistic endeavours.

‘Saroju’, as addressed throughout the film by her male-accompany, her admirer or her lover, is elated to be recognised by the cultural world this way. As a contrast to Mithu’s obsession with the day as a day of ‘loss’, her mother is exuberant to celebrate the day with a sumptuous lunch along with her lover at home. In the spurt of excitement Sarojini proposes to her lover her wish to fly to Madras to pay homage to her dance Guru. The two arranges such a flight.
Mithu has a boyfriend in Delhi. She only expects a call from him on this special day. As a solace, as a succour she waits for her boyfriend’s call. Her eagerness to hear from her lover is belied. Instead her lover calls from Delhi to verify whether the awardee, as they learn back in Delhi through newspapers, Sarojini Gupta is Aditi’s (alias Mithu) mother. He deplores the fact his fiancee’s mother is a dancer. In a typical representation of a male-ordered family view, he even cites the non-endorsement of his ‘cultured’ family to the fact that their would be daughter-in-law’s mother is a famous classical dancer. This is the moment of reckoning for Mithu and she engages in a desperate pleading with her fiancé. She pleads yet she does not feel apologetic about it. She only pleads for the relationship as she almost breaks down over the phone:

... dear, please listen to me dear, you’re misunderstanding me, why shall I hide my mother’s identity? Isn’t I’m important for you? How does and why shall my mother’s identity come into our relationship? Try to understand me, dear...

She is at a loss to explain that it is not all a deplorable identity that she wants to shield from her would be in-laws. More than that, she is a self-realised woman who never thinks of being identified in terms of her filial relationship. Being let down by her fiancé, Mithu breaks down. She regresses into her childhood memory of the day her father passed away. Through a flashback we are reminded of the day – coincidentally on that day too, her mother was out of the city. Driven by her professional requirement Sarojini had to be away from her husband, Mithu’s father’s death-bed. Unable to reconcile within herself Mithu, now left alone in the splash house, meticulously plans a suicide.

In a dramatic turn, using brilliantly the sequence of a thunderstorm, the plot-structure brings in Mithu’s mother back to the home. The thunderstorm and heavy weather cancels Sarojini’s flight to Madras;
symbolically it signifies the imminent ‘storm’ that the two female agents of the narrative were about to get engaged in. Mithu is taken aback, her suicide attempt fails and to top it all – Sarojini discovers the sleeping pills that her daughter has acquired for the ominous act. She discovers the inner world of her own daughter and is shocked to realise the pent up emotion in Mithu’s mind. Mithu’s feeling of being neglected through childhood. Mithu confesses:

... you used to be busy with your dance students and dance. I used to watch from the other room, with so much care you’ve teaching them steps. You never thought of me, you never included me in your dance class. You’d go out, I used to wait and wait aimlessly, I’d sense you’d returned home by the sweet perfume you used to wear. I used to hate that fragrance. I would have thrown that perfume out....

In a tell-tale catharsis Mithu’s mother too unwinds herself. She demystifies the image of her husband before her daughter. She sobs uncontrollably:

Your father was a ver mediocre man. He had no ambition. He could not accept my rise to fame and glamour....

We are told through flashbacks in the narrative that Sarojini’s husband, a doctor of humble pursuit, could not handle his wife independent identity, her glamorous career. Instead as a frail husband, he recoiled to his own male-ego, so vulnerable. Such a demystification narrows down the distance between the mother and daughter. A barrage of dialogue locked in histrionic duel helps the two female protagonists to realise themselves inter-subjectively. Inter-subjectively they reconfirm their bond. They rediscover through such cathartic moment their femininity. Such a new dimension to feminine subjectivity is underscored through the last shot of the film. The phone rings again. Through Mithu’s candid confession of being ‘betrayed’ by her fiance, Sarojini is now well-equipped of the situation. She has regained her daughter’s faith. The narrative built-up point that the caller could only be Mithu’s boy-friend from Delhi. Mithu is hesitant to pick up the phone;
unsure of her own emotion and insecure too. In a brilliant cinematic treatment of filial bondage, in the same frame, the mother joins the daughter as she goes to pick up the receiver. Sarojini in a gesture of support stands erect reclining a bit on the wooden doorframe. A alternate resolution occurs between two women, free from any male intervention.

*Dahan – Probing the Inner-self Beyond Assertion*

Rituparno Ghosh’s second major feature film, immediately after *Unishe April*, is based on popular novelist Suchitra Bhattacharya’s novel *Dahan*. A critical realist writer is Suchitra Bhattacharya. Her dominant subject is to unnerve the day-to-day lives of women in Bengali society. *Dahan* is based on a real-life incident\(^\text{13}\) that shook the otherwise complacent Bengali urban middle-class about gender assymetry and violence in public life. For an erudite, enlightened urban class of Bengal the ideal of ‘respect for women’ is overwhelmingly a celebrated notion.\(^\text{14}\) The more the respect, the more the awe- the more the subtle, the more the complex dimension of male supremacy. The film takes off from this premise, weaves a social-critical content by bringing in the centre of the narrative primarily two female protagonists Romita Chaudhury and Srobona Sarkar. Three other female characters are also in the narrative structure to enrich the theme on female agency. All these five women embody five different dimensions or points in the struggle against male dominance. The other three female character’s are *Srobona’s* (nicknamed Jhiunuk) grand mother, *Romita’s* sister-in-law and *Trina*, the fiancee of one of the villains in the film.

\(^{13}\) On 24th June, 1992 in front of a busy metro-station in Kolkota, a young married woman was accosted and molested by five young men in front of her husband. The husband was badly beaten up. A young print-journalist Amanya Chatterjee confronted these hoodlums. Subsequently, the culprits were booked. For a ‘safe’ city like Kolkota, it was a big jolt to its cultural ethos too.

A young married couple goes on a marketing spree. Evidently it is the South Calcutta locale. They are seen in front of a metro-station. The husband, Palash goes across the road to fetch cigarettes. Romita, his wife waits alone. A young beautiful woman waiting alone falls victim to a group of molesters. She is harassed. Palash rushes back and it starts raining. Palash desperately tries to deter the gang from abducting his wife. Mercilessly he is beaten up. The uneven battle goes on and the passing vehicles avoid the trouble, they do not stop. Even though some passengers wish to intervene, the drivers make easy escapes. At the point, Srobona Sarkar, a young school teacher passing through the spot in an auto, with three other male co-passengers in it,\textsuperscript{15} dares to stop the reluctant auto-driver single-handedly. She jumps onto the scene rain-soaked. She intercepts the group of molesters as Palash lays semi-conscious badly bruised. She rescues finally Romita from being abducted and raped.

Srobona, alias Jhinuk is no flaunting woman activist, or a self-acclaimed feminist. She is a young accomplished woman teaching in an ordinary school. She is socially sensitive to lodge the complaint and an FIR with the police station after the incident, along with the victim and the wounded.

The film Dahan takes off from this event in the public sphere of streets and penetrates into the interior. The spillover of the public sphere into the private domain of home metaphorically stands for the probe within. This public event sets off a series of events/realisations at the private space of the home.

At the first instance, Romita's in-laws are all too grateful to Srobona. But recoils at the idea of pursuing the police case, as that brings their daughter-in-law more in the public. The question of 'respectability' is again

\textsuperscript{15} In Koklata city, auto-rikshaws operate without fare-meter. They provide shuttle service from one point to another with fixed fare-rate from each individual passenger.
at stake. Romita is strictly vigiled so that she does not get ideas from Srobona. Srobona is undetered. She is applauded by her colleagues, as well as cynically commented by one of them. Srobona gains the attention of the society as the police-case unfolds. The case attains importance because of the molesters' social high background.

Srobona is consciously steadfast with the issue, unfazed by the incumbent's gradually reticent approach towards pleading the case. Pressures are created from every corner on her to withdraw and not to pursue the legal case.

The lone voice of wisdom comes from Srobona grandmother. She is radiant in her independent life in an old-age home. She is the only one who inspires her granddaughter to live life in accordance with one's own sense of righteousness and responsibility. When the entire range of Srobona's acquaintances shower accolades on her for the daring act and at the same time does not hesitate to humiliate her at the next opportunity, her grandmother assuages her sensitivities so that she could stick to her grand. She is a different woman and she debunks the convention of a 'progressive society' to heap praises on Srobona's act of fighting injustice and lending a helping hand to a person in distress. She wonders emphatically whether it is indeed heroic to stretch out a helping hand to a fellow being in distress or if it is not the most intrinsic human endeavour and a natural thing to do so. Srobona probably is sustained by the independent emancipatory spirit of her grandmother, Srobona is therefore idealistic and having a mind of her own.

Srobona is simpleton, like any other next-door young woman has a love-affair with normal expectations. Her lover Tunir is another face of the conservative patriarchal order. Masked in the put-on of a socially mobile successful executive, he appears to be sympathizer but never knows which
side he is on. He is a sure seducer, using his power of sexual persuasion he tries to manipulate his lover Srobona's sincere efforts to fight injustice.

The situation in Romita's home is typical of a middle-class conservative reaction when caught in a crucial question of ensuring 'respect' for its women. Nobody wants to see the logical end of the ensuing legal battle against the molesters in fear of bringing ignonimity to their domesticated daughter-in-law. Romita's husband Palash exhibits a typical manhood endangered at the idea of his wife's sexuality becoming a public topic. Actually, Palash's colleagues engages in a spicy discussion in a men's toilet – whether Palash's wife was actually raped or not, the male curiosity stands for the male gaze at female body.

Feeling emasculated, Palash tries to regain his masculinity by forcing a reluctant, yet to recover from the social and physical trauma, Romita into the bed. He reestablishes his male control over his wife's body. Romita is confined to a life of domestic imprisonment. Her movements are restricted and she is not allowed to get in touch with Srobona.

Caught in an object dilemma, to ensure 'family prestige', Romita backtracks while giving evidence in identifying the culprits in the court of law. Srobona fights alone, she defies even her fiance’s advice – risks her love-life, and faces the hostility of the entire society to stand up at the witness-box in the court. The defence lawyer's aggressive male-chauvinistic queries are symptomatic of the society's aggression towards a woman who transgress its code and challenges it. Her free movement in the night travelling in a shuttle auto, her independence and autonomy are all subjected to male scrutiny. She is publicly humiliated at an inquisition, a legal one at that, where her 'character' is brought to question. She has to account for her presence in an autorikshaw on a rainy night and justify why she was with two unknown men. Had she been a male, such a query would have been
redundant. *Srobona* learns the need for freedom the hard way. She recognises the need to redefine her life. She falls back on her grandmother’s moralising strength. The grandmother asks her to read the play – *Saint Joan* by Bernard Shaw (presented to *Srobona* earlier by her younger brother almost mockingly at her fight, valiant public act of rescuing a woman from molesters), minutely because she would find in it many things which have remained the same since the days of Joan – obviously referring to the plight of the women who assume agency.

*Romita*, too learns to acknowledge herself in relation to her being alone and searches for a new life irrespective of her marriage. She finally accedes to her expatriate sister’s call to fly to Canada. Simultaneously with *Romita* voicing her desire to her sister, *Srobona* too expresses a similar wish to her grandmother, such a search for women’s independent identity is underscored in the film-narrative when *Romita* asks her sister-in-law too to accompany her, immediately after expressing her own desire. Throughout the film we have seen Romita’s sister-in-law as the submissive housewife resigned to her fate. She is aware of her domestication and servitude but the fight has long gone out of her. The film ending promises such a transcendence as *Srobona* walks out of the old home alone, while on the voice-over, we hear *Romita* telling her sister that she is coming to Canada alone and henceforth she will stop denying herself of free-will and agency.

*Promitar Ek Din – The Search for Alternative*

Possibly the best way to conclude the twentieth century reawakening of womanhood is to experience a film like *Promitar Ek Din* in the very fag end of 1999. Aparna Sen, we have discussed earlier, makes her mark in Bengali cinema as a director consistently trying to craft a different image of woman in her films. Women attaining/exercising agency occupy - the central characters in her films. That such an agency is worth inter-
subjectively as well as inter-generationally attainable within the feminine order is the moot point of current feminist practices. At a time of celebrating the ‘feminine principle’ as the rallying point for rejuvenating women’s movement, a film narrative revolving around a companionship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law acts as a meaningful cultural supplement to the existential world.

The very opening shot prepares us to experience an intense familial drama having a different axis of unfolding. For the Bengali society, however urbane or progressive, it is a sort of cultural shake-up to watch and accept an estranged housewife to be present in the death-ritual of someone who used to be her mother-in-law sometime back. Such a reaction is created almost inter-textually by Sen, as we see a whole array of kinsmen who gathers at the ritual are uncomfortable due to Paromita’s presence at the event. Her presence is however a very sincere one from her side. Estranged in terms of social relationship, yet the bondage of life-sharing of experiences – possibly the gender affinity, brings Paromita to the mournful occasion.

At the very outset the film promises to hold out a familial melodrama by carving out an altogether untreaded path of probing human psyche, more precisely female psyche.

The film unfolds three main female characters: Sanoka, slightly over middle-age, housewife of a conservative north Kolkata home, a mother of two sons and two daughters. Paromita is the newly-wed wife of the younger son, Biru. She is an M.A. in Mass Communication from a prestigious south Kolkata University. She is married into north Kolkata household. And, there is Khuku – the youngest daughter of Sanoka, differently abled – an acute

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16 Omvedt, Gail, op.cit.
17 The films which have a successful run in the box-office and selected by us for research purpose, are all made with a target audience of urbane, literate and progressive class in mind.
The patient of schizophrenia. She lacks the mental balance, this lack brings out the primitive instincts of life at some important moment of the film.

Thematically put, this film works with the contradiction of Bengali urban society at two levels. First, the film-narrative basically poses the contrast between an enlightened, forward-looking and sophisticated south-Kolkata upbringing/home and a retrogressive, insolent and conservative minded north-Kolkata household. The demarcation of this space of sobriety and emancipation is symptomatic of the second level of contradiction, the cultural and emotional incompatibility between the female protagonist Paromita and her husband Biru. Biru is foul-mouthed, blunt and aggressive towards his wife. The second level of contradiction is then between a forward-looking modern outlook/value system versus a redundant and grotesque conservative family-system/value. At the core it is a contest between obscurant tradition and emergent modern outlook. Modernity comes in myriad ways. So, is the different operations of traditional customs. The conflict between the two ways of living is not narrativised in the conventions of the restoring the ‘home’ either in favour of tradition or modernity or a convenient mix. Instead film-maker Sen explores a search in the interiority of women’s lives. A self-realisation is effected through a unique bondage and friendship between two female protagonists representing two successive generations.

There are three defining moments in the narrative. First, when the schizophrenic sister of Biru, Khuku goes hysteric on the wedding-reception day of Biru and Paromita. She tries to snatch the ornaments from her sister-in-law hands and exclaims:

Ma, I too want to be a bride. I want to be a bride.

The embarrassed and angry mother, Sanoka retorts:
You will never be. You will never be a bride....

Next Khuku confronts her brother on the stair-case. In an unkempt and a sad put-on of bridal make-up she complains:

Brother, Ma said that I can never become a bride... is it so?

Khuku is consoled but her worries keep following:

Ma won't be allowed in my in-law's house. Brother, who'll fetch me medicine there?

Such a moment full of pathos strikes an inner chord of humanity. Quite metaphorically the primary problematic of the film is touched at the very beginning itself – that of the normalcy and naturalness that the society accords on the institution of marriage. As the narrative grows we see a transcendence (or a violation?) of that accord.

In a joint household family Paromita is married to Biru, the younger son of Sanoka. Sanoka manages the household as a female head as her husband in employed out of the city. The husband comes, possible on holidays and weekends, to spend with the family. In a typical exhibition of masculine leisure and comfort he keeps on ordering his wife and insists that she only prepares food for him. The patriarchal ambience is reinforced with the younger son in a crude way joining his father's preferences. Sanoka is detached, although entrapped in the domestic chores, from her husband. She lives the relationship only to keep the ritual on. Quite logically she strikes a chord of attachment with her younger daughter-in-law, as she gives every hint of having a mind and a will of her. Straightaway she achieves her mother-in-laws' closeness by her sensible and sympathetic handling of Sanoka's youngest schizophrenic daughter Khuku. Their attachment grows as they share similar predicament. Paramita's new born baby too grow up as a spastic. Her husband shows utter irresponsibility in reacting negatively to
this misfortune. Till he is reprimired by his mother by citing the example of his own sister. Paromita is indomitable, she searches for a spastic society to keep alive her hope. In the spastic society only symbolically she finds a new man in her life, a new hope to sustain life meaningfully. Srivastava is such a man from audio-visual media working on a film for specially/differently abled children. The lack of companionship and compatibility in her married life and the refreshing, liberating relationship with Srivastava allows Paroita to breathe life afresh. Meanwhile Bablu, her spastic child dies. The break in the marriage relationship is now complete. The second defining moment comes subsequently. Paromita resolved to quit her marital relationship with Biru has to confront her mother-in-law Sanoka. More than a confrontation it is an act of bold confession which leads to a histrionic duel of words between them. Paromita with much hesitation spells out her desire to move out and marry Srivastava. Sanoka anticipates this and breaks down:

.... and what about me? You never bother to think of me. What about my life, with whom will I live. I understand you like that guy Srivastav. So, what? Go around with him, enjoy life but why do you have to seek a divorce for that?....

When Paromita insists on her decision, Sanoka sounds more helpless:

.... What have I got from this family? I would have also walked out. If Manida had the guts... Now I have to bear this drudgery of life... you cheat, you never thought of me!... you are a fallen woman....

Out of a deep sense of attachment and confidence that beyond the relationship of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, they have struck a new dimension of companionship, Sanoka gives vent to her insecurity without Paromita, her daughter-in-law on her side. We are also reminded of the other important male character of the film, Monimoy—Sanoka’s Monida.
Monida\textsuperscript{18} was Sanoka's elder brother's friend. Monida used to write poems, Sanoka also used to write and get poetic applause and inspiration from him. Clearly the relationship was warm. All these we are told through the narrative, without using any flashback. As we hear from Sanoka, Monida was not virile enough to take her away. Monida is a soft, sensitive, frail poet. He remains unmarried and keeps in touch with Sanoka. He would be dropping in at afternoon hours. Paromita has sensed the dimension of this Sanoka-Monida relationship but unlike rest of the family she always respected it, without demeaning it. The emotional bondage and love between the two is made very clear in the film sequence – once Sanoka is widowed, as she wears the dress signifying her widowed status in an afternoon while coming downstairs Paromita observes behind the curtain the two in close comfort of each other. At last, possibly, a belated embrace giving each other the emotional and physical cushion.

Apart from Paromita, the only other member of the joint-household who accepts Monimoy normally is Khuku. The third defining moment of the film rests on an exchange of dialogue between Khuku and Monimoy. On one such afternoon when Sanoka's Monida comes to spent some leisurely time with her, Khuku welcomes him into the groundfloor drawing-room. Khuku innocently asks:

Do you think that some other people might as well have the same disease that I have in my brain? Are you listening?....

And simultaneously in the voice-over we hear the radio news. The radio in the drawing room and Monida's penchant for listening to the news signifies the culture and practice of a time lost out to modern cravings. The radio broadcasts the news of the serial bomb-blasts in Mumbai Stock Exchange. The news is a tell-tale of the severe impact of the blast that left

\textsuperscript{18} 'Da' is suffixed in Bengali vernacular to denote respect for an elder brother.
hundreds of men badly bruised or killed. The news charts out the story of devastation, the destruction of human beings in the hands of another set of the same species. Oblivious of the radio-news Khuku keeps on nagging:

Has anybody else also got this malaise? This malaise...

At this moment the brain palsy of Khuku and centuries old civilisational disease of violence get enmeshed. Khuku's schizophrenic behaviour throws light on the societal madness.

Possibly not to be mad is another form of madness. As Paromita is ruthlessly life-seeking, as she prepares to leave Sanoka's household Khuku rushes in to clutch hold of her mother, giving her the security and assurance oblivious of her own disability. The identity does not matter – a woman giving protection to another woman. Amidst this scene of helplessness and hope on one side, Paromita's marriage with Srivastav is enacted amidst a urbane secular gathering with overflowing bottles of drink. The primordial human instincts of affirming life is underscored with the physical intimate scene of Paromita and Srivastav.

There is no room for despair. Paromita comes back to her estranged mother-in-law, when she is in the death-bed. She alone could help Sanoka at this critical moment, she only could nurse her despite the presence of all the other relationally bound family members. The film ends with its beginning sequence of Sanoka's death – ceremony. Paromita and Monimoy both socially unrelated to Sonoka yet so organic to Sanoka life, leave the spot in deep felt remorse. Life goes on. Paromita's new husband Srivastav was waiting in a car to pick her up. As they drive away, we learn Srivastav's sincere concern about Paramita's health. They joke, they are elated, Srivastav feels Paramita's abdomen – a new life is coming, they are expecting a baby. The car speeds away, - a top-angle high shot is used, the
car takes its twist and mingles into the innumerable flow of Kolkata city traffic. Parmotia moves on with life.

Construction of Woman – the power of sublimation

Aparna Sen’s Paroma is focussed on the issue of a women’s right to choose her life. Sen stirs up the issue by touching the life of an upper-middle class housewife – the most protected emblem of family custom, prestige etc.

Paroma is completely a domesticated and dependent wife. Out of the daily drudgery and monotony of a subjugated conjugality she is thrown into a whirlwind of passion and emotion by an attractive young man, much younger to Paroma. He is a photographer and photographing her face symbolically he brings out the inner desire of a woman repressed. As the two get physically involved Aparna Sen invokes the crucial question an women’s sexuality. Whether she can decide and control her own body and sexuality?

The apparent extra-material affair of Paroma, the ‘apparent’ adultery is the axis of the elaboration of Paroma. However demeaning is this act of hers before her husband and other family members, as a film-maker Aparna Sen has nowhere searched for any weakness in Paroma’s character. In fact, from this thread of ‘adultery’ in Paroma’s life, she raises certain question of validity of social relationship and our sense of morality. Such a stirring question shakes our sense of righteousness. The society creates its victim and subsequent unable to contain it gets rids of it. Paroma is ostracized by her act of transgressing the family/social code. She is rejected by her whole family. She attempts a suicide. The dilemma – external to women’s life is a pointer here, not Paroma’s weakness. The external dilemma is – what
exactly is a women’s position in her society and family? We must note that.
before her hospitalization, Paroma asks her husband imploringly:

Is a single incident enough to destroy an entire relationship?

Aparna Sen herself acts in one character as Paroma’s friend Sheela and like a ‘Choric’ character raises the main concern of the narrative: none can be considered a private property via any social relationship. A social relationship cannot be any more a private property.

In Sheela, Sen provides an interesting variant on the device of narrational intervention. For Sheela is both Aparna Sen, the maker of this film, and a foil to Paroma. Like a participant observant she presses subtly on Paroma the point that she has to decide things for herself and take responsibility for them. Aparna Sen as a maker of this film takes care never to turn Sheela into a strident feminist or a self-righteous sermonizer. Sheela is simply a friend, an independent woman at best.

As a filmmaker Aparna Sen tries to transcend the facelessness of Paroma as a middle-aged housewife caught in a web of social relationship. Sanctioned social relationships makes her a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law, sister-in-law or a daughter. But she is Rahul’s Paroma. Here she is not entangled in any social web. Her relationship with Rahul is a short-stint one but that ‘unrecognised’ relationship takes her to far fetched question as what is her place in a family if she has to return to it?

The affair with Rahul was a short stint one, Rahul leaves back a helpless Paroma. What was for Paroma a joy of discovering her repressed self, for Rahul it was more of a liberal adventure. Rahul simply comes in the narrative as a catalyst to Paroma’s reawakening to a new identity as woman. Paroma’s liberation is two-fold. She is out of Rahul’s life, she is freed from any sense of attachment for Rahul. And as she recuperates after the suicide
attempt and nervous breakdown, she emerges with her own terms and choice of life. She makes a choice of economic independence in order to gain emotional independence. A self-realization allows her to build her own identity as an autonomous women. Such a progress is facilitated by a regression to childhood memories. Her younger daughter too joins her in the frame. The daughter up to a point in the film contemptuous towards her mother for her dependence, recognizes her independence and identifies with her.

The women’s image that is being suggested through the film Paroma is an image of woman’s liberation in the complex terms of a redefinition of the relation between women’s generations, a triumphant avowal of the obligation of mother’s to fight for themselves not merely for their own sakes but also for their daughters.

Such a gender solidarity is suggested in the film Unishe April as well. The role of the male is pushed further into insignificance. In fact, the male character do not even act as catalysts for women’s self awareness. The male characters, especially Sarojini’s husband and Mithu’s boyfriend are invoked as purposive narrative tactics for locating female subjectivity.

More in psychological terms the gender awareness is worked out in the film. The daughter carries a childhood memory of denials from her mother; the daughter is attached to her father. The memory of a dead father makes Mithu reticent. She creates a distance from her mother Sarojini. It is a rivalry in the Freudian explanation. Mithu cannot accept and come to term with her mother’s rise to fame and glamour. Almost a similar response that her mother Sarojini experienced with her husband. However, the dimension is different. The gender angle is significant in Sarojini’s husband’s recoil as far as Sarojini’s career and profession in concerned.
The female cannot supersede the male in the family 'drama'. She can be powerful but subservient to the male power. For a mediocre male personality, Sarojini's glamorous vocation was tantamount to upsetting the male order. But the film is liberating. Sarojini overcomes her dilemma and exercises her agency in the public sphere. There is no happy reconciliation like films of preceding decades.

Since the man-woman relationship is not exactly the problematic, there is no denouement in term of either a restoration of the relationship or a rupture of it. Instead, the feminine solidarity is sought inter-generationally. Almost it resonates the popular slogan of 1980s women's movement: 'the liberation of women and men through the awakening of women’s power'. Femininity is allowed to flourish debunking the popular construction of being a trait of surrender and subjugation.

A woman need not respond to the world only in an emotional and non-competitive way. Sarojini does not remain confine to her husband’s expectation of a wife who learns to mute her strength, wishes and individuality. At the same time the film does not show any rebellion of Sarojini in conventional terms of confronting the husband’s ideology. In its sublime power the feminine voice within Sarojini prompts her to pursue her career single-mindedly. She is neither defined nor differentiated with the man (her husband in this case), instead her subjectivity is differentiated and explored with reference to her daughter, Mithu.

Mithu too is felicitated to self-awareness by her boyfriend’s patriarchal mind-set. This exhibits the incapacity of his male-ego to come to terms with the very fact that a woman’s profession and fame (in this case, his lover’s mother) as a classical dancer is signaling only the assertion and emergence of a woman’s self-identity. Instead the recoil into the conservative shell of a male-order – his family’s disapproval at the idea that
their would be daughter-in-law’s mother is a person in her own right. More importantly, the profession of a dancer which in the patriarchal matrix signals only an object of voyeuristic male-gaze is problematised here. The incompleteness or the lack of Mithu’s lover is located precisely at this discursive level. The weakness of Mithu’s lover only helps the film-narrative to develop the cathartic moment between Mithu and her mother Sarojini. So, the male characters by themselves and in themselves are of little importance. Mithu’s expectation of support is demystified in the representation of his lover’s regressive apprehension about his would-be mother-in-law’s vocation. Mithu engaged in a emotional outburst with her mother, is liberated from her obsession with her dead father too. Mithu used to carry an image of her demised father as that of a victim. She too thought that in her chase for a career, Sarojini neglected both of them. That way she was identifying with her father more and could not handle her mother’s sense of independence fame.

Finally, a reconfirmation of the filial bond takes place between the mother and daughter as they confess to each other their expectations of each other. An alternate womanhood emerges out of a realisation that femininity as the otherness of masculinity can stand to gain if engaged in a self-dialogue. Femininity in a patriarchal order is represented, for all its association with inferiority and subjugation, as much more than an oppressed conditions. This condition of otherness enables both Sarojini and Mithu to stand back and realise their solidarity of life-experiences. So, the image of woman is that of self-realised who does not aspire to imitate the masculine principle. By realising and retaining their differences, woman can celebrate their femininity.

Dahan’s representation of woman is again an exercise in establishing female subjectivity independent of male intervention. The dominant point of
view is that of the female gender. The male protagonists owe their existence entirely to the women – Palash as Romita's husband and Tunir as Srobona's boyfriend and not as central characters having autonomous identities.

Through the delineation of the two female leads in the film, Romita and Srobona, an insightful exploration of woman's psyche is achieved. Apart from the two leading female characters, film invokes three other female characters each embodying difference aspects of struggles against male dominance. Srobona's grandmother is a confident old lady with ingenious wisdom. She does not grumble staying in an old-age home, independent of her middle-aged son and daughter-in-law's household. She has a sharp mind to remind Srobona, her granddaughter, that it is quite a natural human propensity to help fellow beings (with reference to Srobona's bold act of rescuing Romita on the city streets from a group of molesters). And one should not feel or consider this as something heroic. Romita's sister-in-law presents the typical picture of a submissive housewife, who is not oblivious of her domestication and servitude; yet in her resignation she points out the asymmetry in familial gender relation. Trina is the fiancée of one of the molesters. She resents the idea of accepting Rohit, one of the molesters, as her husband. Trina's mother is only too willing to exonerate her future son-in-law's act as a minor instance of eve-teasing. This is the facet of female consent which supplements patriarchy, but Trina through her refusal represents another point of struggle against male supremacy.

To problematise gender relation the most evocative aspect of the film is to suggest the marital rape. Palash unsure of his own masculinity when his wife's Romita's body is transgressed, forcefully have sex with his wife. Such as aspect of silent violence that takes place within marital relationship is dealt with in order to castigate the cowardice of the 'virile' male-order. The self-seeking male psyche is also exposed through the characterisation of
Srobona’s suitor, Tunir. He is above all insidious, who stealthily wants Srobona to withdraw and confirm to the male-order.

The image of woman suggested through Dahan is not one who indulges in moralistic sermonising. She is not a self-proclaimed rebel, who could transgress the dominant masculine value-system. The pivot around which the film unfolds its female characters – that is, the patriarchal impositions on which ‘normal order’ is maintained, is being critiqued in a different manner. A subtle sublime feminine principle is evoked as both Srobona and Romita in the end realise the need to redefine themselves and their lives. It is a matter of explaining the pluralities of possibility. The iconography is that of a ‘new’ woman, ready to change and realise the need for a certain freedom of movement, of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Hence, we see both the female protagonists step out of their confines to negotiate life on their own terms.

The image of woman in Aparna Sen’s Promitar Ek Din is ruthlessly life-seeking. That female aggression as an answer to male impositions should not result in debasement of femininity. This is the moot point of Paromitar Ek Din. Femininity is a life-affirming condition. The primary driving force of civilisation has to be creative life-instinct. When a female assumes agency, she has to assure this life-giving instinct. Paromita, the female lead represents such female character. She can celebrate the otherness of femininity – she befriends her mother-in-law, makes her get rid of the restrictive Hindu customs of widowhood, appreciates the poet within her domesticated mother-in-law, acknowledges her mother-in-law’s relationship with childhood lover Monida, gives her the necessary company in her loneliness. The companionship develops inter-subjectively and in a complex inter-generational gender solidarity.
Nevertheless, when the marriage becomes meaningless, Paromita is ready to move out of the household. Her mother-in-law through her emotional barrage of pleadings fails to stop her from seeking a divorce from her son, Biru. Paromita is a different woman. Self-realised and not self-sacrificing. The feminine principle articulated through Paromita is not that of a bundle of emotion and sacrifice. It gains an important dimension of being rational and realist. Paromita, for the sake of her mother-in-law’s attachment, helplessness or loneliness does not stop searching for a new home. Neither Khuku’s disability deters Paromita from seeking a new life. To continue afresh with life. That basic life-instinct which Paromita clutches on in order to realise her own self makes her a woman of flesh and blood, and not an unreal icon. Mercifully, the ‘new’ image of woman is saved from attaining the image of a Goddess. Life is not affirmed through ‘sacrifice’, it is realised through a meaningful search within. To allow openness and plurality of living, is to acknowledge Paromita’s walking out of a redundant marriage and settling down with a new man – meaningful for her for the moment, to continue with time and life. The twentieth century ends in Bengali cinema with such a sublime power of femininity to assert life. There is no remoulding of the familial order, so that the basic tenets of patriarchal system is sustained. Neither on ends up in the debasement of femininity. Aggression might lead to such debased order. More than aggression, here we see a kind of sublimation of femininity.

The Image and Its Consequence/The Emergent Image

The narrative thematic contents of the films discussed and illustrated before produce specific images of the woman and her position in the Bengali society. Ultimately it is through a process of combination within and across films that the final image takes shape. Not merely through the vehicle of cinema do the image of women become naturalised. Although cinema has
been the focus of this analysis it is necessary to indicate that the effectiveness of cinema in creating a public image is implicated by other texts that surround the primary cinema text. Inter-textuality is a key aspect in the understanding of the role of a primary text in creating specific images and meanings. For our sociological purpose, the films serve as the primary text – which comprise the artefacts that are being probed in depth. Surrounding the primary text are the secondary text – which include reviews, comments and criticism about the films (primary text). Each of the film has a set of corresponding secondary texts that address these films. Added to this one can locate a public informal discourse about primary text. For analytical convenience and purpose, we can identify such public informal discourse in the form of audience-responses. That is, as a tertiary text, this audience-response comprises the consideration and understanding of the selected films that are circulated in the public sphere with respect to the subject-theme of woman’s representation.

As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, such tertiary text is a result of a ‘negotiation’ that takes place between the disseminated theme and the reception of it. Neither the images of woman nor the negotiated meanings are monolithic. The image is built around a set of problems that the film-makers wrestle with and ultimately focus on. Also, the negotiated meanings are product of a dialogic exercise. It is possible for a viewer of any of the films to see the connection between the problem and the representation of women and draw conclusions about the implications of such problematic. In a similar way, a viewer who has seen several such films problematising women’s position in the society would be able to draw

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Adapting J. Fiske’s understanding of ‘inter-textuality’, we consider that beyond the primary text, in this case film, the accompanying film-reviews and criticisms and more importantly audience-responses, inter-textually create/construct a public image of woman. The iconography of woman rests on the shifting images of woman over a time-period. See Fiske, J., *Television Culture* (Methuen, New York. 1987).
connections between the various films and can indulge in a comparative understanding of how the women’s representations has changed over time.

In order to gain a quantitative measure of the ‘event’ of the selected films in the public domain, the following tables are instructive. In our research analysis, the sampled 80 respondents represent the public domain.

Table 6: Acquaintance with Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquaintance/Sex</th>
<th>Watched all the films</th>
<th>Watched Some of them</th>
<th>Watched none</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

Table 7: Mode of Cinema-Viewing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode/Sex</th>
<th>Watched in theatre-halls only</th>
<th>Watched in Television only</th>
<th>Both in halls and television</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

Table 8: Frequency of Viewing the Selected Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency/Sex</th>
<th>Only once</th>
<th>Twice</th>
<th>More than twice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

* The films that inform our scope of study.
Table 6 makes it amply clear that the selected films are overwhelmingly 'public' in character. In a sex-wise division of such a 'public' character of the films, we find that the film under our purview are equally popular with both the sexes. That is, as high as 72 percent are familiar with the film themes. In case of male viewers it is still higher. 28 out of 30 of male respondents (almost 93 percent) are exposed to the films. The percentage of non-acquaintance is zero. The higher percentage of male respondents also indicate the male sex still has an edge (rather a privilege) over the females with respect to access to non-domestic activities and participation. This fact is more meaningfully borne out in the Table 7.

We can infer from Table 7, a very low percentage among the female audience has actually watched the film in the theatre-halls 6 out of 50 (as low as 12 percent) of them exclusively step out of their domestic space to experience a movie. Instead, 28 out of 50 (i.e. 56 percent) watch the movies only on television and almost a similar number 26 out of 50 (i.e. 52 percent) watch them in both television as well as in Cinema-halls.

When we compare this figure with that among male viewers, we see that as high as 40 percent (12 out of 30) experiences the cinema exclusively on theatre-halls. Also, interestingly a very low percentage of male viewers is 'home-bound' as far as cinematic experience is concerned. Solely on television, only 2 out of 30 of them are dependent to access the movies, i.e., around 6.6 percent. This is indicative of the genderisation of the space even in modern urban set-up. That women, although exposed to liberating ideas and engaged in creative activities are still confined to their domestic space when it comes to exercising leisure.

Another inference is that, television plays a major role in retaining and disseminating the cinema-culture in Bengali middle-class society. And the incidence of viewing cinema in television is more among the female
respondents. As high as 88 percent, (28 only on televisions + 16 both in television and theatre-halls = 44 out of 50) of female viewers is dependent on television in one way or the other.

Table 8 substantiates the fact that the select films have a timeless impact upon the Bengali audience. Among the female respondents 21 out of 50 (42 percent) watch at least some of the films twice, and 8 percent watches even more than twice. Among the male audience, 9+9=18 out of 30 (60 percent) watch the films either twice or more than twice. Aggregating male and female audience we see a substantial section (53.75 percent) tends to watch the films under our scope of study more than once. This not only justifies the impact of the film on the public informal discourse but also on the other side the cinema-habit of the audience.

While taking up the survey of the audience and engaging in in-depth interview we intended to check with the audience the validity of our tentative formulation that during the last two decades in Bengali cinema, there is a growing focalisation on women’s lives in thematic treatment. The range of opinion out of our study is reconstructed to formulate the following table:

Table 9: Over the last two decades the most talked about film in Bengali Cinema are all woman-centric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Opinion</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree Strongly</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>73.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree Somewhat</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree Somewhat</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>06.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

The findings are highly in favour of our reconstructed opinion. A staggering 73.75 percent of the audience strongly believes that woman-
centric films have come to the centre-stage so far as creative filmmaking is concerned. Another 20 percent tend to agree to the proposition and a very small section (6.25 percent) disagrees somewhat to the formulation. The opinion leaves no ambiguity. There is no void opinion either.

Why this has been so? A range of explanations are available on the question. If we reconstruct these explanations we arrive at mainly three types. Interestingly, the dominant male explanation goes like this:

The emergence of powerful women on the screen is hardly to be experienced in Bengali cinema. What has happened over the last few years is that the women’s question is researched extensively in the academic circles. In popular write-ups also, especially in newspaper supplements, there is a lot of probing attempts to explore women’s subordination in our society. In fact, the whole question of gender equality has become a cultural priority, hence cinema has only reflected this concern. That too, it is the middle and upper-middle privileged classes who indulge in such concern.

The response is quite non-enthusiastic about any resurgent women’s issues and representations of them in cinema. The images which are constructed in the selected films do not exactly promote rebellious images. In fact, we have experienced women who could expose the dualities of our family-values. But in our analysis we understand that, such exposures go a long way in imagining a ‘new’ woman. An alternate image is made possible e.g. in the film Dahan, through the characterisation of Srobona. Romita, too realises her own independent self at the end but at crucial moment of confronting the male-order, she compromises. Such is the hold of family/patriarchal impositions on a woman’s life. Possibly such a representation influence the dominant male response, as we have recorded just before. But such response fail to locate Srobona’s struggle against her own family, society and the state at different points in the narrative.

Quite significantly, the dominant female response among the audience is less ambiguous. A representative understanding we pick up. This
is a view expressed by a respondent, aged 42; she as a member of a prominent cine-club acts as a valuable informant. She is forthright:

We may not see so many Paroma or Jhinuk around us in real life situations. But such cinematic imagination is to show the limitations of our existence. The spread of the feminist movement across the globe and the awakening in women’s consciousness in the Indian context during the last two decades shape the filmmakers’ sense of reality. We may not get liberated woman in the films we are discussing, but definitely we meet strong characters who show us at least how to question the family ideology based on patriarchal attitudes.

This kind of response is quite self-explanatory. It positively views the woman-centredness of the films we have analysed. Also, it acknowledges the social context of the emergent gender representation positively.

The third type of negotiation on the question of predominance of woman-centric films rests on an existential plane. A handful of both male and female audience converge on this opinion that is succinctly put forward by one female respondent, aged 38, married, working in a government office. As we frame it out:

The old model of woman subservient to familial expectations is not working in 1990s. In our day to day practices we find on the one hand there is a growing tendency among young couples to share the domestic chores. The man-woman relationship is not asymmetrical as it used to be before. On the other there is a growing discord in marital relationships. Possibly, this is due to the female voice which is no longer mute. The hitherto latent incompatibility and dissatisfaction is coming to the surface. Such crisis in familial relationships inevitably places the woman in the foreground. She is no longer restricted to domestic spaces. As she steps into the public, as she raises her voice- the natural order of the family is disturbed. This is reflected in all cultural practices in Bengal, hence cinema is responding to such changes.

From the above three positioning of the audience, we are informed that,

(1) it is being recognised that there has been a growing incidence of woman taking the centre-stage in successful and meaningful films in Bengal over the last 10-15 years,
(2) this does not signal the emergence of woman as victorious in fighting gender injustice, nevertheless, certain alternative female agency is suggested.

(3) The popularity of woman-centric films is not only due to growing feminist practices around the world, it is also reflexive of growing crisis of man-woman relationships in the local context.

Now, coming to the particular films, we notice that Aparna Sen's *Paroma* signalled the beginning of exclusive women's issue based films. We have seen that *Paroma* signified the radical feminist position initially, as she decides her own sexuality albeit hesitantly. Subsequently, she realises her independent autonomous self debunking such sexual liberation. On the screen the unhesitant portrayal of 'adultery' by the filmmaker does not win her appreciation from all the quarters in the public discourse.

T.G. Vaidyanathan, a professor in English and film-critic, has been totally sceptical of Sen's representation of *Paroma* as promising women's self-awareness. He goes on to label the film as 'a Hindi film sensitively made.'

The pivot of the film is adultery, on which subsequent demystification of middle-class patriarchal morality and realisation of female subjectivity is effected. Possibly the transgressive act of 'adultery' annoys Vaidyanathan.

"... Aparna Sen seems wholly indifferent to the moral stature of her photographer, Rahul, who is, for her, merely a catalyst in the awakening and liberation of Mrs. Paroma Chaudhury... *Paroma*, herself is far, far more credible... She is neither ambitious beyond that humble desire for a flat in Ballygunge, nor is she in anyway, particularly unsatisfied.... It is into this clear blue sky of such a life that Aparna introduces Rahul with his Nikon and his American razzmatazz, and we are asked to believe that *Paroma's* world is completely overturned... the liberation of Mrs. Paroma Chaudhury staged at the end with such symbolism (the potted plant

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associated with the innocence of her childhood) and care, looks wholly unreal.\textsuperscript{21}

If we read between the text of Vaidynathan’s point of view, we locate a male voice who does not consider a monotonous unexciting marital life as unsatisfying for a middle-aged housewife. The male code of sexual morality is all too an imposing one in such criticism. Such a male-centric negotiation is apparent:

“In their last confrontation alone, before her hospitalisation, Paroma asks her husband imploringly: ‘Is a single incident enough to destroy an entire relationship?’ But it was not a ‘single incident’ where she impulsively yielded to another man, but one planned and programmed over a period of time. Paroma does not have the moral right to offer such excuses’.\textsuperscript{22}

In his review, the author significantly uses Paroma’s marital identity to designate her as Mrs. Paroma Chaudhury several times. So, it is clear that the fidelity question is given importance by the critic in dismissing Paroma. Secondly, his understanding of a ‘single incident’ is a misplaced one. By ‘single incident’ Paroma does not for sure mean an impulsive act of a moment, she means instead a single ‘event’ in her entire married life. It has nothing to do with how long such an ‘event’ or how well such an ‘event’ was planned at. Quite possibly, the film-maker’s explicit position taking on the question of sexual-freedom shapes the reviewer’s, and even the audience’s resentment with the theme of ‘adultery’ or ‘illicit’ relationship. It is interesting to contrast this response with that on Charulata, which also problematises a woman’s marital fidelity. Charulata’s transgressive act is not steeped in physicality, so it does not violate the emotional and normative landscape of the society. So, even while surmounting the conservative ideology, the film-maker does not evoke negative reactions. that goes to the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp.114-117.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.117.
aesthetic-intellectual sensitivities of Satyajit Ray, the 'author' of such alternative texts. Such an inference is facilitated by Ray's own admission:

"What I admire in women is grace, sophistication, intelligence..... the beauty of a woman like Charulata is largey the beauty of her mind, what I have tried to bring out in the film is the richness of that mind. That comes out through her responses to the world and especially through her growing attachment to Amal, her young brother-in-law. Its an illicit relationship but its beautiful since it reveals the nuances of a sensitive person."

_Charulata_ with its bold theme did create a flutter in the conservative middle-class scenario. _Paroma_, attempting to redefine the iconography of woman in Indian cinema, came up against resistance from the left and the right alike, the former questioning the relevance of its theme and the latter challenging its very assumptions. But the film has to be located in the backdrop of an overriding tendency in Indian commercial cinema to fetisitise and objectify female body and sex, the film industry has had its way in the humiliation and denigration of woman as it is institutionalised in the iconography of the commercial cinema.

Samik Bandyopadhyay is particularly optimistic of the image of woman crafted by Aparna Sen through _Paroma_.

"In her second film, Ms. Sen achieves a cinematic/ideological complexity that has to be seen in the context of both the women situation in India, with all its trappings of conventional moves, and the cinematic iconography of woman in India. Limiting herself to the more enlightened/privileged minority of woman kind in India, she is able to concentrate on the impositions of a traditional society, the patterns of acquiescence within which women tend to bind themselves, and thus lose themselves, and thus lose themselves in a false sense of security, .... And the need for rediscovery not so much in terms of self-isolation as in the assertion of a place in the sun – in a fresh bind of relationship, both economic and emotional."

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24 Bandyopadhyay, Samik, 'An In Sight into Being a Woman in India' in _Splice_, vol.2, July, 1986.
25 Ibid., p.56.
The public domain remains however divided over the representation of *Paroma*. The crux of the divide is on the question of Aparna Sen’s ‘legitimisation’ of adultery as an assertion of the choice of woman as opposed to the subjugation of woman institutionalised in the cinema of rape. A large number of respondents disapprove *Paroma’s* liberating potentialities. A typical response goes like this:

In our society it is true that the ideal image of middle-class woman is undergoing a change. This is a change from within, but that does not validates adultery or promiscuity. Such a notion or idea of sexual freedom is to celebrate chaos. Such ideas of women’s liberation is an anathema in our society.

Mostly, the audience accords importance to *Paroma* as a film. It has an importance just as a film. For them it is difficult to empathise with *Paroma’s* predicament. However, ‘Desh’, the widely circulated literary/cultural journal from the dominant Anandabazar Group of Publications in its review of the film observes that:

“Due to a moment’s act, in *Paroma* the plinth of the value-system and morality of a middle-aged housewife is wrecked. Out of this wreckage, the inevitable question comes up – where does a woman stand vis-à-vis her family? What is exactly her position in a patriarchal order?... Definitely, *Paroma* is a story of emancipation of a woman.”

As a literary magazine *Desh* plays a prominent role in Bengal in sensitising people culturally. The positive reaction exhibited by the magazine is however not shared by a large audience section. They consider that alternate femininity need not be equated with sexual freedom, which is an anathema for Bengali society.

To appreciate the representation of *Paroma* as far as gender identity is concerned we find that, in the filmmaker Aparna Sen’s scheme, sexuality is defined in terms of independent choice, a choice of a relationship realised
and experienced bodily, as opposed to the compulsion and violation of woman’s body which dominates the Indian cinema.

The freedom to choose one’s own sexual life – the radical feminist position\(^{27}\) has not really fired imagination in Bengali cultural practices subsequently. *Paroma* remains only as a singular bold attempt to problematise women’s sexuality. Instead, women’s lives are represented more in psychological terms. Femininity is sublimated in the subsequent films like *Unishe April* and *Dahan*.

*Unishe April* marked a departure from the dominant melodramas of the time which were geared to addressing, in the industry’s terms, ‘female’ and ‘rural’ audiences rather than the urban middle-class habituated by mid-1990s to dense social-critical off-beat domestic dramas. Heavily dependent on strong dialogues, *Unishe April* captures the urban middle class audience, by employing visual stylistics of television serials. Confining within a domestic space the narrative unfolds using only a few indoor locales. The audience that really made the film a success is composed mainly of urban middle-class women. This is evident from our audience – study. As one male respondent puts it:

It is a change to see so many upper and middle-class woman queuing up for a Bengali film in recent times. In fact the strong emotional dimension of the two leading female protagonists’ lives definitely draws more women than men to the theatre-halls.

This fact is corroborated by the responses of female audience surveyed in the research study. As one respondent, a middle-aged housewife, explains:

\(^{27}\) The conventional sexual morality has always privileged men to decide and define women’s sexuality in a way they want. The female choice is absolutely silenced. Radical feminists attempt to turn this male dictated morality on its head. Such feminist assertion swept the women’s movement during 1970s and 1980s, which later on lost its ground. Important radical feminist ideas are explicated by Shulamith Firestone: *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (William Morrow. New York, 1970).
We are quite tired of man-woman tension in Bengali film which ultimately get resolved amicably. This happy-ending stories are all very chiche. Familial tension need not be only between husband and wife. A women has so many delicate relations within the domestic sphere. A very important relation is that between mother and daughter. The film deals with it in a very sentimental style. We have all appreciated such a new angle. We still watch the film whenever it is being shown on TV.

That female subjectivity can be explored irrespective of a heterosexual complex is established by the film-maker. Sarojini represents a self-assured, successful, independent woman. She is a mother too. For the larger part of the film her motherhood has been under a cloud of doubt. This is so as result of her daughter’s reticent attitude towards her. Apparently her daughter Mithu is resentful because her mother is oblivious of her father’s death anniversary, because of her mother’s total obsession with her career and fame. But deep down it is a feeling of neglect from her mother. It is a strong desire to unite with her mother. Through a dramatic catharsis Mithu and her mother Sarojini realises their filial bond. Symbolically it creates an image of gender solidarity. That a woman’s life-experience and expectation can only be shared by a woman inter-subjectively – such an image of woman is crafted in Unishe April. The proase of attaining this self-awareness is no longer charted out by male protagonists, as it used to be depicted in 1950s and 1960s.28

We are offered an image of women’s emancipation in the complex terms of a redefinition of the relation between women’s generations. A confident image of woman who could offer a support system inter-generationally exhibiting and realising gender-solidarity.

28 The independent emergence of female subjectivity, independent of strong male intervention is signalling a new phase of women’s struggle. The redundancy of the male as a subject makes Unishe April a favourite amongst female cinema-viewers. Such a review is carried by the popular film journal Anandolok in its 27th July 1994 issue.
Such a question of gender-solidarity is fraught with mixed reaction as well. In the film *Dahan* too, the self-awakening of its female protagonists takes place in collaboration and/or intervention of female confidants only.

*Romita* and *Srobona*, the two leading female protagonists are both victims of male dominated society. *Romita* has her husband Palash as a constant reminder of domination. *Srobona*’s suitor Tunir is the more dangerous face of the male order because his way of doing things is subtler and treacherous. But both the characters emerge out of this victimhood. The film and its representation of woman characters are acknowledged by the popular press, precisely because it refrains from falling into the trap of mawkish sentimentality. As a popular vernacular daily review it:

“... based on a real life incident, *Dahan* metaphorically stands for the ‘burning guilt’ that is simmering in our middle-class existence. It is a guilt of false morality. It is our middle-class sense of morality that creates the victim that it afterwards vainly attempts to get rid of... the struggle of *Srobona* and *Romita* to upstage the entrapment feeling is a landmark representation of modern day woman. 29

So, in the popular perception the figures of *Srobona* and *Romita* are liberating. Although there is a division of opinion with respect to *Romita*’s image. A good number of responses are critical of *Romita*’s weakness to stand-up against the oppressive social/familial order, when an outsider like *Srobona*, can go too far in the struggle against the whole male-dominated system. As one wonders:

*If Romita* at the end could decide to leave home and fly abroad, why could not she stand up shoulder to shoulder with *Srobona*’s lovely fight. In that case, *Srobona* would also have got the support. *Srobona* would not have been humiliated in the court of law.

This is a typical reaction of an average cine-goers, who wish to see a positive resolution to the problem on which a film-narrative unfolds itself. In the film, no resolution is arrived at and no solution is offered. The public

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29 It is a translated version of a review of the film in Bengali daily *Aajkal*, 6th August 1998.
circulation of the film’s images are problematic precisely because of the real-life base of the film.

In actuality how did Kolkata and its public sphere reacted to the infamous incident\textsuperscript{30} of molestation and attempted rape? The family of the victim did not regress and recoil. The victim took up the cudgels to fight the legal battle. And the young lady journalist who intercepted the molesters, took the issue to the logical end. The molesters were convicted. The husband of the victim fought the battle shoulder to shoulder with the two women. The media coverage was although supportive of the women’s cause.

The protagonist in the real-life incidence, Ananya Chatterjee, an independent minded woman, by profession a media-personality expresses doubts about the twist in the novel or the film with regards to the course of action and events that unfolded in reality after the act of molestation and rescue. In reality as she confides in a personal interview, the protagonists were quite powerful strong human beings. They were not so hesitant or debilitating as shown in the film. Neither, their family nor the society exhibited such male-centric sense of morality. In fact that public sphere was all too helpful for the protagonists to fight the legal case and see through it.

Now, we face the question why such divergences were effected in the film? Given the general condition of gender-relation in society such a flight of imagination is probably aesthetically and politically justified. The purpose of art is to explore also the possibilities, and not just imitate the reality. The ‘reality-quotient’ of such possibilities is to be judged. As a particular case, the real-life incident might have thrown up liberating men and women but if one digs down this reality – how many cases/complaints of molestation actually are filed in the police station and how many of them in reality result

\textsuperscript{30} Such an incidence happened on 24\textsuperscript{th} June 1992 in front of the Rabindra Sarovar Metro Station.
in conviction? Beyond that, there are so many such cases which go unrecorded.

A literary critic, Sutapa Bhattacharya while writing about imagination of women in popular literature comments:

"It is not Romita, but Srobona, alias Jhinuk who is the main female character in Dahan... If you are like Jhinuk (i.e. Srobona) you will earn only abuses in your family as well in the public life. But she is not a sermonizing feminist. She is a simpleton who gossips with her friends, has a love affair and works in a primary school. Her only fault is that she does not compromise with injustice... In her fight against the masculine world of injustice even her parents withdraw into imparting domestic ideals of a woman to her. That's why she wonders 'Why in a male orchestrated untoward incidence only the woman is castigated? Are women only thoughtless body? Just carrying a womb?...' "\(^{31}\) (tr. Mine)

Srobona's assertion of her independence as a free woman is what makes her a woman with a difference. Such an assertion is more introspective and self-reflexive in nature. So, the iconography of woman rests not on any stereotypical construction of either reconciliation/restoration of the home or aggressive storming out of the home. Instead it reckons sublimity of femininity into a search of the inner-self. Developing an agency of self-determination. Such a representation of woman is what the audience is struck with. A significant female response recorded resonates this point:

Watching Dahan is the like having a re-look at our own social upbringing. The predicaments of Srobona are not unreal. Parents of a young girls is bound to be scared of, if their daughter confronts the male ordered social system. That's why at the point of crisis Srobona's parents reprimand her, you're being given good education, you're being allowed to do a job - does that make you on par with the menfolks? But we discover Srobona not really breaking up. She gathers her senses, on the verge of breaking into tears she realises that she does not want to be a man. She only wants to be a complete human being.

Going back on one's own resources, rediscovering the authentic feminine principle as against competing with the masculine principle is what

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the competing iconography of woman charts out. As the wise grand old lady of _Dahan_, _Srobona’s_ grandmother spells out, “Since the women folk have been pardoning of (the male wrong doings), the social system is surviving”. Not merely in the mood of being merciful, the present day woman also wants to be a complete human being. That’s why she falls in love also. That’s why she longs for a family too, at times there is clash between the two proclivities – she is merciful and that she longs for love and family. At times they are in harmony. Such is the public image of the female protagonist in _Dahan_.

The last film of our analysis, _Paromitar Ek Din_ in its project of imagining a ‘new’ woman thematically is in league with both _Unishe April_ and _Dahan_. Tapping the feminine power and agency from within is the dominant thread of women’s construction in _Unishe April_ and _Dahan_. But as a concept gender is essentially built on a relational term. Without bringing in the male, into the working complex, the gender question cannot be dealt in its entirety. _Paramitar Ek Din_ while still championing inter-subjective feminine self-awareness, goes on to image a complete woman. A completeness is seen in ensuring a meaningful bondage between a woman and a man. Such a fulfilment almost reworks the desire of the loyal audience of Bengali cinema. The steady middle and upper-middle-class film audience of Bengal we have discussed in previous chapters, always desired for a restoration of the man-woman relationship. The filmmaker offers them such a ‘restoration’ but with a different dimension – here there is no reconciliation and restoration of the home which has lost its appeal and meaning to the protagonists. Instead there is a search for a new home, a search for a alternate man-woman relationship. In this sense the ‘home’ is restored. Now how does a woman figure in this new ‘home”? That is, in other words, what is the image of a woman in this search for a new relationship?
The film, which was screened at the fag end of 1999 performed so well in the box-office that it spilled into the year 2000 for weeks. *Paromita* the female protagonist evoked immense audience support. She is the image that we talked about. As appreciated by the audience:

*Paromita*’s character is worth empathising in the present day crisis of man-woman relationship. She is not a home-breaker, as popularly we conceive of a woman who walks out of a marriage. Her relationship with her mother-in-law makes her a different woman. She makes a point that a relationship between husband and wife may go wrong, but that does not exhaust the web of relationship that a marriage gives rise to. Even when the conjugal relationship ceases to exist, the bond between the mother-in-law and *Paromita* is a pointer to the possibilities of relationships beyond the stereo-types and conventional.

Such an elaborate response of one of our respondent, interestingly an upper-middle class woman, 62 years old is significant at two levels. First, no longer a young woman’s self-assertion (as *Paroma* decides her own life beyond the context of an unsuccessful married life) is viewed by a woman of the older generation as an aberration or transgression. Secondly, beyond the sanctified husband-wife tie-up in a marriage, the relationship into which women of two different generation (between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law) is equally given importance.

What is of more importance is that *Paromita* has sought a new life, a new relationship and she steps out calmly out of a marriage. She steps into a new marriage, a new relationship. That makes *Paromita* a home seeker and not a ‘feminist’. Such is the popular construction of a feminist in Bengali society, if we consider our select audience as representative.

Almost 90 p.c. of the audience, on their own used the term ‘feminist’ while enunciating their appreciation for the film. The term is used as a negative connotation. We can present the observation of one very typical viewer; important to note that the viewer in question is a female university teacher in science, aged 46. The observation goes like this:
We apprehended a feminist treatment from Aparna Sen, given her first Bengali film *Parma*. We are pleasantly surprised by Sen’s *Paromita*. Both *Paromita* and her mother-in-law *Sanoka* are victims of an obscurant masculine world, possibly that draw them close to each other. *Sanoka* belonged to the older generation, she had limited choice to decide on her own life. *Paromita* belongs the present. She retains her individuality and is able to exercise her choice to decide to course of her life. Luckily she is not a feminist. She sets up an alternate home – that’s what suggested in the film-climax. That’s why she deserves our support.

Here we discover that in the Bengali society that ‘feminism’ as a concept has a negative connotation as popularly it is constructed as such female practices threatening to tradition. Also, it is geared towards a negative kind of westernization. So any female efforts and exercise that is thought to be disruptive of tradition are implicitly castigated as a feminist practice.

An interesting aspect of our audience-study showed that ‘feminism’ as a concept does not hold much for them, and most of the respondents could not categorise themselves as feminist directly. Out of 50 female respondents 45 were categorical about their negative opinion on the concept. This is because of the perception of feminism among them as concentrating too exclusively on women while neglecting the fact that in society (by which probably the family is understood) men and women need to act in harmony. There is another set of objection – it is to do with feminism’s direct identification with a negative westernised modernity. Amongst the male respondents, 28 out of total 30, i.e. 92.4 percent, rejects the concept as they identify feminism with the life-style of a certain western inspired, comfortably-of “sermonising” class of women.

As, reviewed by one leading poet of Bengal,

"The subject-theme of the film *Parmitar Ek Din* is only one – that is of humanism. That human beings are so helplessly humans. The film suggests that all our relationships are inherently tragedy-filled. Such a tragedy is actualised through mental or physical death. But we fail to
completely snap our ties in any such tragedy, some remnants of the relationship stays...” 32 (tr. mine)

This failure to completely break away from a social relationship is signified in paromita’s character. That’s why she is so much a topic of discussion in the public sphere....

For the first time, it is being established in our films that a woman need not snap all ties with her in-laws even when she gets divorced from her husband. The old relationships stay even when the man-woman relationship exhaust itself. Paromita is distinctively calm, she suffers all the pain of an incompatible marital relationship initially. Then she tries her best to convince her mother-in-law, who emerges as her confidant during the married life, her desire to actualise her life-instincts. To move beyond the ‘dead’ relationship and get married afresh – and finally she walks out silently. She is tolerant, able to protest when it is required, also capable of self-assertion and decide her own life – such an image of woman would have acquired the status of a rebel or an innocent victim, but luckily she is ruthlessly painted as a human being. ....” 33 (tr. mine).

Paromita is not a rebel; she is neither a feminist nor a compromise seeker. She is painstakingly human, she has learnt to be so the hard way. She is cruel to desert her mother-in-law and all that helplessness of Sanoka and her disabled daughter cannot hold back Paromita to a redundant relationship. Such ‘cruelty’ is to become ruthlessly a woman of flesh and blood. Such is the iconography of woman that Aparna Sen desires at the end of the 20th century, although she almost ‘legitimised’ adultery a decade and half back through Paroma. The family regains significance, rather it retains its meaningfulness and a new family, a new kind of relationship is suggested through sublimating femininity, instead of depicting a storming out of the in-laws house. A loud feminist protest or an assertion of debunking family is anachronistic in this case.

32 Goswami, Joy; ‘Ma, Oke Mera Na Andho Kore’, a review of Paromitar Ek Din, in Desh. 15 April, 2000, pp. 80-82.
33 Op cit.
Meaningfully we can sign up by recording Aparna Sen’s own words on the theme:

"... A family is very important. That’s your anchor..... I am not really a feminist. I sympathise with feminist cause as I see them as a part of human rights issues. *Paroma* was my most feminine film. But then the protagonist could have been a man too. And yes, a family is very important for anyone ... Marriage is not a crumbling institution if one can find the right partner with the right values and background...." ³⁴

Such a comment by supposedly the most firebrand woman film maker that Bengali cinema experienced in the 20th century, summarily captures the mood of the contemporary women’s world. A new image celebrates a subtle kind of feminine sublimation, the image of reconciliation or rebellion is no longer aspired for.

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³⁴ In an interview on personal life as well as on her filmmaking, Aparna Sen says so. The interview is with Sushmita Mukherjee, appeared in *Times of India*, 8 September, 2002.