Chapter Four
THE ENCOUNTER WITH MODERNITY

The Period of Recuperation – 1950s to 1960s

In the previous chapter we have already discussed that the immediate years in the post-independence phase of Bengali society were marked by a tension between a tradition bound society and the emergent modern values. This was quite logical. Possibly this inherent tussle between the two world-views continues still today. Cinema, as we have theorised in the introductory chapter, has something about it that is physical, visceral, direct and unmediated. Also it has been suggested that films may serve as entry points for understanding the legitimisation of social and political power through narrative forms, commanding at the same time the widest of social constituencies. For us films would serve as vivid, highly public and politically immediate document.

Before we embark upon the films, which constitute our scope of study, let us briefly state the social context of the post-independence filmmaking in Bengal. During 1950s and 1960s Bengali cinema had to come out of the redundancy of independence-seeking, social films or mythologically oriented filmic fantasies. With the emergence of new classes, the growing middle-class as well as the working class populace, we find that there had been attempts to extend the thematic boundaries in Bengali films. Conventional plot revolving around city-bred middle-class familial stories continued to thrive. In addition to this, there had been attempts to quench the intellectual thirst of an emergent class of intelligentsia; the intelligentsia was a product of the crisis of the national liberation movement, the spread of Western values/education and the

---

emergent industrial working class. Responding to the changes unleashed in the society in Bengali cinema there was a shift of focus on the neglected and the obscure. The first cognisable shift was the focus on the interface of modernity and tradition. The encounter between the two captured the filmmakers' imagination. Narrativising this grand problem in familial stories, conjugality was problematised and explored in the genre of romantic melodrama.

The first decade after independence had been almost emblematized by Uttam –Suchitra melodrama. For two decades such popular melodrama thrived with enviable success. Such was the popular public rapport that even today through various private television channels and film discourse they continue to be timeless hits.

The films we select from this phase of film-making fall into the melodramatic genre which as a rule emphasises women's agency, albeit within the parameters of patriarchy. In all the films centrality has been accorded to the female characters. Although the narratives, agency is exercised by the female figures with the males mostly reacting to it. The films under our scope of study are essentially representative in terms of our thematic concern. Imaging a 'new' woman is an important cultural process and an exclusive project of modernity. In the post-independence scenario, the changing portrayal of woman is poignantly located in creative filmmaking in Bengal not only the stereo-typed images of woman drawn from family institutions are transcended but alternative subjectivities for woman are also invoked.

Out of our audience survey, the following data is instructive for our initial proposal.

---

On the question: "Whether cinematic portrayals of woman characters have undergone a change from the films of 1950s to the 1990s", we frame a statement in the affirmative and the rage of opinion is measured in the following way in order to avail a quantitative measure.

**Table 3: Statement: Women’s images have undergone substantial transformation in the last five decades of film-making in Bengal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree somewhat</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree somewhat</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

We find that the opinion is highly in favour of the statement. Also the respondents are clearly non-ambiguous, there is no void opinion about it. Only 15% of them tend to believe that such changes have not been effected, but there is no strong opinion about it. In total 85% either tend to agree or agree strongly to our research formulation that cinematically women’s images have undergone metamorphosis over the last five decades of the 20th century cinema in Bengal.

For our research purpose we take up for analysis some select films which are representative in character, as claimed earlier. Films selected from the first phase after Indian independence are:

---

3 Here by first phase we mean, the year immediately after independence, the years of emergent industrialisation backed up by optimism of Nehruvian modernisation. Spanning over two decades the society was trying to come to terms with the dilemmas and contradictions of the nationalist discourse of progress and modernity.
a) **Meghe Dhaka Tara** 1960 Director: Ritwik Kumar Ghatak story: Saktipada Rajguru

b) **Charulata** 1964 Director: Satyajit Ray, Story: Rabindranath Tagore

While treating these films as primary source material we address to new types of data (forms of popular and mass culture), along with the conventional data collected from audience responses vis-a-vis the films. Also, we would juxtapose our primary findings with analyses of two signature films of the previous decade, 1950s: *Agnipariksha*, (1954, directed by Agradoot) and *Hasano Sur* tr. Missing Melody, 1957, directed by Ajoy Kar).

Charu of *Charulata* and Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* are the two woman characters of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak respectively, acclaimed as their career best timeless cinematic portrayal of woman’s image. To quote Chidananda Das Gupta, one of the finest chronicler of Ray’s works,

> “Ray’s analytical method, his ability to reveal the mental event with exactness and with few words reaches its height in *Charulata*. His method justifies the dictum that in the Indian tradition decoration and expression are not two different things but one. His craftsmanship reaches a fineness of detail which turns skill into art, quantity into quality, decoration into emotional expression”

As for Nita, in Ghatak’s own admission – “Nita till date is my favourite of all the characters I have conceptualised. I have imagined her as a symbol for hundreds of years of sacrificing Bengali woman. Her birthday falls on the *Jagatdhatri* Puja day. She unites with the mountains, i.e. *Mahakal* in her death. Before the final exist, taking

---


6 *Jagatdhatri* – a form of Mother Goddess popular in Bengali pantheon of Goddesses. She bears the world, etymologically speaking.
succour in her childhood memory of climbing the mountains to which
sunrise Nita dreams of a bright illuminating surroundings...” (tr. mine)

Using these two characters Charu and Nita we would be probing
how the moral dilemmas and the socio-historical context has been woven
into the construction of woman. Juxtaposing these constructions with the
iconic figures of 1950s from Bengali cinema, we would be in a position to
draw insights into how these films tap into, play on, and ultimately resolve
through a variety of narratival strategies the concerns and moral dilemmas
of the everyday life on the women’s question.

As we have indicated, as secondary sources of data we would be
dealing with two woman-centric film, Agnipariksha and Harano Sur of the
preceeding decade to juxtapose the images of the two decades to identify
their central concerns, the limits of their time and circumstances and mark
out their possible continuities or discontinuities in subsequent decades of
women’s characterisation in Bengali cinema.

The Making and the Plot of Charulata

Rabindranath Tagore’s novella Nashtanir (The Broken Nest, 1901)
was adapted by Satyajit Ray when he directed a film version of it with the
title Charulata: The Lovely Wife in 1964. He wrote the screenplay as well.
Ray’s film, like Tagore’s Nashtanir upon which it is based, is set at the
height of the Bengal Renaissance, about 1879.8

---

The Set-up

The story of *Charulata* takes place at a time when the Bengal Renaissance is climbing towards its peak. Western thoughts of freedom and individuality are raffling the age-old tranquility of a feudal system. Changes are set in motion by rational, thinking male protagonists. The liberation of woman is being talked about but not much being achieved. Poised between tradition and modernity Madhabi Mukherjee (plays the role of *Charu*) provides Ray with an embodiment of the Indian Woman. Expressively graceful and suave, with sublime sensitivity she is the kind of traditional woman whose inner seismograph catches the vibrating waves reaching from outside into her seclusion. The victory of the Liberals in Britain becomes the subject of jubilation in Indian drawing rooms as the world outside is all set to change. It is the peak of the socially reforming western philosophy coupled with Ram Mohan Roy’s emancipatory ideas indicating a liberating notion for women’s lives.

The Plot

A thematic treatment of *Charulata* provides us with three major characters of late 19th century Bengal, belonging to the upper stratum of the leisured jamindars class: Bhupati, who dabbles in politics and funds the publication of an English newspaper that he edits. Inspired by the ideas of freedom and equality of Mill and Bentham, he spends his feudal wealth and time on the propagation of this world view. Charulata, Bhupati’s girl-wife who has grown into young womanhood and whose household duties are light, is drawn towards literature and writing. And Amal, a cousin of Bhupati, a student and aspiring essayist, who has been living with them.

---

9 Das Gupta, Chidananda, op.cit.
10 Ibid., pp.69.
The winds of change are not only stirring the rationally thinking liberal Bhupati; his good Hindu wife Charu, conveniently childless, too looks beyond the beaten path of the ideal–wife whose aspirations revolve only around one’s husbands happiness. She longs for his company and is bored with his attempts to assuage her through means in which he himself is not involved. One of the means is her husband’s cousin, who is introduced to her by the trusting liberal husband. The cousin Amal is served as Charu’s friend, philosopher and guide. In him she finds one with whom she can bestow her affection.

At the urging of Bhupati, Amal helps Charu in reading literature and, without premeditation, the two withdraw into a fantasy place with plans in the garden at the backyard of the house for a park with fawns and a lotus pool with Swans – a fantasy world with no entry for Bhupati and others. Slowly the traditionally “sweet but chaste” relationship between wife and husband’s brother turns into one of infatuation and love. In his youthful narcissism, Amal encourages Charu to fall for him. Amal realises the passion he has generated in Charu and his own vulnerability and responsibility; in the dead of right, he leaves to go to Madras to stay with a friend before his marriage in Burdwan and departure for England for higher studies.

In a letter to Bhupati, Amal states the ostensible reason for his departure from the household; he does not want to be a burden on Bhupati in his financial straits. Bhupati suddenly confronts the truth when Charu breaks down on receiving news of Amal. Bhupati finds her sobbing uncontrollably over the fact that Amal has left their household without telling her, not knowing that her husband has come back into the room. She hears the retreating footsteps of her husband and sees him leaving; she recovers, tears up Amal’s latter to Bhupati and, when Bhupati returns
home, says, ‘Come to me....’ and extends her hand. Bhupati then extends his own hand and the film ends with a freeze of their extended hands – surely an act of reconciliati.on. Apparently the ruined nest is to be built.

**The Making and the Plot of *Meghe Dhaka Tara***

Saktipada Rajguru’s story *Chena Mukh* (The Known Face, tr. mine) appeared in a popular magazine *Ultorath*. In 1960 Ritwik Ghatak scripted the story into a full-length feature film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud Clapped/Hidden Star). The turbulent time and experience of the post-independence phase of Bengal is the backdrop of this film. The immediate reality into which Ghatak stepped in is that of the travails and agony of millions of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan to Bengal as a result of political decisions and events quite distant from those who have suffered as a result. Ghatak’s own family was a victim to the Partition decision of the nationalist elite. The sense of loss and uprooting formed the matrix of most of his works, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* was the beginning. In the words of Ashish Rajadhyaksha it was:

“Ghatak’s most crucial film, the film that marked the turning point for him, what becomes evident is the revolutionary aspect of the returning to the form a fullness, a totality of perception and experience that has been drained away from it by the dominant tradition. More than any of his other work, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* depends upon purely sensuous portrayal in its evoking of the conflict of traditions...”

**The Set-up**

The everyday life of an agonised Kolkata colony, inhabited by refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan throws up an ordinary young girl, silent and sober, ready to struggle it out – such a domain naturally attracts Ritwik Kumar Ghatak in late 1950s. Ghatak is moved by the relentless

---

struggle of the uprooted class of refugees to search for a homeland and survive. Kolkata bears the weight of millions of refugees, absorbed their pain; and could provide only an apology of a relief. Saktipada Rajguru's story captures this theme, poignant in its very title Chenamukh (The Known face). It is primarily the story of Nita, the descent struggling young girl of Meghe Dhaka Tara (adapted from Chenamukh). Nita is constructed from the image of such a girl (silent and sober) whom Ghatak occasionally observed waiting at a tramstop near his house. He observed: 'I discover a history from the subtle lines of pain on her face'. Irrespective of his marxist strappings Ghatak for the first time tries to understand and articulate his own feelings about the early Indian mother-goddess cult through his readings on Carl Jung, the poetry of Yeats and Evic Neumann's book on comparative religions and the Great Mother. Repeated allusions to Indian mythology provides the basic frame of this film.

The Story

Meghe Dhaka Tara foregrounds Nita, the female protagonist, in an uprooted middle-class East Bengal family struggling for survival on the outskirts of Kolkotta. Nita is at the centre of the story as she trudges day after day to support the other members of the family. IN the very beginning of the film we see the characters as Neeta encounters them on her way back framework.

The film begins with a long magnificent shot of a leafy spreading tree standing by a stream. Shankar, Nita's elder brother, an aspirant classical singner practising by the stream. There is Nita's sister Geeta, the flightily young woman, brother Montu practising his boxing, always more

---

12 Ajuntik op. cit. Commemorating the 75th birthday anniversary of Ghatak this film journal published the director's own observation of the film under the title Parichaloker Katha (The Words of the Director), pp.9-10.
interested in amusing himself than in shouldering responsibilities, there is Sanat, the serious bespectacled research student, Nita’s suitor. The insecure mother, hard and cynical, always sour-tempered. She apprehends Nita’s possible marriage to Sanat and resents it for quite obvious reasons. The father, old Taran Babu, a meek school-teacher and a typical example of British colonial legacy (fond of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth) is a helpless and compassion-arousing individual.

Nita cannot marry, having the responsibility of providing for her family. Her responsibilities only increase with every misfortune as the father loses his legs, Montu has an accident – but the most shattering moment comes when her sister Gita draws Sanat away from her with facet approval from the mother, and eventually marries him. With little in life to look forward to, Nita trudges away until she finally comes down with tuberculosis. Her elder brother returns a success from Bombay in classical music to realise her terminal disease and takes her to a sanatorium. At the end she fulfils her one desire in life, that of returning to the hills. The tragic end reaches its crescendo with Nita’s last cry “I wanted to live” echoes and comes back from the mountains, with her helpless brother Shankar trying in vain to assuage her.

Construction of Women

Having dealt with the thematic treatment of the two films Charulata and Meghe Dhaka Tara, we can identify that female characters hold the coutrestage in both the narratives. Now we would attempt to understand how the female subjectivities are woven around these characters. Thereby, the images of woman as cinematically explored can be brought out for our subsequent analysis. We begin with Charulata. Evidently Ray’s film is a study of the female protagonist Charu as indicated by the name of the film. This sublime power of naming at the very outset designs Ray’s intention.
as different from Tagore whose novella *Nashtanir* is the basis of this film Tagore’s story is that of the breakdown of a marriage.

In Tagore’s story, Charulata’s husband Bhupati refuses to live with a wife who is constantly going to think of another man. He escapes to a job in South India. In Ray, the helpless woman wipes her tears, invites her husband to come in as he hesitates on the threshold. She recovers, tears up *Amal’s* parting letter to *Bhupati* and says, ‘Come to me’... come’. She knows she is entering a life of suspended animation (the hands freeze before they touch), thereby credence is accorded to the urge of the woman to reconcile.

Ray makes another ‘transgression’ with respect to Tagore’s story. Ray invokes the Hindu custom, not in Tagore’s story, when *Charu* marks the parting of her hair with vermilion customary for a married Hindu wife, and then touches her iron bangle. On this point we may conclude that Ray establishes *Charu’s* married identity as an overriding one. Thereby the duties, responsibilities and loyalty as a wife for *Charu* seems to underscore Ray’s construction of the female image.

Nevertheless in the totality of the film-narrative, Ray develops *Charu* as an adult female character despite being married to *Bhupati* is capable of developing self-awareness. She fills in her loneliness with a penchant for literature and art. She actualise her romantic flights of imagination in association with her husband’s cousin, who insults in her self-confidence and almost narcissistically encourages her to fall in love with him. Quite sympathetically and boldly Ray dramatises the relationship between *Charu* and *Amal*. A few such moments are:
- **Charu**, in a mood of self-assertion, publishes an essay in a prestigious Bengali magazine, hugs Amal and says between sobs (English sub-titles in the film): ‘I won’t write any more’

- When **Amal** tells her of his plan to return to Bengal after obtaining the Barrister’s degree from England, **Charu** tells him: ‘And the sister-in-law, she is bad, not beautiful, brazen!’

- Later when **Charu** tells **Amal**: ‘Promise me you won’t go, you won’t leave this house, Promise me’. To which **Amal** replies: ‘Let me go. Let’s go.’

- When **Bhupati** finds **Charu** uncontrollably sobbing and addressing **Amal** (in his absence): ‘Why didn’t you tell me before you left?’

Through such dramatic moments Ray brings to fore **Charu’s** inner struggle. Such an ‘adulterous’ relationship is used to emphasise **Charu’s** viewpoint. Ray’s “calm without, fire within” concept of eastern art is most serene outside and smoulders most inside **Charu** herself.\(^{13}\) The husband’s preoccupation and the wife’s boredom are merely outward instruments of plausibility which do not obscure the inner change of attitudes and aspiration in woman in a society in transition. The urge for freedom to love, the need for companionship in place of none loyalty, the sense of being an individual being – these forces are all there underneath the play of events.

**Charulata** is quintessential Ray. According to renowned film critic Aruna Vasudev,

> “Charulata herself is one of the most sensitive, intelligent, emotionally strong and memorable women to reach the Indian screen. She stands out

\(^{13}\) Das Gupta, Chidananda, op.cit.
even among Ray’s films in which the women are invariably complex, subtle, strong individuals."14

If Charu represents the female voice from the upper stratum of late 19th century ‘reawakened’ Bengal, Nita of Ghatak stands for the millions of struggling young women of middle and lower-middle class Bengali family ravaged by the political partition of United Bengal. Nita in Meghe Dhaka Tara is as much a victim of historical and political upheavals as she is of the parasitic tendencies of her own family. The partition of Bengal is one of the larger forces ultimately responsible for her destruction. Her tragedy is in a certain sense inevitable from the very beginning, since it is the result of the instability of her position in an irrevocably splintered society.15

Through repeated allusions to Indian mythology Ghatak images Nita. In this construction he regresses beyond finite history to invoke the Great Mother Archetype, the collective unconscious, myth and mythology of epic tradition. So, we find Nita’s birthday coincides with Jagatdhatri Puja. When she is down with tuberculosis, the Vijaya Song ‘Aye go Uma Kole loi’ (‘Come Uma, Come in my lap’. tr. mine), full of pathos, is used in the refrain. Finally, Nita as a final act of salvation embraces Mahakaal – the mountain symbolising it. In turn it symbolises Shiva too. Nita is being compared with Uma – the mother Goddess who finally unites with Shiva – the phallic symbol of mountains signifying it.

Now, what is the existential construction of Nita? Nita, a working girl belonging to a middle-class refugee family, occupies the centre-stage in the film narrative. Her gradual transition from the all important position

15 Sen, Meheli ‘Three Women Lost to Time: A Brief Note on Ghatak’s Heroines’ in Journal of the Moving Image, (Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Autumn, 1999).
16 A Mother Goddess, another form of Uma. She bears the world.
17 A The departing song that marks the mother Goddess’ return to her natal home.
as the family’s sole bread-winner to that of a mere outcast shunned by those whom she once thought to be her own near and dear ones sums up the pathetic trend of the human drama that the film unfolds. Backdropping the object helplessness of an uprooted family, Nita is as the provider which resonates with the mythical image of the Mother Goddess.

As the archetype takes over the character – Nita getting increasingly trapped into her role as provider – there is a receding of Nita’s individuality. Her happiness comes only through the satisfying of other people’s desires. Her satisfaction ensures the survival of the family which turns out to be her reason for turning down her suitor’s offer for marriage. Nita struggles through the reversals and setbacks of the family, so that each might achieve what they desire. When eventually her need is no longer felt by the family, she is sacrificed. What makes Nita’s characterisation more dense is that she is the provider and sacrificing at the same time. Her only solace comes from the hapless father. Eccentric at times, he represents the conscience. When he realises his daughter’s terminal disease he exclaims:

‘You leave this place, leave. These people now dream of a two-storied house, You are successful. You have settled these people’.

He continues subsequently (in the background):

‘You are not required anymore. They pity you now... Now, you are a burden. Your breath is now poisonous’.

What adds strength to Nita’s resilience is her suitor’s irresponsibility and compromise. Sanat takes a petty job and marries Gita, the younger sister of Nita who has always been flippant, flirtatious. Gita represents the ‘other’ of Nita demonstrating what we would have called in present day context ‘white collar delinquency’ of a consumerist capitalist ambience; she persuades Sanat:
‘Don’t be foolish, take up the job, leave the mess, acquire a flat and marry a good woman’.

_Nita_ trudging against this selfish consumerist world-view comes out as the epitome of the feminine power as life-giving.

_Nita_ has always placed faith and hope in her suitor _Sanat_ and compared him with _Shankar_, her elder brother - ambitions, a bit bohemian and an aspirant classical signer. _Sanat_ disappoints her but _Shankar_ acquiring success in Bombay fulfils his duty to _Nita_. To both _Nita_ has earlier expressed sarcastically her fetishtistic desire – to turn her into a mannequin and confine her in a glass-shelf. This way Ghatak mocks at the prevalent attempt of our society to fetishise women. _Nita’s_ strong character is built around this accusation. At times through harsh reminder of our moral cripple: When after realising his daughter’s predicament with tragedy the father looks straight into the camera, raises his finger and rages: ‘I accuse’. On the other, this sacrifice and struggle is empathised. In a tone of self-condemnation the local grocer _Banshi_ laments (after _Nita_’s brother’s return from the sanatorium leaving her back in terminal stage):

‘Nobody now remembers that such a person was here. ... the silent girl... does this tragedy behove her? Tell me brother, tell me?’

_Nita_ is sacrificed, but where does this tragedy leave Ghatak? In his construction of woman’s image the ever-optimist Ghatak cannot allow debasement of the feminine power. _Nita’s_ last cry, ‘I wanted to live’ echoes and comes back from the mountains standing as phallic-sentries in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. As _Nita’s_ tragedy becomes universal we see the archetype going beyond _Nita_, as the individual in her desperate longing for life. Life-affirmation is linked with life-perpetuation. _Nita_ has been sacrificed so that others might live.
Continuities and Discontinuities with the Images of the 1950s

If Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata* images female subjectivity around a representative of the upper stratum of the Bengali society, Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* provides us with a woman’s images problematising the middle and lower-middle class of the society. In both the cases we encounter strong female protagonists debunking conventional images of the ‘ideal’ woman. In their different ways they question the stereotyped familial relationships to emerge as ‘rebels’.

This emergence of female protagonists gains significance when compared to popular construction of woman in the film of 1950s. Two representative films of the mood of 1950s which we would refer to this section are *Agnipariksha* (The trial by Fire, 1954) and *Harano Sur* (The Lost Melody, 1957).

The Thematic Built-up of the Films

The title of the film *Agnipariksha* brings to mind the event in the Indian epic *Ramayana* which glorifies the testing of Sita’s chastity through an ordeal by Fire. The message permeated through this event essentially legitimise a male-dictated moral order. Interestingly, the same title has been reclaimed for a film whose narrative revolves around three main female characters.

We have the heroine Taposhi, her mother *Chitralekha* and her paternal grandmother. Quite apparently the film has a female-centred narrative where the chief female protagonist Taposhi reconciles with the ideology of allegiance to a childhood marriage. The film premises Taposhi’s mother as one who seeks the ideal of femininity in terms of modernity’ of the enlightened, educated Bengali Hind middle class ethos.
Whereas, Taposhi’s grandmother stands as to forebearer of a ‘traditional’ Hindu ideal of femininity.

Taposhi in her teens, in a summer vacation accompanies her paternal grandmother along with her two brothers to the ancestral home of her paternal grandfather’s (deceased) village. This was in defiance of her mother’s, plan to spend the vacation in a hill resort, much as a modern way of life. In her home village, the grandmother obliges to her late husband’s friend’s last wish to get teenaged Taposhi married to his only surviving ward, his grandson Bhulu. Out of the desire of a dying man basically a wedding virtual takes place without it being consummated. Bhulu represents the village/traditional and not urbane/modern.

Such a ‘marriage’ is being resented by Taposhi’s parents as they return home. This is despite Bhulu’s good family background and good education in the city. The grandmother in turn makes an exit from the extended family to spend the rest of her life in Benaras. Importantly she bequeaths all her property to Taposhi and significantly implores Taposhi to uphold the ethos of tradition as she retires for religious contemplation. That is, Taposhi is reminded of the sanctity of the marriage which can never be reversed. Taposhi’s mother rubs off and violates all the wedding marks on her body to nullify the grandmother’s desires as well as the ‘unacceptable’ marriage. Quite obviously Taposhi grows up with an ambivalence of identity. Erased of her marital status she is being taken away to Kolkata and brought up in line with her parents’ notion of modernity/urbanity.

Subsequently we find Taposhi as a grown up young woman vacationing at a hill resort with her brothers and mother. In the foggy mountain, quite symbolically, she is being addressed by a male figure, not so clear. This man now becomes Taposhi’s focus of romanticism. This man is Kiriti Mukherjee – educated, rich and handsome. He is a foreign returned
most eligible ‘bachelor’ yet quite indifferent to feminine attraction. Back to the city the relationship grows until the courtship receives a jolt with Taposhi remembering her predicament of childhood marriage. As she confesses in utter distress and ambivalence:

“I have no right to love anyone. Not even when I do love...”

Such ambivalence and dilemma draw Taposhi closer to modern urbanity as she dreams of Kiriti assuring her to debunk samskaras, i.e. traditional customs. Still melodramatically the dilemma is allowed to reach its peak as she runs away from the engagement party (arranged by her elated mother). She engages into a soliloquy with an inner voice (apparently her grandmother’s). Authoritatively she advises:

“... your love for Kiriti is only an attraction, whereas you love for Bhulu is your ideal”.

Taposhi runs away to Benaras to seek her grandmother who in turn tells her to go back to her ideal. She goes back to the ancestral village of her childhood marriage. visibly she is robbed of her urbane modern get-up. Her femininity is domesticated as she gets embroiled in performing domestic rituals. Once in the ancestral village, she is overwhelmed by spotting the wedding place. The memories are flooded with emotions and she discovers herself in the arms of a man – none other than Kiriti Mukherjee. To build up the drama, the camera focuses on the back of Kiriti, visually capturing only the traditional attire he is putting on Taposhi is bewildered to find Kiriti as none other than her childhood married husband Bhulu. The resolution sets in with Taposhi’s mother arriving on the scene to realise that her initial attempts to celebrate modernity was a misplaced one. And the ideological agenda of the film gets pronounced as Taposhi’s younger brother acts as a meta-commentator to address the audience that our hearts and minds are couched in our tradition so much so
that social change cannot be imposed from outside onto us. Change has to come from within.

If in *Agnipariksha* the battle between tradition and modernity is narrativised by invoking the female protagonist as the site for a resolution of the two contending world-views; in *Harano Sur* modernity is achieved "in a fantasy space outside society, a fantasy underlined by our inability to apprehend if through a method not normally productive for understanding Indian popular films." It is all about establishing the importance of conjugality as a marker of modernity. The film depicts a particular set of desires that developed in the 1950s: the mobilisation of an image and a space of the couple that made it the idealised emotional unit for a new society. The substantive theme of *Hasrano Sur* runs as follows: the amnesiac Alok (played by Uttam Kumar) is being treated in an asylum by lady doctor Roma (played by Suchitra Sen). In a humanising effort Roma helps Alok out of the asylum and accompanies him to her father's country house. They develop an attraction towards each other and get married.

The marriage receives a jolt as Alok suffers a new bent of amnesia due to an accident. As a result Alok derecognises Roma, his wife and regains lost memory of his earlier life – a rich flamboyant businessman in Kolkata. He goes back to his city, Roma follows him there but she is not remembered by her husband. This causes, quite obviously, considerable anguish in Roma yet she is not defeated. Indomitable, she keeps trying to help her husband recollect his memory. To stimulate the hero's memory she even uses the refrain of their wedding song, but is unable to reply when

---


19 Ibid.
Alok, haunted by her presence, asks “Who are you?” finally, Roma wins over her husband’s (now her boss) heart.

Construction of Women – A Comparative View

Apparently *Harano Sur* is a domestic melodrama of a subordinate woman (Roma) winning over her boss’s heart. It is not the usual patriarchal chores of subordinating a woman. In fact the film focuses and revolves around its female protagonist. Roma as a lady doctor represents the emergence of educated enlightened Bengali woman of the post-independent decade. The familial spheres is significantly excluded in order to develop Roma’s affirmative action in rescuing Alok from the asylum. In this sense quite symptomatic of the spirit of the post-independence period an emergence of female agency is indicated. However, in the final resolution the subordinate position is being reworked with the hero regaining his memory. That is, the patriarchal matrix is remoulded even though the female subjectivity is allowed to intervene in this remoulding.

In *Agnipariksha*, the subordination of woman is less signifying than representing the female protagonist *Taposhi* as the site of a contest between her mother and her grandmother over the ideal of femininity. In the contest between the grandmother’s notion of femininity in tune with ‘traditional’ Hindu custom and the mother’s ideal of ‘modernity’ of the emergent middle-class Hindu, *Taposhi* attains all the modern way of life, yet she finds solution to her dilemma taking recourse to the repertoire of tradition. In this sense, the film in its ideological agenda does not critique patriarchy as such. In fact female subjectivity is espoused within the greatest institution of patriarchy – family. Nevertheless, it does allow us to hear the female voice of the family. It vents out certain repressed female energies. Yet it cannot move beyond the parameters of patriarchy.
While probing the film of 1950s we can say that these film-narratives explored female characters anchored in speech-idioms and narrative conventions supported by tradition. Still we sense an arrival of at least a fragile sense of self in their thematic treatment. Comparatively, in the 1960s we find a definite critique of patriarchy in the representation of woman in the films we selected for our research purpose.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the female protagonist *Nita* is shown almost as a rebel. Her rebellion is not so pronounced but in her self-sacrifice and tolerance she exercises an immense sublime power to critique the existing familial ideology of patriarchy. *Nita* evokes the ideal of the Mother Archetype, thereby the traditional repertoire is explored to seek an alternative to prevalent view of ‘oppressive’ tradition. True, she is sacrificed in the film but that such a character would continue to stir the middle-class patriarchal biases is indicated pointedly as the film ends. The character graduates from particular to general as we are shown at the end, another frail working young woman traversing the pebbled road. Her slipper also snaps, and she picks it up. Life continues and the rebellion is justified.

The other film under our scope, *Charulata* by its very title emphasise the female view of the family institution. In fact, as we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Ray not only artistically explored the possibilities of Tagore’s short-story, he also exercised the sublime power of naming the film as *Charulata* – the female protagonist. Thereby, we are focussed into the interiority of the female subject. As a great leap, hitherto not explored so poignantly, Ray problematizes an educated housewife’s aspiration and agency beyond her husband. Quite boldly *Charu* has been represented as a desirous and sensuous woman who could venture into a world beyond the familial domestic space.
Talking to the Audience

The concept of 'negotiation' reworks the relations between media products, ideologies and audience. It bridges the gap between textual and social subject. The term 'negotiation' means the holding together of opposite views in an ongoing process of give-and-take. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience. 20

In our exercise in studying the audience vis-à-vis the portrayals of women in cinema, we acknowledge that the viewing situation affects the meanings and pleasures of a work. This is accomplished by introducing into the cultural exchange a range of determinations, potentially resistant or contradictory, arising from the differential social and cultural constitution of viewers. Viewing is a social process, which differs between individuals, groups and time periods. Such viewing shapes the meanings which audiences derive from cultural products. This way, we move beyond textual analysis to the field of anthropological and ethnographic work with the 'real' audiences.

As we have discussed in the introductory chapter the audience covered is predominantly composed of avid cine-viewers. The social-cultural profile of the respondents inform us that, given the subject-matter, almost all of them very enthusiastically responded to the chance of expressing their opinions and understandings with respect to the portrayals of women in Bengali cinema. The following data gives us a quantitative sense of the major issues addressed to in the cinematic representation of woman in the films immediately after independence and for a decade or so.

---

Table 4: Issues in Women’s Portrayals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major issues pertaining to women’s portrayals</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conjugality</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domesticity</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Participation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Participation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Reform</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents: 80

Overwhelmingly it is being suggested that in the social-cultural milieu of modernity the domestic sphere has been the focus of attention in the films we have discussed.

Among the respondents, almost 83 p.c. (42+24=66 out of 80 respondents) regardless of education, sex and social background priority is accorded to the familial sphere of women’s life. In an attempt to explore women’s subjectivity, her familial role has been reworked. The basic problem of casting women as embodying and sustaining tradition has been relocated. The dominant opinion is that the central concern for socially sensitive and reformist attempt at depicting women’s lives has to probe the domesticated role of women in the emergent era of modernisation. While the emergence of the ‘new woman’ is indicated, the patriarchal order is not really dismantled. Rather, through certain recuperative devices the male-order has been re-fashioned. Nevertheless, such reworking is also a stepforward towards a new gender relation.

Even though not suggested by our interview schedule a majority of the audience (52 out of 80) talks of the term ‘Nari Swadhinata’ (in the vernacular), meaning Women’s Liberation. while discussing the woman’s image in films. The use of the term is particularly significant in the present day context of investigating gender relations. That, the women’s question is to be contextualised beyond the scope of cinematic images in the socio-
historical structures. This helps us to locate the key moments at which influential images are invoked.

The early 1950s was often celebrated as a period when women triumphed since middle-class women entered administrative, professional and political spheres as equal of men. The weakening and falling apart of the women’s movement by the mid-1950 has been interpreted in socio-political terms as one caused by middle-class women’s co-option into ‘new’ hierarchical power structures of expanding class norms. It is pertinent to quote Kasturi and Mazumdar to assess how far the visible ‘changes’ in the real life of amounted to an overhauling of the gendered power relations in the society in general.

“... conceding some share of the material benefits to women in the middle-class, thus blunting their desire for a change in power relations, patriarchy acquired new forms of ideological and institutional control”.

Such a historical analysis finds resonance in the audience research. While commenting on the two films of 1950s, one respondent put it candidly:

“In Harano Sur a different cinematic imaging of identity is created, possibly as an obligation to modernity. Creating a new form of romance demands a female protagonist who is articulate and autonomous. However she has to subject to a new form of authority. Roma definitely indicates the coming of an educated, self-controlled woman in Bengali society. But, the male supremacy is not challenged”.

So, inspite of invoking the idea of an ‘emancipated’ woman, creating the image of an educated modern woman exercising her volition, Harano Sur remains a melodramatic tale of virtue disempowered,

21 Mazumdar, Vina, ‘Editor’s Note’ in Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India (Bombay, Allied Publisher, 1979).

victimised and finally ascendant. 23 A large percentage of 90 (72 out of 80 respondents) firmly opine that films like Harano Sur or Agnipariksha opened up a possibility, showed the discontent with the existing familial roles of women. In fact, Agnipariksha as the signature film for the romantic genre builds a popular image of a desirable woman. As analysed by Dulali Nag, such image building questions and subverts the elite nationalist construction of a woman as embodying the tradition and representing cultural authenticity. At the same time the female protagonist – acting as subject does not really dismantle the patriarchal order. The 'transgressive libidinal energy of the heroine... is ploughed back into the structuring order of the Bengali middle class family, thus maintaining the patriarchal boundaries”. 24

As expressed by a majority of the respondents, women’s participation in the public sphere is not the focus of the films of 1950s, instead it is being assumed from the very beginning that her social location is best explored in the domestic sphere only. In this domestic location the basic conformity is achieved finally by highlighting the sacrosanct character of the ritual of Hindu marriage. Here women often serve the figure through which the contests between 'tradition' and 'modernity' are resolved. In fact here are attempts to adjust the Bengali tradition with modernity. It is interesting to note that in a review of the film Agnipariksha, the modernist journal, the most influential and widely read among the literati in Bengal, 'Desh' observed that:

... It is a film which shows the contradiction between custom and independent instinct. The principal contradiction is of breaking out of the shackles of social custom to tread an independent path. But 'modernity' in the film is a twisted one, in order to denigrate it. In the name of modernisation the aping of the British/colonial life-styles is

23 Gledhill, C. (ed.), Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the 'Woman's Film' (London, British Film Institute, 1987).

24 Nag D. op.cit, p.779.
shown in the film — which is not to be endorsed. Such representation of modernity is fictitious.\(^\text{25}\)

An important point that we derive from such review is that, the modernising agents of Bengali society (in this case, the journal concerned) do not endorse the ultimate overshadowing of ‘modernity’ by ‘tradition’. The argument is simple: in order to mock ‘modernity’ one need not twist it. Thereby indicating that modernity holds out a promise for women to emerge out of the labyrinth of custom and tradition.

How does this question of modernity vis-a-vis women’s representations change in the 1960s? Appropriate to our subject-matter two films we have studied are *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Charulata*. On the question of changing women’s portrayals in 1960s from that of the preceding decade and the issues relevant to it, the following data is available from our audience study.\(^\text{26}\)

**Table 5: Issues Pertaining to Changes in Women’s Images**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergence of Educated Woman in the Public Sphere</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Role Being Overhauled</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the Domestic Sphere Conjugality is more focussed</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman as Self-Regulating Autonomous Character</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergence of Woman as a Singularised Subject</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetic Change/No Change at all</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

That a shift has taken place in 1960s is clearly borne out by the above table. In terms of their identifying the issues of change they differ.

\(^{25}\) *Desh* no.45, 11\(^{th}\) Sept’ 1954.

\(^{26}\) It may be noted that in order to gain a quantitative view, out of our interview schedule based study, the different opinions that we have collected are reconstructed to frame the opinion range in more concise intelligible categories.
From the table it is clear that a very high 47.5 p.c. of the audience gives conjugality as the dominant space where women's subjectivity is being problematised. The man-woman relationship attains significance in delineating the position of woman in society. This has been the major shift from the 1950s' attempt at invoking the spirit of 'modernity' within the confines of patriarchy. The high incidence of this particular opinion is probably due to the impact of the film Charulata among the audience in particular and in the Bengali society in general. As it is, it bears the creativity of too most prominent cultural figures of 20th century Bengal. It is a film by Ray, adapted from Tagore's short-story.

The impact of Charulata in the cultural map of Bengali society is captured through the following response of a female informant:

Although not for the first time, yet in a very emphatic way an extramarital love affair of a young upper-class housewife is being imaged in Charulata. In order to explore the interiority of a woman's life, Charulata does not show any torture being inflicted upon its heroine. Yet she is intellectually aspirant and shown as a sensuous desirous woman. Such a representation is a very rare thing in Bengali cinema hitherto. Fulfilment of one's desire beyond one's husband is a sort of 'transgression' in Bengali domestic life. What is important is that the woman continues to exist with unfulfilled desire. Such a dilemma is allowed to continue as the film ends with a freeze shot of two hands striving towards one another without meeting, making their inner separation permanent.

We observe a new dimension being added to the emergence of an intellectually desirous woman who could seek emotional/cultural satisfaction or fulfilment in her brother-in-law Amal's creative exuberance. Charulata has the right to love if she loses all emotional and physical urge towards her husband Bhupati. Ray essentially creates a havoc with the middle-class conservative view of looking at female subjectivity. In this sense, a significant change has been effected as far as women's representation is concerned. Such a change is being handled addressing only the normative system, without ever taking recourse to crude
physicality of the question. As reviewed by one of the most thoughtful film-critic, Chidananda Das Gupta:

“In Charulata, intensify of love is expressed without the lovers even holding hands; there is only one impulsive embrace camouflaged by apparent familial affection, but it contributes only a minor note in the tension created between the two.”

The question remains as to how does the society take this representation bordering on adultery? Ray’s characterisation and imaging has had a certain touch of nobility that such an apparently uncomfortable theme could stir the collective conscious of the middle-class or upper middle-class Bengali society. As noted by one respondent:

Such a theme, a case of attraction beyond one’s own spouse is quite inevitable when there is asymmetry between the two. Even, in the present day context, such attraction may not be purely as a result of emotional, intellectual or cultural affinity. It may simply be an expression of physicality, but luckily Ray does not venture into this. Instead he, like a poet, unlids this repressed energy of the society in a lyrical way.

Charulata as a film has had an enormous critical and box-office success internationally. As Das Gupta observed that:

“One was not surprised either by the Catholic award at Berlin for a film on a woman’s movement towards adultery or the sight of old women coming out of the theatre wiping their tears. The secret of their identification with an otherwise uncomfortable theme lay in the state of innocence of the characters caught in the web of forces greater than themselves...”

If Ray allows us to conceive of a woman who could transgress the familial domain, notwithstanding the fact that such transgression only stretch the patriarchal boundaries without finally reordering it, Ghatak problematises the same theme by resorting to a more contemporary story in

---

27 Das Gupta, Chidananda, op.cit., p.159.
28 Ibid., p.70.
Meghe Dhaka Tara.\textsuperscript{29} Meghe Dhaka Tara stands as the finest and most successful film of Ghatak. Its protagonist Nita continues to resonate the feelings of many middle-class working women in Bengal. As conceived of by many of our respondents, Nita represents a more real face of a young woman of the contemporary society. An useful pointer to this is what a female respondent, aged 30, hailing from a humble middle-class background feels:

In comparison to Charulita, Nita is not so distanced from us. It is difficult for our class to empathises with Charu’s unfulfilment. It is difficult also to identify with her predicament as she belongs to an upper-class aristocracy, that too the character build up is a dated one. Nita of Meghe Dhaka Tara represents a woman of our class and time. A young working woman supporting the family, sacrificing her own desires and in turn getting sacrificed by her own family. Such a representation unmasks the brutality of the male-ordered society.

Evidently, Meghe Dhaka Tara’s imagining of a woman is a big leap in Bengali social-cultural field. Table 5 show a sizeable section of the audience considers changes in the 1960s is related to emergence of educated women in the public sphere (32.5 p.c.). This figure is possibly reflective of the audience’s appreciation of Ghatak’s creation of Nita.

Nita is a victim of the parasitic tendencies of her own family. At a secondary level she is a much a victim of historical and political upheavals – the partition of Bengal is one of the larger forces within which the female subjectivity is located.

A meaningful negotiation of this image can be identified in a critical review of the film by a film-critic:

“... the pain of these women is as palpable today as it was to be audience who first saw the film in the sixties, who had participated in this history and for whom the partition and the subsequent trauma associated with it was still a fresh wound. Ghatak writes that it is this wound, This is his way of remembering not to forget. In doing so he has invested his heroines with something, a special quality that reaches out across a

\textsuperscript{29} Ray’s film is a period piece, set in the backdrop of ‘renaissance’ in Bengal of late 19th century. Rey felt free to adapt Tagore’s story to the twentieth century’s need and to his own understanding of male-female relations.
distance in time and history to touch even those lives which have almost nothing in common with theirs.\textsuperscript{30}

A dominant opinion on *Nita*, irrespective of social-cultural background, among the audience is captured as follows:

Nita is a character that is beyond time and history. This is Ghatak always sought the ideal beyond the ancient Indian culture to a primitive culture of Indianness. That is why he invokes the archetypes of the Mother Goddess in most of his films. He juxtaposes these archetypes to modern day image of a Bengali woman. So, such representation of woman remains unaffected by the passage of time.

There is another set of opinion which explains why *Nita* as a sacrificing yet asserting female-subjectivity in debunking the given familial order and gender-role touches even the imagination of those audience which hardly has an existential identification with such a role. The opinion goes like this (from the various responses of the audience we have reconstructed the essence of their statements – which converge):

Certain images circulate only within specific societies to generate meanings. *Nita’s* image is pertinent for the Bengali society for a specific socio-historical reason. More importantly, *Nita’s* very ordinariness at one level, might account for the immediacy with which she reaches out to us. All of us have somewhere or the other come across a person like her. Perhaps it is this sense of having known somebody like her, this familiarity that we as an audience identify with.

*Nita’s* dying cry as she asserts her will to live is echoed by the vast indifference of nature. At this dramatic point the audience feels her pain which strike them with an intensity that is almost physical, similar to the whiplash that has been used in the soundtrack earlier in the film (many times it has been used, whenever the female protagonist feels betrayed by her near or dear ones). *Nita* is definitely constrained by her time and circumstances but in her sacrifice there is no debasement of femininity. Instead, as the film goes an to show another young working girl, a long

\textsuperscript{30} Sen, Meheli, ‘Three Women Lost to Time’ in *Journal of the Moving Image*, No.1, (Calcutta. Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, 1999), p.104.
distance shot from behind, having an appearance similar to that of Nita. We realise that Nita’s predicament is not an individual/particular tragedy. A sense of history is evoked in the audience’s mind. A sense of inadequacy is brought in. Such incompleteness goes a long way in further exploration of female subject as an autonomous self.

**Woman in the Public Sphere – the Decade of 1970**

The emergence of independent, self-controlled and autonomous woman – the dominant feminist agenda, cannot be actualised in the abstract. Irrespective of the historical reality vis-a-vis the question of economic independence, such an image of woman can only be a figment of ambitions theorisation distanced from historicity. Any study probing the changes in women’s representation in any popular culture has to encounter the contradiction between women’s familial and civic role. Put simply, in our primary sources of data, i.e. the films that constitute the scope of our study, we need to search an answer to the question: ‘Where is woman at work?’ Also, we need to analyse ‘What happens when a woman emerges as a contemporary urban working girl/professional?’

Prior to the 1970s we have seen the gradual unfolding of women’s world within the confines of their familial boundaries. Creative imagining of woman in Bengali film tried to seek woman’s subjectivity within the parameters set by the project of modernity. A step forward for modernity is to place woman beyond the domestic sphere into the public sphere, where she is economically independent to set her own desires and seek justice assertively. 1970s is such a decade. It is a decade of activism – which includes radical political activism to growing feminist activism across the globe.
Globally speaking 1970s has been the decade when side by side with radical political activism feminist assertions/movements also flourished. Crucial questions were raised and theorised in the feminist circles/academics. In that period of protest, did Bengali cinema address the women’s question? To put it differently, how far and in what way did Bengali cinema responded to the prevalent feminist themes of the time?

If we check the anthology of Bengali film for the period 1970-1980, we find—

(i) a major shift in Ray’s work towards contemporary urban set up and its tension. In his Calcutta trilogy — set up and its tension. In his Calcutta trilogy. *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971) and *Jona Aranya* (The Middle Man, 1975), Ray ruthlessly abandons his earlier humanist position and exposes the urban decadence. Ray almost suggests how a new generation emerges who can abandon the values of the past. The contemporary as a problem, that’s what Bengali cinema received from Ray during this period.

(ii) although quite marginal in terms of popular viewership, using explicit political language Mrinal Sen enriched Bengali cinema with his Calcutta trilogy: *Interview, Calcutta ’71* and *Padatik*. These films no doubt served the cause of energetic leftist activists and their screenings are almost the meeting-point of activists. The turbulent time is captured consistently by Sen in a free-wheeling style. Overtly political, Sen exposes the internalisation of colonial residues that blight the society. Didactic in nature these films encourage the

---

audience to gain an insight into the dynamics of history and urges action for change.

If both Ray and Sen create films reflective of the turbulent time of 1970s, Ghatak cannot lag behind. Even though terminally ill, Ghatak engages head on with the radical policies of the period in his *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and Story, 1974).

It is to be underscored here that although all the three doyens of Bengali cinema responded to the tumultuous socio-political scene of their society, none of the above-mentioned films problematised the women’s question. We are drawn to conclude that, all the activism, revolts and political uprisings that characterised the period in Bengal were so masculine in their modalities that all the protagonists were male. Otherwise, we have to hypothesise that the feminist angle as usual gets subsumed under a ‘greater’ inclusive political movement.

(iii) enchanting films are also on the show. Ray himself based films on children’s fairy tales or soft-thrillers. Even satirical comments on socio-political formation are commented upon through such fairy-tales, same is the case with popular film-makers, e.g. Tapan Sinha’s *Banchcharamer Bagan* (The Garden of Banchcharam, 1980).

(iv) during the period, woman as protagonist hardly shows her face in Bengali cinema. The only exception is Mrinal Sen’s powerful *Ek Din Pratidin* (And Quiet Rolls the Day, 1979). As commented upon by Y. Thorawal, in its sobriety the film most efficiently brings out the travails of a working woman in an urban set up. In a society like India where 35 p.c. of household is either dependent or subsist on single female earner, a story of a young working girl supporting an entire family is most poignant in addressing the crucial women’s
question in our society.\textsuperscript{32} As Sen himself claims,\textsuperscript{33} moving away from the explicitly political language of his earlier 1970s film, with \textit{Ek Din Pratidin} he starts his probe into the ‘inner’ world of middle-class life. Perhaps the question of women’s position/experience in the social system rests into this ‘inner’ realm of our lives.

**The Significance of \textit{Ek Din Pratidin}**

According to the noted chronicler of Mrinal Sen, John Wood:

“Notwithstanding the totally inappropriate Sholokovian allusion, the film (\textit{Ek Din Pratidin}) is without doubt one of Mrinal Sen’s best and is notably important for its treatment of the position of women is modern Indian society”.\textsuperscript{34}

The film examines the effects on a family of the unexpected and unexplained absence of one of its members – the eldest daughter, a young working woman \textit{Chinu}.\textsuperscript{35} In the film the daughter appears only in brief flashbacks before her eventual return at the end of the film. It is almost a banal incidence which has been transfigured into an intense drama of suspense. In the process engaging an entire section of ardent Mrinal Sen audience, viz. the sensitive middle and lower-middle urban class into self-introspection.

Mrinal Sen probes simplest or mundane reality. He poses the most simple question: are we very honest in all our progressive talks about according man-woman equality? Do we really understand what we claim in our emancipatory progressive and/or radical postures? The question is a soul-searching one for the middle and lower-middle urban classes of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Thorawal, Yves: \textit{The Cinemas of India} (New Delhi. Macmillan, 2000).
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p.71.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} The film is based on a short-story, \textit{Ahirato Chenannukh} (The Timeless Known Face, tr. mine) by Amalendu Chakravarty.
\end{itemize}
Bengal (especially Kolkota) who often serve as the repertoire of revolutionary activities.

The absence of the grand, the magnificent, the epic or the profoundly complex in the Bengali cultural tradition is complemented somewhat in the human interest of Mrinal Sen. Forces above and beyond ordinary human simplicity are indeed relevant in his films, but it is particularly important at this point to understand just what it is that intrigues Sen about ordinary human simplicity. In his own words:

"I feel that the more we try to find a dramatic cohesion of incidents in life, the more we realise that life is built of non-events. Why shouldn't we make a film on that?"  

In a contemporaneous mood Sen captures the repressed energy and desire of the preceding decades – which allowed women to be ‘modern’ yet reconciled to a moulded male order. Sen makes a cinematic representation of one of the great anomalies of our society that a woman may be educated and self-sufficient, and in that sense ‘modern’. Still she is expected, by and large, to be subjected to traditional values.

The Thematic Content

In keeping with Mrinal Sen’s preoccupation with the ordinary in everyday life, *Ek Din Pratidin* opens in a characteristically mundane manner with shots of a rickshaw emerging from one end of a narrow lane, and the edifice of an old house festooned with saris hanging up to dry and intermittently clouded over by the smoke rising from many humble coal ovens.

The story is set among Kolkata’s petty bourgeoisie. A young woman, *Chinu* is the sole breadwinner supporting a family of seven headed

---

by a retired clerk Hrishikesh and his wife – a conventional housewife. One night Chinu does not return home from the office and, as the hours pass, the family grows increasingly distraught as each member, including the independent – seeming university student Minu (younger sister) begins to realise how dependent they are in Chinu’s labour.

The story graphically illustrates how profound insecurities underpin a precarious, egotistical moral code that refuses to acknowledge the real place of women in the social network. When Chinu returns by taxi in the next morning, nobody dares question her since this would invoke each family member having to betray the selfishness of their concern. With amazing resilience, the facade is restored.

Chinu’s absence gives rise to a number of questions. The basic one, of course, is the issue of her safety. The gossip of the neighbours about accidents and crimes of violence, the harshly candid language of the police and the bitter reality of the hospital and the morgue – all serve to justify the worry that she has met with some tragic mishap. Even a passing funeral procession – a common enough occurrence in Kolkota – takes on a chillingly ominous significance. Given the possibility of calamity, it follows that at least some of the members of the family will be worried in their own interest, for, after all, Chinu is their sole means of support. How would the family survive without her salary? But the question of overriding significance is the concern for her ‘respectability’.

The Construction of Woman

The focus of Ek Din Pratidin is the concern of the family when its eldest daughter Chinu fails to return home until close to daybreak. By exploiting her absence, Sen analyses her role and its significance to her
family. Beyond the particular, this theme suggests notions about the role and significance of working women in society generally.

Fundamental to the core of the narrative – the delayed return/non-return of Chinu from office, is all the speculations about where she might be and what she might be doing. The problem is a focussed one: that Chinu is a woman and the traditional believe that a woman cannot be independent without disastrous consequences is still strong in many Bengali middle-class homes. It is this believe that the film seeks to assess. Hence, to probe ‘why’ she returns late is to miss the point, and Sen quite deliberately gives no explanation. The unstated affirmation is that Chinu is a mature independent able woman and it is, simply, her own business.

Here we find a major discontent of Indian modernisation is being indicated. In modern India, women might compete on equal terms with men for jobs, but the notion of male proprietary rights over them still holds strong. Thematically the film offers a close examination of gender roles in order to show the injustice and the lack of logic in the denial of personal independence to women.

The film also depicts the ‘incompleteness’ of the ‘superior’ sex in order to underscore the women’s question. A significant flashback highlights the inept male that Chinu’s younger sister Minu sees in her brother, a slightly younger Tapu. Tapu has been spoiled all his life by mother and sisters in the same way in which we see Paltu (another brother) being mollycoddled throughout the film narrative.

The fact is that in the domestic arena the males are quite comfortable at being dominated by the females of the house, and their ineptness is very much a product of female spoiling. When such attitude to
another extend to life beyond the home they are manifestly anachronistic and inappropriate.

The anachronism is evident in the fact that the same theme could not have been crafted about a young man coming home late. Whereas it is simply accepted that the brother’s can come and go as and when they like, but when Chinu plays truant the family and its neighbours are thrown into crisis. And yet it is Chinu who cheerfully takes on her shoulder the financial responsibility for the family, providing her retired father some security in his old age. More significantly, her work enables Minu to stop earning money from tutorials and concentrate on her own studies so that she, too, may become financially independent. Yet she has already been restricted in her personal life. She was denied of her earlier boyfriend, probably a naxalite, due to her parents’ middle-class prejudices. In their own self-interest they deemed him unworthy. Chinu’s feelings were not paramount in the controversy.

The domesticated notion of womanhood is not only a male point of view, it is widely complemented by women as well. That is, the ideology is not a biological issue but a product of gendered socialisation. In the film we see, Girin and his wife (Chinu’s neighbours) are discussing Chinu while their granddaughter, Lily, is (significantly) doing her home tasks –

Girin’s wife: You know, I too feel (a miss). Girls going to offices and courts – you can’t even trust them.

Girin : If girls don’t behave like girls, this is what happens.

Lily : And what happens when girls have to work like men?

Girin : Shut up!

And a little later,
This girl is going to give you a lot of trouble – mark my words! There is the idea that nature has been ruptured by women taking on roles traditionally ascribed to men, the consequences of which might be too horrible to contemplate.\(^37\)

The mood of pessimism due to Chinu’s absence is enhanced in the film narrative by the flashing of headlines on the screen after the scene in the hospital mortuary:

**Woman’s Dead Body Found Floating in the Lake**

**Mutiliated Body of Woman in a Trunk at Hourah Station**

**Pathetic Confession of a Call Girl in Court**

**A Survey of the Trade in Women’s Flesh.\(^38\)**

The last two headlines suggest that which is to be feared most – not death or physical injury, but scandalous less of respectability. The discomfiture is much more in the violence to a woman’s respectability, which is the perceived disgrace to the family. Chinu’s death would at least be respectable whereas her elopement with an unknown would mean shame and humiliation never to be lived down.

The doubts and dualities that mark the middle-class perception and practice of modernity go a long way to characterise a working woman of the 1970s. Even when everything is questioned (the spirit of the decade), certain questions with respect to acknowledging a woman’s independence and agency are limited by a patriarchal matrix. Nevertheless, the very

\(^{37}\) Datta, Nandini (tr.), ‘And Quiet Rolls the Dawn’ in *Cinewave*, no.1, Jan 1981, p.18. It is an English version of the script of the film.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p.38.
representation of Chinu marks a bold re-figuration of the woman’s image on the Bengali screen. The society might not be ready enough to accept it, but the woman has arrived on the public sphere – bringing with her the tension that a tradition bound society encounters while facing the demands of modernity. This portrayal of woman as an educated working one shouldering the responsibilities of a family is a big leap towards women’s assertion into the sphere which is hitherto being ordered and dominated by men. The independent assertion might not have flavoured to the full in *Ek Din Pratidin* but its unfolding is hinted at quite successfully. In an introspective mood the problems associated with women’s subjectivity caught in a social network are also ruthlessly exposed by Sen.

It will not be an overstatement to say that in aesthetics and intellectual craftsmanship Satyajit Ray was quite ahead of his time. In the early 1960s only Ray could foresee the economic role of woman as being crucial for her emergence as an autonomous individual. He could engage himself with a forthcoming reality in his vision for an emancipated woman. Beyond the question on gender relation, the issue is more entangled with the specific socio-economy of an inchoate urban class. The urban class, middle and lower-middle, which has a heterogenetic formation is bound to define and redefine its response towards the inevitable historical role of woman as an economic personality. Such an identity of a woman – as participating in non-domestic economic activities is invoked by Ray quite early in the 1960s in a mood of engaging with contemporary urban set up.³⁹

Woman not as a shadow of man, but as an individual has its, possibly maiden representation through Ray’s authentic probe at contemporary city-life. He adapted the short story *Abataranika* by realist

³⁹ Das Gupta, Chidananda, op.cit.
writer Narendranath Mitra to make *Mahanagar*\(^{40}\) (The Big City) as early as 1963. For the first time we come across a woman who is awakened to the possibility of determining the course of her own life.

Middle-class clerk *Subrata* persuades his wife *Aarati* to take a job as a saleswoman. The large joint-family, including his sister is horrified at the thought of a working woman in their midst. To a hesitant wife Subrata convinces the necessity of her gainful employment in order to tide over certain financial difficulties. *Aarati* rises to the challenge and the job of a salesperson opens up a new world which an Anglo-Indian colleague and friend *Edith* and her employer Mr. Mukherjee. She makes a success of her job.

Earning money changes *Aarati’s* status in the family. She acquires a sense of pride with her self-earned money. She shows her money first to herself in the bathroom mirror, then to her husband she offers some with a conspicuous lack of grace. Her father-in-law does not approve of her working them, although he accepts money from *Aarati* for new spectacles. *Aarati’s* own sense of independence gives her the strength to resign when her Anglo-Indian friend is unjustly sacked by her boss with a show of contemptuous disapproval of the supposed immorality of all girls of the Anglo-Indian community. In the simplicity of her indignation at the slander, *Aarati* produces the resignation letter her husband had drafted when he found her growing so independent. Such an act throws the family into crisis as the husband loses job in the mean time and tries to reach his wife to prevent her from resigning.

---

\(^{40}\) The subject them of *Mahanagar* is much more emancipatory as well as contemporary when compared to the dominant theme of film making in the period. We consider the film as a secondary source data instead of a primary one, in order to gain a comparative perspective at women’s representation. Since themewise it has an affinity with *Ek Din Pratidin* – ‘what happens when a woman becomes a working woman’?
Here we encounter a traditional middle-class housewife finding a new worth in herself. On the threshold of a leap from the domesticated passive life Ray crafts a new woman in *Mahanagar* torn between self-abnegation and self-respect. She is a hesitant emergent from behind the curtains of tradition. Although typically enough, the awakening touch comes from the husband, for men have traditionally liberated, just as they have enslaved women. Ironically, they retract when they see the consequences of their action. So it is logical that, Aarati’s husband prods her for employment to tide over financial strains (so concurrent for urban middle-class life) and at the same time when Aarati behaves her sense of independence and success, he drafts her resignation letter. The fragile male-ego deflates as the husband prevents Aarati from resigning (when she actually does for a different reason) as he loses his own job.

The film is significant because its foreground action of Aarati’s finding, doing and giving up her job is embedded in the family’s life and its complex web of relationship, attitudinal and generational differences. The father-in-law’s value of expecting feudal loyalty from his ex-students; his opposition to Aarati’s taking up a job but borrowing money from his ex-students – all contrast sharply with Aarati’s adventures in her life outside the family fold in her job. Whereas the husband suffers from a dilemma: to cling on to the patriarchal/traditional value-system which abhors women to seek a life/role outside the four walls of the domestic life; or to react positively to the demands of the modern day city life, where the sheer economy of existence compels women to join the workforce outside the domestic sphere.

The novelty of the female protagonist’s representation in *Mahanagar* is that she traverses from an initial shaky feelings at the idea of working in an office outside home to a confident success in earning
independently. She exhibits her sureness of feelings and can gather courage to even resign in protest against victimisation of a colleague/friend. That such an image would entail a continuous struggle is implied through the last shot in the film. It resonates with an almost socialist-realist idiom to show the couple striding with determination into the teeming proletariat on the street. The primary question and doubts that emerge as soon as a woman joins an urban workforce are addressed to in Mahanagar. Whether it is prudent for the housewife to work outside? Is it respectable? Such abstract sense of respectability does not stop woman from joining the public-sphere. It is the pure logic of the economy of modern times that would naturalise the coming of women in the public sphere. But the discontent of the male-order is many layered. In the 1970's film we find the question of 'respectability' takes on a different context. It is Chinu's non-return from office in time. Probably, Chinu is invoked to introspect more deeply the middle-class normative system. In the earlier film Mahanagar, more than the travails of Aarti, her assertion and affirmative action are given eloquence. At that time (early 1960s) the feminist agenda of the question of gender-relations are not so overbearing. Instead the promise and possibility of a rational modern era are more relevant. At the fag end of 1970s, the optimism and promise of modernity are no longer so appealing, instead the dilemma and discontent of modernity are catching up the intellectual map. So, the initial shakiness is overcome. Chinu's employment is accepted familiarly. The dependence on Chinu's earnings is also not hurting the male-ego, rather a more subtle and complex issue of Chinu's non/delayed-return from office is problematised to explore female subjectivity in a decade of 'protest'.
The Anxiety of Modernity – The Audience View

A lot of possibilities are opened up in the decade of 1970s. This is so because a linear unfolding of progress as assured by modernity has not been actualised. So, self-reflections are at premium. The response of the Bengali screen towards the emergent feminist issues and struggles is hardly pronounced. Instead, the masculine world of revolutionary political activism or the urban-crisis involving primarily male as an ego become the staple of creative film-making. The sensitive issue of recovering the female view is rare, that is why the theme of *Ek Din Pratidin* engages the audience in self-probing. Along with the characters of the film, the middle-class audience also chances upon a re-look into their own self. This is so, because the film narrative offers only a non-verbal solution to the problem of women’s emergence as an independent individual.

It has been intellectually refreshing to engage our respondents to the themes of 1970s, more specifically to Mrinal Sen’s cinema. The response is multi-faceted, probably because the film-maker himself is interested in provoking controversy. Such controversy, if backed up by emotional and intellectual involvement, would result in self-reflection so essential to critique the face modernity which the middle-class quite conveniently laps up, yet retaining the ideologies of male-centredness in private-life. Therefore, the responses we gather are bend to interpretative. As Sen himself claims: “I have always been chased by my own time... I need to convey to others, I want to share my opinion or provoke a controversy.”

Most eloquent negotiation on the part of the audience comes from those ardent members of cine-clubs that we have covered in our study. An

---

insightful reaction is given by a senior member of a cine-club; social background wise this respondent typically exemplifies a family-bound middle-class progressive. As he says:

Out of a microscopic examination of a family crisis, certain socially significant questions are allowed by Mrinal Sen to occupy our attention. For us, it is a refreshing change from Sen's earlier prescriptive and at times abstract political films. This one is a more immediate reality for us. We are left with a doubt— are we really sensitive to women's lives. I would have also reacted the same way like the members of Chinu's family had my daughter or sister failed to return home after office-hours.

As against such self-probing mood of the audience, another strand of opinion understands the 'silence' on the part of the filmmaker with respect to any final resolution of the central problems, as an evasive one. For them a film has to transcend the limits of reality. When the entire socio-cultural practice is trying to rescue woman from the traditional bondage, it does not suffice to represent only the despair or the incompleteness, in our imagination of a modern woman. An incisive opinion we note interestingly from a feminist activist. In fact, most of our female respondents, irrespective of age and employment status tend to converge on the same line of thinking.

The opinion as we reconstruct for easy comprehension goes like this:

_Ek Din Pratidin_ only succeeds in highlighting the helplessness and hypocrisy of the middle and lower-middle class of our 'enlightened' urban populace. As a cultural exercise Sen could have shown the struggle which would transcend a dream into reality. Instead, even after boldly imagining the travails of a young workingwoman, he almost suggests the incapacity to transcend the reality. Dissecting the middle-class of its lack does help in self-reflection; but beyond that a modern woman successful in public-life does not really get represented.
Now, it is true that the film does not end with resistance and protest, as cherished by agit-prop filmmakers. Social activists would also prefer such a linear view of progress. A simple resolution of the hurdles faced by a working woman may suit the programme/agenda of any agitational group, but it does not really rip apart the many layered operation of patriarchal ideology. As reviewed by Siladitya Sen, a film-critic, the film is a successful representation of the introspective mood of its time. The anxiety of the family on Chinu's non-return is emblematic of the restlessness and anxiety that marks our march to the rational modern world. The film ends in a 'silence'. A kind of status-quo becomes apparent. But when we check the ending in depth, we see that the characters of the film are provoked by none other Chinu to have a re-look into their own perceptions. Going back to the film: in the early hours, with the return of Chinu nothing really is resolved. She is greeted with a silence. Throughout the worrying vigil was Chinu's safety the family's concern? Chinu herself puts across the words of transcendence when she addresses her sister:

Minu, didn’t you want me to come back? Didn’t you once think what could have happened to me? I too may have something to say! You didn’t ask me anything, you didn’t want to know a thing. You didn’t even give me a chance to say anything. Mother could at least have scolded me. Father too just kept looking at me strangely. All of you had so much distrust in me? If I had had an accident today, perhaps you’d all have had nothing to say. I’ve become so distant to you in these few hours?

True, there is silence from the family members. But such 'silence' stands as an irony to the 'standstill' inert social world outside. Things

---

change. The worrying vigil and silence subsequently need not be the last word. As understood by Mrinal Sen’s critic, for the urban middle lower-middle literate class- who incidentally compose most of his subject in filmmaking:

... while no questions have been asked of Chinu, the members of the family might well come to ask certain questions of themselves – but that is beyond the scope of the film. Sen has raised his questions in the hope that a thoughtful audience might try in someway to grapple with them and go on to ask their own. For Chinu and her family life must go an amidst dream and reality.44

At the crossroad of two different decades, Ek Din Pratidin’s representation of Chinu, stands as a sign-post of the changing time. The city-life and its complexities have shaped Sen’s intellectual frame of mind.45 Quite realistically he crafts the face of an urban working girl. The ambiguities of the society is also captured in the process.

44 Wood, John, op.cit., p.82.
45 Katyal, Arjum and Bandyopadhyay: Ten Days in Calcutta: A Portraits of Mrinal Sen (Calcutta, Seagull, 1987). It is a reconstructed film-script of the documentary made by Reinhard Hauff on Mrinal Sen.