Chapter Six
CONCLUSION
FEMININITY AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN BENGALI CINEMA: A DYNAMIC PROFILE

General Layout of the Basic Idea

In our interpretive mould of the present study we arrived at certain research findings at three different levels. First, we understood the significance of cinema in the cultural life of Bengali society. At the level of the films under our scope of study, we discovered how meaningfully in varied ways women had been conceptualised and represented cinematically. Finally, talking to the audiences we encountered insightful observations vis-a-vis their cinema experiences. The findings generated at the three levels enriched each other and when they were tied together they presented us with a fresh understanding of our problem of study. We started off tentatively with a conjecture that contrary to dominant understanding in media-researches, in Bengali cinema there had been conscious attempts to seek images of women debunking the stereo-typed representations of women as object of male-desires and as domesticated by patriarchal ideology. And that, over the decades such exercise in portraying alternative women’s images had undergone crucial changes. We analysed the films and checked with the audiences to see that such changes were real, but they had not progressed in a linear fashion, also not all the alternatives presented in the films were accepted by the audiences. Let us deliberate on our findings separately in detail as observed at different levels.

Significance of Cinema

Even in the age of globalised culture and explosion of the electronic media, satellite television as well, the Bengali literate middle-class retained a penchant for cinema – viewing. Due to economic and social reasons,
going to the theatre—halls might have had dwindled a lot but televisions (mainly private channels) had provided the scope for watching popular, classic films to the Bengali viewers. In fact, more than the various teleshows and serials, the feature films drew a better viewership.

The hold of cinema in Bengali intellectual cultural map was indicated at two levels. Bengal has had a long tradition of theatre and literature. As Bengali cinema developed out of this cultural baggage, if itself became a part of such baggage. Added to this, the role of 'reawakened', cultural personalities in film-making made Bengali cinema a very enchanting and intellectually invigorating engagement for the literate middle-class. Secondly, the nature of the cinema (with the exception of the post 1980s efforts of imitating mainstream Hindi movies, indulging in alienating spectacle of the irrational) had a close approximation with the everyday life situations. Every film, by telling stories, portraying characters and narrating events made a symbolic sense of the world.

Despite the growth of television and availability of other means of entertainment, cinema remained the most popular audio-visual medium of entertainment for the masses which was a basic necessity. Also, cinema had emerged as a major art form which gives expression to the vision of distinguished creative artists. For Bengal, the reason for cinema’s popularity and cultural spread was not far-fetched on this count. The cinema of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen had brought Bengal in the international cinema map quite prominently. The rich legacy had passed on to insightful film-makers like Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Aparna Sen, Rituparno Ghosh etc. Contrary to the claim of National Film Policy Report\(^1\) that the wide popularity of cinema and its known strength as an

\(^1\) Report of the National Film Policy, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India 1989.
audio-visual medium of communication invested this medium with a persuasive power for social influence, we realised that cinema retained its privileged role as a medium of enlightenment and information but the 'social influence' was not one-sided. The films had been subjected to multiple understanding and rendering of meanings as divergent groups of audience engage with the films at variance.

Our study qualified our understanding that being immensely popular did not always invest the films with great persuasive power. The popularity of the medium evidently had nothing to do with that particular strength of the cinema. The popularity of the films signaled their entry into the public discourse but their power for social influence was not non-problematic. The films were highly reviewed and circulated in the public discourse, their themes and motifs were critically talked about, shared with but the audience always kept an observer's distance while responding to their film-experience. Such an observation in our study did not belittle the impact of films in Bengali culture and society. In fact, it underscored the critical faculty of the film-audience that sustained the cinema culture of Bengal. Meaningful films, socially-relevant films, films based on real-life events kept cinema in Bengal alive even when the economy and the shape of the industry was not entirely encouraging.

An interesting finding of the study was that after a lull period of 1980s, during 1990s there was an upsurge in film-making. No doubt, a particular spectacle-formula oriented/costumed films had appeared during this period to revive the film-industry economically, but side by side a number of films were made with their plinth on realist aesthetics and politics. *Unishe April, Dahan* and *Paromitar Ek Din* - all these three films which found their way into our primary 'data', qualified in terms of their realist aesthetics. Moreover, the proliferation of women's studies, women's
writings and voices in the academic and semi-academic circles influenced film-makers to indulge in sensitive characterisation of women's lives. In fact, more and more, female-oriented plots were unfolded cinematically. Thereby, everyday life of women were brought to the fore. The female agency is explored, albeit with punctuations. Interestingly, such women-centredness in recent Bengali films had brought back not only upper-middle and middle-class women back to the cinema-halls, the literate class too in general gathered around films and started discussing the feminine portraits as suggested by film of Aparna Sen or Rituparno Ghosh.

The impact and significance of cinema was amply brought out by our everyday knowledge of television-viewing. While watching a television programme, we could ignore it, go on to do something else and return to it etc. The large image of any film on the screen in a dark theatre could not ignored, not to speak of an outstanding film whose content was achieved with skill and with compelling force. The views of the respondents covered in the study converge on the above assessment. As far as their engagement with film-viewing was concerned, it was observed that from the time of watching the film, and often much longer afterwards, their minds were programmed on certain lines that either re-inforce the dominant ideology of the power-structure in the society, or question it and seek to subvert it.

Why and how did they do so? That part we should be enumerating while dealing with our findings at the level of audience.

Findings From the Films

Before we deliberate on our findings of the consideration and understanding of the audience with respect to the film under study, let us organise the salient features of our film-data. Thematically, we have
roughly three different modes of women’s representation in Bengali film during the period 1950s to 1990s. We observed almost a chronological unfolding of the three different moulds of women’s portrayals.

Initially, it has been the case of reconciliating with the existing ordering of man-woman relationship. Through an employment of certain recuperative devices, like creating a fantasy-space or regaining lost-memory etc, the various alternative possibilities were ploughed back into maintaining the patriarchal boundaries. The reconciliatory mood at least helped in remoulding the man-woman relationship within the parameters of patriarchy. Such attempts in adapting modernity with tradition subsequently gave rise to a phase assertive feminine selves. Such rebellious mood in exercising female-agency often ended up in self-destruction. Overcoming such debasement of femininity, a third phase opened up a search for creative self-introspection on the part of female-protagonists. Probing the interiority of women’s lives, cinematic representations indicated a quest for an alternate agenda. It was a sublime reflection on one’s own life. Instead of positing the man-woman rivalry and ensuing a rebellion, through self-reflections the alternate search was for conditions conducive to reciprocity, and equality based on dialogic communication. There was no victory to be scored over men, instead through on exercise of sublimated femininity, the whole question of man-woman relationship was reworked beyond dualities and dualisms.

The films studied for the decade 1950s viz, *Agnipariksha* and *Harano Sur*, offered female characters anchored in narrative conventions backed up by tradition. Nevertheless, one traced a fragile sense of ‘self’ being inscribed on female protagonists. A corrective process somewhat upheld the return of the significance of rejuvenating the family. But the fact that the male regained his moral status through the intervention of the
woman must ultimately transform earlier models of patriarchal power/order by making men dependent on the woman’s superior understanding.

In the 1960s also, woman’s social location was explored in the domestic sphere but with a difference. Conjugality was the focus as also the emergence of woman as a working-woman stepping out of the household confines. *Charulata* for the first time allowed a hitherto conservative society to fathom the exegesis of a woman seeking fulfilment outside marital relationship if such a relationship lost it meaning. In the other film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the female protagonist *Nita’s* self-sacrifice was overshadowed by her assertion of female-subjectivity, debunking the given familial gender-roles. So, the film did not celebrate sacrifice of the woman but reaffirmed life. The probabilities of alternate subjectivities for women was underscored by bringing in the imageries of the archetype of Mother Goddess. The eternal feminine-principle of life perpetuation was invoked at the very end of the film through the long-shot of a non-descript young girl almost reminiscent of *Nita*.

1970s, had a different expression of femininity. In the film *Ek Din Pratidin*, we experienced the emergence of woman as a contemporary urban working girl. Alongwith we saw the flow of the public and domestic space into each other. The film at a deeper level explained that, it was only by understanding and analysing the oppression in women’s personal lives that we could move towards an understanding of women’s marginalisation in the public and political sphere. The final denouement showed *Chinu*, the female protagonist raising the voice of protest from the confines of male-dictated societal order. A rebellious representation was thus narrativised.

The assertive mood continued in the 1980s’ phenomenal feminist film *Paroma*. Quite boldly its maker abhored the morality of patriarchal familial values. Its protagonist was allowed to realise her selfhood, her
independence and sexuality through a loud illicit relationship. The male-characters were simply invoked to mark the lack and at best as catalysts for its female lead to celebrate self-awareness and self-assertion independent of male involvement.

Woman-centeredness was the hallmark of the film of 1990s. The domestic familial spaces were not explicated in the conventional mould. Interestingly basing the narratives on familial domestic locales, the three films under our scope of study developed alternate subject-positions for its female protagonists. First of all, the male characters hardly were given agency, which was exercised by the female characters with the males mostly reacting to it. Sociologically it was interesting to see that this feminisation of the male exhausts and/or reshapes the patriarchal institution of family. All the woman protagonists in each of the films emerged as survivors through self-introspections and through inter as well as intra generation gender solidarity. Replacing an aggressive rebel mode in the 1990s the select films projected alternate femininity seeking a meaningful identity and existence which rejected neither the home nor the family but only the asymmetry within.

Finding of the Audience-Study

At the level of the audience-study, our findings were instructive. As admitted in the introduction of this study the audience essentially represented the literate middle class section of the Bengali society. Quite purposively, such a social composition was adhered to while constituting the sample. The very subject-area and theme of study privileged such a group which played the most important role in opinion formation. We were dealing with cultural – constructs of women; the cultural representations as articulated and as negotiated by the articulate section of the society allowed
us to have a measure of how the circuit of communication, at least in part, constituted the social world.

While talking about films of 1950s, the opinion was almost unanimous that it was a period of nascent modernisation, so the women characters were essentially embodying cultural authenticity. This was so as a result of cultural anxiety of protecting one’s own tradition. However, the women are ‘modern’ to the extent it reworked conventional family-ideology and helped it to accommodate both tradition and modernity. During the 1960s only, the patriarchal ideology was pointedly put on a trial. In this phase the contradictions of modernity showed their ramifications in private lives as well. Conjugality was thought in a different way. The possibility of love beyond marriage is acclaimed by a generalised opinion as aesthetically and emotionally non-transgressive. Although Charulata was a period piece and many felt irrelevant in the present context. But it provide the middle-class literate society a sense of awakening to the call of modernity. In other words, the ultimate emotional response to the film was like an awakening. The audience was quite conversant with the fact that Ray adopted Tagore’s story to his own understanding of male-female relations. To give it a more contemporary kind of feeling or sensing the emotional landscape of the society Ray effected a subtle reconciliation whereas in Tagore’s work the relationship was finished between Charu and her husband.

The audience-response with respect to Ghatak’s film was virtually couched in passion and emotion. The ordinariness with which Ghatak portrayed his female protagonist Nita, allowed the audience a sense of looking at their own lives. It was a realist representation of urban working women’s predicament. It was a big leap to in the 1960s to image such a steadfast struggle of a non-descript young women. A majority of the
audience studied felt, although, melodramatic at its climax the film would add strength to the cause of women’s emancipation from the patriarchal hold. The strong socially-critical dialogue content was the added strength of the film.

The audience was sharply divided on the question of the entry of the woman in the public sphere – the theme of 1970s *Ek Din Pratidin*. The climax of the film possibly allowed such a division. The central question remained unresolved, thereby many felt it was a failure on the part of its maker to allow a transcendence. On the other a contesting opinion was that, it conferred the young working girl the autonomy and independence to remain clueless. Aparna Sen’s *Paroma* might have had generated a slot of enthusiasm amongst the feminists and film-critics but to the common viewers the explicit physicality of women’s sense of freedom did not really resolve the man-woman asymmetrical relationship within a family.

No wonder that most of the respondents to the study felt that the stated objectives of feminism enabled women to seek justice and assert themselves as well as their rights, but could not categorize themselves as feminist directly because of the several interpretive layers of feminism as a concept. Among these, the perception of feminism as concentrating too exclusively on women while neglecting the fact that in society (by which probably is meant the family) men and women need to act in harmony, seemed to construe feminism as unidimensional. The other objection was feminism’s direct identification with a negative westernized modernity, and also an identification of feminism with the lifestyle of a certain western educated “life-style” women. According to the audience opinion, these self-professed feminists were unable to connect to “real” women. Why is it so?
We made a conjecture that, it was the popular media which had constructed an image of 'attitude-wearing' feminist and separated them from a large section of those sensitive to women's condition and desirous of charge. Ironically, amongst the audience it was clear that the media had instilled this awareness of women's underprivileges and the same media instilled a sense of scepticism amongst them as far as the effectivity of feminist thoughts.

What appealed to the audience and made them throng the cinemahalls for the select films of 1990s was the nature of the denouement exercised in the films, viz. Unishe April, Dahan and Parmoitar Ek Din. The conventional film closing on the note of an impossibly naive happiness or a problem-terminating death could not really convey any kind of reality as such 'closures' could not redeem physical reality. Instead, the intellectually inclined, culturally accomplished literate class of cine-goers opted for physical existence in its endlessness. The films offered continuum which ofcourse was identical with open-ended life. Such was the spirit of 1990s – as evident from the audience-study.

Unishe April and Dahan – Ritupurano Ghosh' two films were acknowledged by the audience on the count that they not only presented women as singlalised subject, capable of exercising ‘power’, working towards an end, but also highlighted certain everyday life situations. A predominant female audience was created by Unishe April, who could empathise with the mother-daughter catharsis to self-realization and identification with each other.

In Dahan, the two female protagonists were almost cinematic incarnate of real-life women's struggles within the family and without. The audience felt for the representations, more so because their real-life helplessness to counter such oppressive order. Many a female audience
revealed that the sense of powerlessness was felt by women when it came to gender-relations be it in the public sphere or the domestic. The audience-opinion was particularly sympathetic towards the way the film offered its ending. It was being shared by them that the film-maker deliberately employed a radical kind of ambiguity. In this case the denouement engendered at the end was not merely due to a refusal to arrive at conclusions but either due to a radical uncertainty on the part of the maker himself/herself or the intrusion of the subjectivity of the maker into his/her art. But then such subjectivity or uncertainty allowed the protagonists to be more inward-looking and self-reflexive. The audience opined categorically in favour of affirming life, family and society.

The most striking aspect of our audience-study findings was that not only males but females as well as, was sceptical about positing male as marginalised or as anti-women in the upsurge of women-centered films. Such accentuation was being felt as uncalled for in the present-day context, where at least in the urban set-up, the male-female relations were less oppositional and more complementary. Films of 1990s evoked such a critical reaction amongst the audience, although overwhelmingly they supported a woman's silent rejection of an incompatible, meaningless marriage (Paromitar Ek Din). In the same vein they acknowledged positively to Paromita's emergence as a confidant, employed woman seeking and accomplishing a new relationship.

Through the select films covering the last half of the 20th century we estimated a changing representations of the woman. Such films portrayed women differently. Different in different moments of time. While in mainstream Hindi cinema as well as in the imitative genre of Bengali cinema women were often used as a metaphor, either for the suffering mother land or the poor, or for stereotyped depictions of family life, film
makers in Bengal (by that we recognise and refer to those competent, cultural creative personalities) seemed generally more wary about reducing individual women by generalisation and strive consciously against metaphorical portrayals of women protagonists. As against stereotyped images of woman drawn from familial relations there had been a gradual unfolding of woman’s images conferring alternative subjectivities, changes in the representations of the woman in contemporary cinema were prominent in Bengal because of the varied portrayals of women historically in Bengali literature and, because of the interlocking of cinema and literature in Bengali cultural landscape. The changes in women’s iconography on the screen revealed not only the views of the filmmaker, as of the state of society in which the films were appraised.

To begin to look at, to validate and recognize images that were in all ways different to the dominant domesticated/subjugated images of women, to see women as whole and complete, was to open the possibility for women to create and claim for themselves other ways of experiencing their own lives. It was to challenge the normative assumptions embedded in the way women’s lives were described and represented in dominant images and to destabilize their meanings. To see and represent was to allow, define and celebrate independence and difference, to recognise strength and begin to explore ways of constructing a non-patriarchal expression of gender.

While studying representations of women we realised certain basics. That, the import of any representation varied according to different audiences and socio-historical context. Also that, audiences understood things differently according not only to where they came from, and their experience but also the subject-position that was offered to them by the image. As our subjectivity change, as our sense of the world and place in it change our responses to the same images change. So, was true for the
audience. Finally, we underscored that, what the film-maker represented was also largely influenced by the audience for whom s/he was filming, those s/he was trying to reach.

The Study and Contemporary Feminist Thought

Modernity in contemporary Bengali Society is a condition fraught with conflicting values and possibilities. It was useful to probe at this point why the tradition-modernity debate was so crucial with respect to its implications for women. As various social scientific researches had indicated, tradition itself was variously identified with the bodies and selves of women and the preservation of one's own cultural authenticity was equated with the maintenance of the traditional patriarchal gender ideology. With respect to discursive portrait of woman as an icon in cinematic enunciation the traditional-cultural repertoire served a very convenient succour to fall back upon. This was more true for the phase of society just after independence; there were far fewer spaces or possibilities for women to construct any public representations of themselves. So, the question of resisting or challenging the dominant images were hard to come by. Patriarchies are capable of reordering itself, of changing themselves to appear "modernised" in order to continue subjection and oppression of women in less immediately obvious ways.

The problem was accentuated because the version of feminism visible in the particular society was popularly conceived to have originated in the west. So, along with all other practices threatening to tradition feminism too was abhored by popular cultural practices. Unlike feminism, modernity seemed to escape this trap of identification with a negative westernization. The various practices shown and experienced through various other forms of media to be disruptive of tradition were implicitly added on to feminism as a way of life. The negative connotation related to
such disruptive practices were almost automatically deployed to characterize the later. This was an important way that patriarchies co-opted feminist challenges.

There was another way of looking at the problem. The way the domestic space was problematised and alternative familial relations were explored was fraught with complex question of gender theorisaton. The changes that women initially sought were in the personal, private family realm where their subordination was most embedded and which was most resistant to change. Interestingly, there would be an acceptance of middle class women’s outside employment simultaneously with the resistance to their personal freedom. Because, employment in professions and services enhanced class-status while freedom with the family decreased male privilege within the class.

In a world where men had power to define themselves as primary, the contradictions for women remained. Though resistance could be offered by women in many ways, material and ideological controls were reinforced in other ways. Women coming out of the domestic spheres and participating in the public work-force did not necessarily signal the emergence of the women as a subject exercising her own agency. The ‘enlightenment’ model in Bengal was replete with ideas of women coming into their own guided and aided by their husbands. Progressive husbands encouraged their wives’ coming-out of the private-sphere and their freedom but in order to further their own enhancement of careers and status as liberal progressive. As long as the basic tenets of subordination was protected and the hierarchy is maintained, the ‘more powerful’ woman signified still a much more ‘powerful’ man.

Ideologically, female subordination was ensured through myths of female sub-servience, domesticity, inferiority and regarding an independent
woman as immoral. It was the middle-class women who had really come out of their homes to participate in the non domestic work-force due to pure economic reasons and at the same-time, the middle-class was supposed to be the timeless repertoire of cultural tradition. Changes in the lives and representations of the middle-class women elicited the gender issue more poignantly.

To participate in the public-sphere the middle-class women had to embrace the masculine spirit (of rationality, articulation, education, reflection etc) whereas to retain the home and the family they had to act as repository of cultural authenticity. It is an ambiguous subject position for women, that becomes more problematic (rather vulnerable) on the face of the current lease of consumer capitalism.

Modernity as defined in western philosophy is bound up with central values such as choice, individualism and market relations; in a consumer culture, these values seem to be attainable through consumption. Modernity in a consumer society is the freedom bequeathed to women hitherto bonded by drudgery, limitations and silence: and of course, this freedom is a gift of things, things to buy from the market place, thing to choose, things that define modernity and liberation just as surely as modernity and liberation are their inevitable consequence.

The current phase of consumerist modernity actively promotes the image of the non-mother, the dynamic career woman; it incorporates within its repertoire inoculated versions of feminist goals and demands, using a sanitised feminist rhetoric to advertise an attitudinal change that is supposed to define the very condition of "modernity". Against such signs of self-indulgence hostility and fear are vastly exacerbated.
How far this consumerist modernity assigns the woman with an affirmative self-image? This consumerist culture allows her access to new non-domestic access to a value-system which might after contestatory forms of selfhood that refuses the politics of consumerism. It only 'modernises' her body and time. After all, the ideology of consumerist modernity is rooted in a never-ending spiral of fear and desire, it quips her to fight a losing battle over and with her body and her commodities every moment of her life.

The immediate post independence moment led to the phenomenal iconisation and identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. Nationalist discourse constituted the female body as a privileged signifier and various struggles are waged over the meaning and ownership of that body. In mainstream Hindi films women are predominantly used as a metaphor, either for the nation or for the stereotyped depictions of domestic life. In various moulds, even in contemporary period casting women as embodying and sustaining tradition recycles the old stereotype in Indian films. We identified, to the contrary, a different strand of film-making in Bengali cinema. Here, alternative female subjectivities were invoked against such metaphorical portrayals of women protagonists. At different moments of Bengali society, through such alternative experiments, different icons were produced to contest the image designed by patriarchal values. Traditional icons were reinterpreted in the light of enlightenment nations. The 'enlightenment' model was invoked to engage with the twentieth century spirit of self-consciousness. Subsequently and simultaneously, the 'feminine principle' were resorted to in order to recover the authentic femininity from objectification and fetishization. Traditional gender resources were re-interpreted to identity their points of strength to produce the icon of feminine power which could creatively combat the reactionary usage of cultural traditions as well as the
historical structures of patriarchy. The icons of revolt and rebel hardly had any lasting impact on the Bengali society. Such experiments were far and few between. Finally, woman emerged through the icons of sublimity. Such sublimation of feminine power overcame the dualities of public and private, man and woman. It sought its own potential within, made men realize it and rescued the tag of negativity from feminine work. It arrested the exclusion and marginalisation of the feminine principle eschewing the aggression of the rational masculine world. Such a changed iconisation of the woman begs a reflection on the present debate/development within feminist thought.

What throttles the horizon and possibilities of a woman is the imposed ‘femininity’ which poses her as inferior to men. ‘Femininity’ is constructed as a lack. Modern feminist take off from this gender asymmetry. The lead was given by Simon de Beauvoir2 more than fifty years back. That the women is the ‘other’, requiring the man to complete her. Postmodernist feminist thinking has turned Beauvoir upside down. The ‘difference’, the ‘otherness’ is hailed as a condition of diversity, openness and plurality. The growing fetishization of ‘difference’ and ‘separation’ provokes contemporary feminist thinking to critique exclusivist thinking and practice.

The development of a sense of self does not require the repression of connection to others. Instead, a struggle for intelligibility and intersubjectivity is called for. A different conceptualisation of femininity is relevant at this point.

The author of the signature work of radical feminist period (The Female Eunuch) Germain Greer too is self-reflexive at the end of the 20th

---

century. Given the incompleteness of the hitherto feminist attempts to correct the gender imbalances one feels for a different manifesto for women of a different time. The search is now for completeness. The agenda is not to ‘equal’ the men only. Instead, feminist have to opt for an agenda which cannot be criticised by the media as ‘man aping, dungaree-wearing, foul-mouthed, angry, humourless person’. The task is not to negate the feminine-self, but to tap its creative potentials. Debunking the orthodox feminist position, the search is for a ‘Whole Woman’ in whom these potentials have blossomed to the full.

Over the last three decades of feminist theorisation and movement, beyond the edifice of equality there has gathered a whole lot of anti-feminist positions. Feminist agenda has over the years distanced itself from becoming a distinct philosophy. It is now only issue-based. As a result the movement has moved away from life-practices.

More than the male-order, the object of hatred for the feminist now is the consumerist-culture. The problem is how woman and womanhood are falling victims to the designs of science, technology and advertisement-the package of consumerist culture. The feminist consciousness is being gradually manipulated by the ever-expanding market of consumer society. The women of ‘substance’, the women of independent life-choices and self-control also metamorphose into ‘life-style feminist’; feminism itself becomes a commodity.

The weapon of anger has not furthered the cause of feminists. Men cannot salute women’s anger. The excess of a woman’s sentiment has been disciplined and controlled by naming it as ‘hysteria’ or ‘sentimentality’. The creative possibilities of a woman’s sufferings cannot be fathomed by a consumerist culture. Greer writes, ‘it is time to get angry again’ but
introspectively winds up, 'if we can find ways of harvesting the energy in women's oceanic grief we shall move mountains'.

The icons of Sublime femininity that we elucidate and encounter in the Bengali films may be located in the concurrent feminist thought. Here one appreciates the 'paradoxical' nature of female subjectivity. Females can become separate by recognising their connections and joined with others by knowing their distinctiveness. This is over and above the cardinal principle of any emancipatory agenda – feminism ought to be influenced by societies which host them. The politics of change must find purchase through the values already endorsed in society, even if those value are to be dialogically renegotiated by feminist intervention.

**The Study and Contemporary Film Criticism**

Locating the study in the context of recent feminist intervention in film criticism, we recognised that it was not fruitful to make language and the signifying process so exclusively central to the production of the social formation. One cannot conflate the social structure of reality with its signification. It is true that social relations and processes are mediated through language and that, language has the mediating power to reflect back on the social process. But it is one thing to acknowledge that language has a determining effect on society, and quite another to equate society with its language and signifying practices.

Once the object of feminist criticism is defined solely in terms of the cinematic production of meaning, we lose the ability to deal with its relationship of women as defined in society altogether. The traditional concern of feminist criticism was with characters and stereotypes influenced by literary tradition. Such approaches treated film as an

---

3 Greer, Germaine *The Whole Woman* (London, Deubleday, 1999).
expressive medium revealing in the story of a character’s experiences and
development truths about the human condition that could be judged
according to their depth, maturity, etc. In the present study, it was being
borne out that the changing iconography of the woman did contest the
dominant view of media/cinema as perpetuating a male objective. While
problematising why “women as women” were not represented in the
 cinema, we had diagnosed that this was not always the case in Bengali
films. The select films which constituted our scope of study might not
exclusively belong to the mainstream cinema, also in numbers such strand
of films might be outnumbered by films that presented woman as what she
represented for man. Nevertheless, in the cultural map of Bengali society
their imprint was timeless and the public event of these films qualitatively
outshine the films where the female was portrayed on the principle for
realizing male objectives than a person in her own right.

While studying the negotiated aspects of the films under study, we
located somewhat a parallel development of popular imageries with regards
to woman as an icon. The steady emergence of the woman from the
conservative domain involved an investment of experiences of everyday
life. The ideology of patriarchy was a recurring subject in almost all such
popular discourse. Whether it was the purdah ideology, family ideology,
the ideology of seclusion, the housewife ideology or gender ideology –
every instance of gender inequality was being traced to ‘patriarchy’. Used
in such a blanket fashion, the concept was robbed of analytical
significance. A strong plea was then suggested that women’s oppression be
viewed in its historical development in order to see it various
manifestations and specificitres. It brought us to the question of the
relationship of ideology to the other structures and processes of society.
That is, how far ideological notions were carried out by the people and so
on. Therefore, a sociologically informed analysis of women’s
representations in cinema, located analysis at the intersection of the process of construction of the text and the social context which determined and was represented in that text.

Feminist movement had set a great store on the interrogation of personal experience and consciousness raising as a form of work aimed at uncovering the political in the personal and creating new identifications for individual women where the recognition of a gender position in terms of the category women, as opposed to the patriarchal abstractions “women”, is precisely to leave behind an individual identification and begin to recast the self in terms of a group membership.

Limitation of the Study

Using products of imagination (in our case cinema) as primary source material may evoke considerable septicism with regards to the modalities of validating the findings. Two things need to be classified on that count. First, being self-conscious of the travails involved in using such a primary source, we in the same breath claim that using such new type of data and forms of ‘popular’ culture allowed us a probe into such areas of human experience that were otherwise left unattended by conventional sociological research. Cinema as providing primary source material can be gainfully conceived as perceptive observations of its makers about their societies, like any other informatns’ responses on a field. Cinema interpretations of social-cultural reality which hold clue to the existential paradoxes and possibilities that people encounter in their social-living.

Without being oblivious of the delicate nature of such source-material, the research supplemented its primary ‘data’ with the help of several other ‘sources’. That included – the archival sources, documents on cinema production and exhibition, information about the film-personnel at
various levels and finally, how socially they are being received. In the process, the most important question of 'what is shown to whom' was tackled. Also, it was probed who such generated meanings impacted upon everyday life and imagination.

Secondly, as a fallout of the nature of the 'data' used, deduction cannot be made in the routine sense of the term. Obviously, the primary 'data' is subjectively interpreted by us. It is being tested and validated inter-subjectively vis-a-vis the critics' and viewers' opinions. It is a case of 'organised subjectivity' which helped us to meaningfully interpret the film-data and in a hermeneutic mould check the interpretations with the perceptions of the select film-reviewers/critics as well as that of the popular viewers.

Also, we may record that cinema as socially significant art form creates many a social world. It is very complex cultural product to be subjected to sociological analysis. Therefore, the area we have attempted to explore is not very well organised given the existing state of sociological knowledge of films. An exhaustive, inter subjectively verified, consistent account of all facets of cinema would have served us a research base. It is lacking. We worked on what we possessed. There were discreet chunks of 'wisdom'. The gaps within were obvious, they were punctuated with 'wise' guesses. We tried to fill such gaps and move forward by constructing disciplined formulations out of such 'wise' guesses. Thereby we attempted to accomplish the most elementary task of 'doing' sociology.

Lastly, with regards to the selection of the films for study with respect to the subject-theme, we not two things. First, it has been a consistent endeavour of many feminist literary critics to study films and include how the male-order is reclaimed through various devices even in contemporary Bengali cinema. we started off with a stated objective to
dismiss such films on which the popular feminists’ exercise thrive on. The dismissal is purely on the ground of the ‘strength’ of those films to qualify,

(i) as archival material for posterity, and

(ii) as politically and aesthetically relevant material to make an entry into the rich cultural baggage of Bengali society and collective psyche.

Simply put, the dismissal is aimed at not to valorize the trivia, masquerading for the ‘popular’.

Lastly, the admit that some would often feel that a particular film or two, relevant for the subject-these has been left out of the study. We submit that for incidental reasons like difficulty in procuring the prints, poor print quality etc. deterred us from watching/viewing/analysing a few films that we though initially to be relevant. Also, some films might be left out due to inadvertent, unwilful omissions. The question is, however, whether the films omitted would have challenged the present analysis.