Chapter Two

The Father Figures: Paternalism, Nation and the Emerging Model of the Group Theatres in the Fifties

Introduction

This chapter will look at how the emergent group theatre in Bengal in the 1950s gradually shapes itself into a form that models itself on the ‘ideal family’ that represents the modern Indian nation. In order to do this, we will look primarily at the history of the formation and self-fashioning of Bahurupi, one of the leading Indian theatre groups of the 50s. Bahurupi establishes, in the 1950s and early 1960s, a guiding structure for the group theatre in Bengal that determines its ways of functioning for several decades to come. It is this foundational act of self-conscious articulation that determines the imperatives that govern the Bengali group theatre’s future ‘mission’, the performative force of which theatre in Bengal still finds difficult to elude or resist.

This mission was, in simple terms, to build a new ‘national’ (jatiyo) theatre that attempted to emerge as the voice of the newly-formed liberal Indian nation-state. This attempt was called, after Sambhu Mitra, the Nabanaatya Andolan (the new theatre movement). It is through Nabanaatya in the first decade of independence, that Bengali theatre begins to look for its rightful place in the task of nation-building. The erstwhile struggle against colonial economic oppression undertaken by the Gananatya movement is left behind for a new national theatre that announces its own coming in no uncertain terms. From the artistic vanguard of the 1940s, Bengali theatre shifts place little by little towards the cultural, spiritual and moral guardianship of the new nation. From a theatre (purportedly) of the dispossessed, it begins to become, slowly but surely - a theatre of entitlement. It begins to see itself as entitled to a coherent national identity, the terms of which it sees as incumbent upon itself to define, and articulate. This schema fits in well with the dominant atmosphere of euphoria of the first
decade and *Nabanatya* flourishes with its performative utterances for a while. Open-armed acceptance from the central government and nation-wide popularity follows for *Bahurupi* in this period. Yet, Sambhu Mitra consistently refuses offers to work elsewhere in the country (except for a few very small sojourns to Bombay to work on films with, for example, Raj Kapur). Salil and Arundhati Bandyopadhyay write in this context: “Even later, he [Sambhu Mitra] was invited to assume responsibility for the National School of Drama, after Sri Satu Sen came away. He was requested to continue his theatre work in Delhi. But he politely refused saying “Bengal is where I must work”.”

*Nabanatya*, then, under the leadership of Mitra, refuses to give up its sense of cultural location – but seeks to speak, through Bengal, of and for the ‘nation’. It attempts to form and continue networks of communication with artistes in other states of India. *Bahurupi* works towards finding a regional cultural voice that seeks nonetheless to be deeply ‘national’ and integrationist. It moves deftly, for a decade or more, between a rhetoric of self-sacrifice (as a group of ascetic artistes on a national and admittedly ‘noble’ mission) and the sense of moral/spiritual entitlement, until its ideology begins to collapse upon itself from the pressures of the incommensurable surplus that it has generated within itself.

A primary analysis of the basic terms which form this enunciation of ‘*jatiyo* theatre’ would reveal its problematic position vis-à-vis its own ‘mission’. Even on a very light perusal, the contradictory pulls that were apt to become difficult to reconcile in later years become evident. It is one of my primary arguments that the attempt to form *a theatre of the modern Indian nation-state* (the moral and governmental obligations of which *Nabanatya* finds its duty to reflect, in order to participate in the inescapable task of ‘nation-building’) become increasingly incommensurable with the cherished memories of the ‘revolutionary’ theatre of the 1940s (the putatively radical, unforgettable moment of *Nabanno*, for example), distinct traces of which *Nabanatya* continues to carry in the first decade of independence. While unable to let go of the memory of this ‘revolutionary’ moment, *Nabanatya* simultaneously claims its place in the process national consolidation – a process that was to prove to be more and more exclusionary in later years, not the least so in the case of women. ‘National’ carries an added inflection in the use of the word ‘*jatiyo*’, in being derived from ‘*jati*’ or ‘race’.

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It is an inflection that is distinctly different from ‘deshio’ or ‘deshajó’ which means ‘of the country’. For our purposes, it will be crucial to remember that the term jati has always carried within itself the force of the patrilineal, where women stand in an essentially mediated relationship with their own selves and the state.

Thus, in this foundational utterance that Bahurupi as a group undertakes in the 1950s, almost as an oath and a promissory note to rest of the nation, ‘jatiyo’ (national) militates endlessly against ‘andolan’ (revolutionary struggle) in attempting to make the difficult transition from the revolutionary moment of the 1940s (and what is seen now as the failed project of the IPTA) to the sovereign Indian nation state. It seems pertinent to quote Geeta Kapur here, when she writes: “The nationalist movement, as it ‘demobilises’ itself, gives over the task of bourgeois cultural transformation to the state, enjoining its artistes to cooperate with its new institutional structure. [...] artists, like their intellectual counterparts, perpetrate a set of self-deceptions during the period of transition to a national state.”

Nabanatya, therefore, moves from ‘andolan’ to ‘institution’. And at the base of its ‘institutional’ mission is also the driving desire to establish theatre as serious ‘work’, as distinct from the frivolities of mere ‘entertainment’. Here the ‘moral’ mission of theatre reigns supreme, and distinctions demand to be made both from the ‘shallow and amoral realms’ of the commercial stage and the ‘partisan instrumentality’ of the erstwhile Gananatya movement. Nabanatya takes on what Gananatya has ostensibly failed to do honestly. It promises in its self-fashioning treatises to do ‘good’ theatre that is also ‘socially’ responsible. The shift then is from ‘political’ work for the liberation of the masses towards ‘samaj-gathan’ (building a good society) in the interest of the new nation-state. This results in seemingly strange decisions on the part of Bahurupi through the 50s – for example, the decision to produce one ‘gramer natok’ (a village play) after every ‘sabarer natok’ (city play). The aim, quite

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261 Ibid.
obviously, is to build a ‘total’ national theatre of some sort – which genuinely wishes to articulate oppressions, but does so eventually for the sake of national well-being or ‘jatiyo’ interest.

The form of functioning that seems most convenient to this mission is that of the family, structured around the ‘companionate’ marriage of the central couple. It is the place where distinct roles maybe defined for members in the interest of love and not power, and where an apparently benign paternalism finds it easier to justify itself in return for affectionate protection and guidance. This is the crux of the delusion that allows the family to function as a social unit, and Bengali group theatre identifies itself with this oft-used metaphor at its very inception.

It seems crucial to refer here to the work of Anne Mc Clintock. Mc Clintock writes that the ‘family image’ represented a sort of ‘hierarchy within unity’ and “became indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy within non-familial (affiliative) social formations such as nationalism, liberal individualism and imperialism.” She goes on to indicate that this image “depended on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere.”

She argues, that drew its ‘legitimate sanction’ from a ‘putative organic unity of interests.’ We would do well also to remember here the passing of the 1950 Marriage Law in India, which drew on a ‘different’ conception of monogamy, based on images of ‘man and wife’ as helpmates in the nationalist struggle and on the socialist ideal of a monogamy freed from bourgeois property relations. Srila Roy writes: “The 1950 Marriage Law defined marriage as one based on mutual love, free will and consent, free from the concerns of property and wealth. At the same time, as demonstrated by Evans, this socialist ideal of monogamy transformed into a regulative one that reinforced traditional norms of sexual morality, the custodians of which were invariably women.”

We will need to take apart, thread by thread, the trope of the ‘companionate marriage’ based on the identification of the new Indian

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263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
woman as the ‘bhadramahila’, but at a later stage. We will also need to analyse why the ‘new national theatre’ needs the bhadramahila actress as intrinsic to its process of self-fashioning. In claiming her presence and labour and love, theatre establishes its own respectability, finally managing through her to make a clean break with a ‘disreputable’ past.

Yet, women are often regarded as problematic for the coherence of the group. They are also frequently seen as having failed in their duties to hold it together with love, or to be an effective helpmate to her artiste husband (and/or director.) Her silence and apparent complicity are, therefore, telling. It will be our task to tease out moments of slippage and surplus from this visibly neat ‘domestic’ economy of the group. Judith Butler writes, in speaking of Monique Wittig’s work: “Discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression – that is, take for granted the speaking subject’s own impossibility or unintelligibility. […] to speak within the system is to be deprived of speech; hence to speak at all in that context is a performative contradiction, the linguistic assertion of a self that cannot ‘be’ within the language that asserts it.”

We will try to understand how women negotiate these performative contradictions in work and domesticity, ‘work’ and ‘domesticity’ both being defined according to shifting patriarchal convenience.

The Bhadramahila Actress as Citizen – Wife: A Doll’s Playhouse

Let us begin this section with one or two brief anecdotes. I quote from an interview-based essay by Salil and Arundhati Bandyopadhyay published in the Bengali little magazine Chaturanga in the early 1990s:

It was about ten to eleven years ago. We were talking to Tripti Mitra in the drawing room in her flat at Naseeruddin Road. At one point during the conversation she had raised her hand and pointed across the room: ‘This is where our rehearsals used to

266 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147-148. [Emphasis mine.]
take place. Once the rehearsals started, I did not have the permission to leave this room and go inside. He used to say — “You have also come here to rehearse like the others. You can’t go in and attend to your domestic duties anytime you like just because this is your own house.’ Shaoli (their daughter) was about four years old then. One day I sat her down to have lunch and came in to rehearse. Around late afternoon, my sister came around to visit. She came to door of the rehearsal room, parted the curtains and whispered to me: ‘Come and see mukhpuri\textsuperscript{267}, what kind of a mother you are!’ I peeped into the dining room and saw that the girl had fallen asleep on her lunch plate, her cheek resting on the uneaten rice.\textsuperscript{268}

This anecdote is mentioned in the above essay as an example of Sambhu Mitra’s unwavering discipline when it came to the practice of theatre, an instance of how he ruled himself and his family with no less an iron hand than the other members of the group. He was a disciplinarian, but a fair man – the essay seems to suggest. Next, a section from Shaoli Mitra’s memoirs about her mother called ‘Amar Ma’ (‘My Mother’):

Later, when ma was performing in Shetu (The Bridge), I got the pox. Baba would not let ma enter my room, just in case she got it too. There were so many shows then! Baba came, Lakshmi mashi (Lakshmi mashi was the one who brought me up from the time I was seven or eight) came, but she did not. […] This too has happened: my parents have gone off to perform and I have had fever. On those occasions, I checked my own temperature, covered my own forehead with wet cloth periodically and stopped when the fever was gone. My friends used to be very surprised that I could do all this on my own, but I felt quite proud of myself. I never felt that ma did not care for me. That’s what the atmosphere of our home was like. It was always very clear that theatre came before everything else. […] Perhaps if every member of a family is so dedicated towards one particular kind of work, each one becomes a little alone. And then, I suppose, each one has to accept his or her own loneliness and get on with life. I have experienced this again and again in my own life.\textsuperscript{269}

The primary sense we derive from these anecdotes is that the artiste’s household must necessarily be different from the homes of ‘other’ people’. The homestead would, at particular hours during the day, be converted into a ritual, inviolable space of artistic labour where all other immediate, proximate concerns would have to be set aside. In Shaoli Mitra’s memoirs, it appears to be an accepted truth, that in a family which had at its centre an ‘artiste-couple’ (who worked ostensibly as colleagues and helpmates to each other), certain

\textsuperscript{267} ‘Mukhpuri’ is a word the inflections of which will be almost impossible to translate into English, so I will not make an attempt. Suffice it to say, that it rests somewhere close to ‘shameless and callous woman’.

\textsuperscript{268} Arundhati and Salil Bandyopadhyay, ‘Sambhu Mitra: Ekti Parichay (Alaap Alaape Ek Anweshan)’, 330. [Translation mine].

perceivedly ‘normal’ familial practices would have to be abandoned. There is the wisdom of a child grown up in difficult circumstances in this acceptance, but both anecdotes point towards a more interesting fact – one that is not spelt out on the surface of the memorial narrative but exists nonetheless for a discerning reader to see. In both instances, the narrative turns on the pivotal trope of a ‘radical family of artistes’ that rises above day-to-day middle class concerns and forms a different kind of understanding of duty, labour and familial love. It is a family where the woman has radically different duties from the ones demanded of her in traditionally patriarchal households. But in spite of this, both anecdotes fail, in my eyes, to make a workable case for a ‘radical companionate’ marriage aimed at collaborative artistic creation.

The point for us, perhaps, is not to make a simplistic checklist for women’s liberation through the ticking off of the absence of traditional patriarchal tropes (freedom from domestic chores and childcare, for example) but to ask the crucial question about agency. Was it Tripti Mitra’s choice to give up the care of her child when she was ill? Was it her choice to leave her sleeping on a plate of food in order to attend rehearsals? Neither story answers these questions. All they say, categorically, is that ‘it was forbidden’, or ‘it was disapproved of’. The question of choice does not seem to arise. The narratives mark out clearly the man who lays down the law - the one who forbids and allows, the one who prohibits certain actions and sanctions others. It is not difficult to imagine (even without naturalizing or essentializing the strength of the mother-child bond) the pain such forced separations may have caused the ones they were inflicted upon. The operation of this ‘hierarchy within a seeming unity of interests’ is legitimated by the ideological rhetoric of Nabaniyat (the linguistic reigns of which are held firmly in the hands of the director/ head of sampraday) and one that links itself directly (in several statements made by the then members of Bahurupi) to ‘desher kaaj’ or ‘the nation’s work.’ Sambhu Mitra writes in Sanmarg Sassarja (‘Worshipping the Road towards Truth’) in an essay called ‘Andolaner Proyojone’ (‘For the Sake of the Struggle’) written in 1957:

[…] if there is any theatre that has given the country glory in recent times, it is that which was created by the groups that have emerged from the Nabaniyat Andolan. They are outside the common (‘sadharon’) theatre of the day. So we must understand
that this is why all the responsibility has come to us and this is why we must save this
movement, make it grow and become fruitful.270

He goes on to say, in the same essay:

A singer can sing alone, a writer can write alone but one cannot do theatre alone.
Even in the wrong sort of group you cannot do good acting alone. Therefore you
need a group of similar-thinking actors to work together. And soon as they come
together to make something like a family, some responsibilities begin for each of them.
For example, punctuality.271

There is nothing wrong with the rather commonsensical demand for punctuality from the
members of a theatre group because they must rehearse together, but it is interesting that the
claim is legitimated on the basis of the demands of familial duty. Rather than being an
accidental or occasional metaphor, the family emerges as the predominant trope for the
group theatre structure for years to come, not just in Baburupi but almost everywhere outside
it. The family image, as we have read, makes it easier to legitimize hierarchies in other socio-
ideological institutions through claims of an organic unity of interests and purposes.
Everyone in the quasi-family has a particular duty towards the fulfillment of the common
‘mission’ or Andolan. Since the demands of familial duty now begin to be made within the
theatre group, the necessities of the family in the traditional sense are left outside the realms
of intelligible concern. The accompanying apprehension is that women will find it difficult to
resist the pull of domesticity and to free themselves from their erstwhile shackles. Therefore,
they must sometimes be made to do so by force. In order that she maybe a suitable helpmate
to her artiste-husband, a companionate wife must be able to put aside her domestic concerns
(‘tomar sansarer kaaj’) and her childcare, and participate with equal vigour and zeal in the
artistic work of the quasi-family, which is now, through sheer ideological force, her real field
of duty. At no point in this utterance does the husband’s position as the primary beneficiary
of the woman-artiste’s domestic labour (her frailty, her concern) become evident. In a rhetoric
not very unlike the one adopted within traditional equations of ‘classic patriarchy’272,

Ltd. 1988), 26. [Translation mine].
271 Ibid, 30. [Translation and emphasis mine].
272 A term used by Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy’ and which she sees as
uniformly central to the almost patrilineal-patrilokal complex in different parts of the world. Deniz
reproduction, childcare, domestic work (and as we will see later, even sexuality and erotic ‘play’) are completely identified (without surplus) with the woman’s person. Just as much as in the classical patriarchal societal forms, these are seen as the woman’s ‘natural’ concerns, things that she feels inescapably drawn towards through the sheer force of her own ‘feminine’ nature. ‘These are not just her duties, but her natural inclinations’: both ideologies see it fit to assert. The difference here is that new demands are now made on women within the framework of the companionate marriage between artistes. She is now asked to give up her ‘natural inclinations’ rather than feed them, harden her soul and ostensibly to behave more like a man. It is surprising that these new demands are not very different from the ones women faced in other movements of an entirely ‘political’ nature, as is clear in work of Susie Tharu on the Telengana movement and Srila Roy on the Naxalbari movement. Tharu and Lalita write in *We Were Making History*, in discussing the problem of the separation of a mother and child (once again, for the sake of the movement - albeit under significantly different circumstances):

 [...] the movement still stands in the foreground of inquiry and acquires a solid positivistic weight. It is regarded as objective fact, not human event. Women are not seen as making history, or as having shaped the movement, only as having contributed to it. The ways in which women were affected by the movement, their struggles for survival and the growth (or stunting) of their consciousness, are nearly always depoliticized even when they are not ignored. [...] there was also the brooding, pervasive sense that women were ‘problems’. And as long as the ‘problem’ was not politicized, as long as its dimensions were not rationally encountered, its contradictions acknowledged, it obviously remained, like other such problems - an embarrassment, accompanied by the barely articulated but powerful wish that it would just go away. A wish that emerged not so much in explicit statement as in the small (and yet not so small) everyday moments of dismissive encounter whose corrosive power women anywhere will recognize.

The way in which women were ‘problems’ for the Telengana movement is obviously significantly different from the way in which they were problems for the emergent group theatre movement, yet the parallels in attitude are difficult to miss. These include seeing women as simply instrumental to the movement, unwillingness to rationally meet their problems head-on and authoritative self-legitimizing speech-acts that continue to reinforce women’s uncomfortable positions within monolithic structures. While the situation in the

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group theatre may appear to us to be more ‘progressive’ than that of the woman in traditionally patrilocal families (a woman allowed, in fact urged, to prioritize her ‘work’ over her domestic duties), it is probably more insidiously regressive than we would, at first glance, imagine. The ground beneath the woman’s feet is, within the ostensible ideology of group theatre, infinitely more unstable and shifting. For one, she is now being told not just what she must do but what it is necessary for her to want in order to become the ‘new’ woman suitable for the work of national consolidation through art. Second, there is a complete invisibilisation of domestic work as labour. It appears in the authoritative male speech almost as an ‘indulgence’ that can be done away with and which the artiste-wife must find time for outside the routine allocated for real ‘work.’ Third (and most significant for our analysis of the ideology of the emergent group theatre movement in the 50s), is the conveniently differential and shifting space that ‘group theatre’ begins to occupy between ‘homestead’ or ‘family’ and ‘workplace’. The group theatre is both the place for serious artistic labour of a professional contractual nature and a network of societal relations where familial loyalties and duties based on love operate. This appropriation of competing ideologies allows group theatre to make certain simultaneous and contradictory demands on its members (especially women). I quote again from Sambhu Mitra’s Sanmargo Saparja to provide an instance of the shape that familial ideology begins to take within the group. In the essay ‘Andolaner Proyojone’, Mitra counters the claim that the members of the group should not be answerable to it for the nature of their personal lives. He writes:

Many people say I have come to the sangha275 to act. That is the whole of my relationship with it. As long as I am not breaking the rules within it, it should be fine. What I do with my personal life, is no concern of the group.

But if a boy from the family lies around drunk on the roads and then comes home to say to his parents, ‘don’t you dare interfere in my personal life!’…how would it sound? Is he not bringing shame on his family in the neighbourhood? Similarly, the samiti is a family. If someone from here goes and behaves in a disreputable manner elsewhere, is not its reputation compromised?276

275 The appellations awarded to the theatre group at this stage shift in ways that appear to be rather random between ‘parivar’, ‘sampraday’, ‘samiti’ and ‘sangha’ i.e. ‘family’, ‘community’, ‘association’ and ‘organisation.’ Inflections of kinship, patrilineality, professional camaraderie, religious and missionary brotherhood colour and override each other in a continually shifting way within these formations.
The group theatre is a mission. It is also a family. It is a movement. It is an institution and a struggle. And amid these variable identities, it decides differentially, on the basis of performative truth-claims, what its legitimate concerns are and which problems it finds unintelligible within those concerns. Therefore, the management of domestic work is not a legitimate concern but the moral conduct of one’s personal life is. One wonders, therefore, what kind of linguistic authority makes these foundational speech-acts of ideological government possible in the emergent group theatre. One realizes thence, in retrospect, that the nature of the sanction behind this authority is not very different from that which works for the benefit of a patriarch in a traditionally patrilocal household. The content of the directives issued maybe different but the processes of legitimation that make these authoritative speech-acts work are distinctly similar. Indeed, they sometimes work so well that we find Tripti Mitra writing categorically at one point in her memoirs: “Women are selfish by natural law.” meaning perhaps, that they are apt to lose sight of the greater goals of artistic mission and become entangled in day-to-day petty concerns of domestic well-being. This kind of internalization of institutional utterances as categorical ‘fact’ makes the search for moments of real recalcitrance and rebellion within the movement significantly more difficult. One remembers once again at this juncture, Butler’s discussion of Monique Wittig’s work in her foundational book Gender Trouble. Butler writes:

Language gains the power to create the ‘the socially real’ through the locutionary acts of speaking subjects [...] Language, for Wittig, is a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects eventually misperceived as ‘facts’ [...] The naming of ‘sex’ is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutional performative act that both creates and legislates social reality.

Similarly, it is not difficult to read the foundational speech-acts of the group theatre movement, like many other ideological institutions, as ‘institutional performatives’ that have produced ‘reality-effects’ over time, sometimes simply by force of repetition. The initial move to power is then towards something like Wittig’s ‘coerced contract’, but there may be other readings of the reasons for women’s participation in this ideological process. A look at the available records of Tripti Mitra’s life during these years shows us that it must not

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278 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, 147-148.
279 Ibid, 148.
have been easy to live the life that she lived. She seems to have shuffled constantly between
kitchen, nursery and ‘workplace’ - all (quite amusingly) located within the same household
but all divided by invisible walls under orders from her director-husband. Yet she seems to
have done this with a remarkable lightness and generosity of spirit. Arati Maitra, writes in
her piece on Tripti Mitra (rather interestingly titled ‘Atmanibedaner Pratima’ or ‘The Picture of
Self-Sacrifice’):

On the question of dedication, I am compelled to speak of Triptidi’s other struggle. It
was, in fact, not just her struggle but the struggle of an entire family. […] This couple
has continued dedicatedly their theatre work in the face of utmost poverty, sometimes even making do with very little to eat. There were times when there was
no money to buy baby food for Shaoli. Once, we had asked them over for dinner. We
were also going through a difficult time financially then. They arrived very late.
On asking her, she said: ‘I had to wash the saree, dry it, iron it and then come. Of
course it was going to take time.’ I can still hear those words. I felt ashamed of
myself and very sad. She had one good silk saree with a black border that she wore
to every invitation.

Arati Maitra goes on to say:

It is women finally who have to run the house, bear the burden of the sansar. It was
her duty too to run her household, take care of it. I have looked at her face again and
again over the years but have only seen contentment on it. There was never a trace
of any other emotion on her face.

Elsewhere in the essay Maitra speaks of Tripti Mitra’s dedication as an actress. Even here the
terms of praise appear to be extremely interesting:

Her desire to learn was unbelievably strong. And for the sake of this desire, she was
able to submit herself entirely to her Guru. Like an ironsmith beats and burns his metal
into the shape he desires, Sambhu-da created Tripti-di as an actress.

The violence that is just barely contained and kept at bay in this oft-used idiom of Bengali
parlance becomes painfully evident in translation. The process of making a woman into a
suitable companion for a ‘marriage with a mission’ seems to be have been fraught with the

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280 Arati Maitra was Tripti Mitra’s colleague in Bahurupi.
281 Arati Mitra in Debashish Majumdar ed., Tripti Mitra, 134. [Translation and emphasis mine].
282 Ibid, 135. [Translation mine].
283 Ibid, 132. [Translation and emphasis mine].
contradiction of first having to rule and forbid in order to later share and create. In
discussing the plays of G. P. Deshpande in post-independence India, Maya Pandit writes:

The doctrine of the wife as a friend was in a sense consistent with one strand of
Hindu thinking: ‘Grihini sakhiavaha, sakhi mithaha, priyashishya lalite kalavidhan.’ (A good
woman is a wife – secretary, partner in erotic games and a model student in fine arts.)
It also assimilated the newly emerging concept of a wife as a companion of the
husband.284

However, in the figure of the companionate wife in 20th century India, the trope that seems
to have emerged most strongly is that of the student-wife, who in the true tradition of the
19th century reform movement could be taught, guided, made into a likeness of the male self
and if necessary, beaten into shape. We look back briefly here to the end of the last chapter,
where we talked about how women like Tripti Mitra waited on the margins of the IPTA, for
the final script of cultural action to arrive from the male offices of intellectual production.
However, once the script is ready, the answers known and the ‘true way’ ostensibly
discovered, the same ‘play’ (that was then apt to be ignored because it was seen as infantile
and harmless) is ruled out. It is ruled out, in fact, in favour of severe disciplinary training that
prepares her for the new artiste’s work of nation consolidation. Tripti Mitra writes of a time
when she was about to perform for the first show of *Char Adhyay*:

The first show was at Srirangam (now Biswarupa). It was very crowded on that day.
More people had come to watch than there were seats in the hall. In spite of having
left the house at the right time, my taxi got caught in a traffic jam in Sealdah. Though
traffic was not as bad then as it is today, for some reason on that day, our taxi got
stuck at Sealdah for half an hour. It was quite late when I reached. Sambhu Mitra and
some of the others had been there since morning. When I reached late, he was
insanely angry. He didn’t even want to hear what had gone wrong. Ordinarily, we do
our own makeup. At least, I have always done so. *Ela* is described as being beautiful
in the book. I am not beautiful. I had thought I would ‘make it up’ with makeup, but
where was the time? At least, I thought, I must make myself look a little fairer. I
went and asked Sambhu Mitra: “Couldn’t we delay just a bit?” He became all the
more furious. I made a mess of things trying to look fair quick. I was in total dismay
when I saw myself in the mirror, what could I say of the audience?

The play begins with me. I am sitting on the stage, *Indranath* is about to enter. I
kept feeling that I was looking very ugly. That was the first show. I kept messing
things up. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t understand what was happening. Anyhow,

scene by scene the play came to an end. I could tell – what do I say? – that I hadn’t been able to do it.  

Later, opinions began to come in about the show. Tripti Mitra writes:

After the first show of every production, we used to have a review meeting. In those days, we used to have donor-members. After the first show, they used to send us letters to tell us about their opinions, and then the members used to get together to discuss them. Even now, when I think about that meeting, I feel only one thing: ‘He Dharani, dwidha hawo.’  

Almost everyone had disliked me. One or two had even written: ‘With looks such as her’s, I should never ascend the stage again to play Tagore’s Ela.’ Of course, I played the character many times after that. But the memories of that day … That is perhaps why every time I played Char Adhyay – for a very, very long time – I would feel unbelievably scared.

I do not know how to analyse these above passages, except to point out the simultaneous and contradictory pressures that the bhadramahila actress of the 50s is faced with, on a day to day basis. First, of course, is the expectation of physical beauty from an actress on the part of a middle-class elite audience which has not yet left behind the desire to see her as desirable. This expectation is so far internalized in Tripti Mitra’s consciousness that she tortures herself over this perceived lack of beauty. What is more significant perhaps is that she does this alone - without any help from her ostensible guru, who has (ironically) prepared her in every other way to play the part Ela. Perhaps ‘beauty’ or ‘looking beautiful for the part’ was considered too trivial a concern within the dominant rhetoric of the ‘mission’ and Mitra found it difficult to articulate this concern for fear of being thought frivolous. But the brickbats came straight towards her from an audience which had not yet learnt the single-minded, missionary zeal for good performance (and nothing else) which she had had to train herself in. There is a grave sense of self-doubt that recurs again and again in Mitra’s memoirs, which is surprising, since they are written at a point in her life when she is already one of the most well-established theatre actresses in India. It is interesting to note that a

\footnote{Majumdar ed., Tripti Mitra, 30. [Translation mine].}
\footnote{Meaning ‘O Earth, please split into two and swallow me.’ Once again, this is a Bengali idiomatic phrase, the inflections of which cannot wholly be translated. But, the origin of the proverb is the Ramayana and Sita’s mythical plea to mother Earth at the time of the final and public test of her chastity in Ram’s court.}
\footnote{Ibid. [Translation mine].}
\footnote{In the tradition of the erstwhile commercial theatre, where actresses often walked the thin line between a performance career and sex work.}
reference, though passing, to the possible causes of Mitra’s recurrent self-doubt comes from another senior actress, who remembers her after her death. Kanan Debi writes of her:

> Even in *Aparajita*, Tripti used to hold the audience all on her own. While watching her that day, a shadow had passed through my mind. I felt that artiste like this would have had much greater appreciation abroad. [...] The way Tripti has worked - from *Putul Khela* to *Aparajita* – with such talent, such dedication, she should have been valued a lot more than she was. There is another thing. Our society is male-dominated. No matter how capable a woman is, she has to work many times harder to prove her worth, to gain some respect. I cannot say what the situation is today. But this was how it was in our time. When I met her, came to know her, she seemed like such a simple, unassuming person. Her manners, the way she spoke – everything. She had no arrogance, she was all politeness. It was great, but sometimes I felt, perhaps she did not know how great an actress she was.289

It is difficult to unearth the shadows of an individual’s internal doubts and tribulations from the dominant narrative of a movement, from the story of a group ostensibly moving towards a common mission. Even when personal memoirs are written they tend to be the memorabilia of a sanctioned commonality; there is a lot that is unintelligible within this framework, little clues to another history that finds only passing mention every once in a while. Yet there are references to her silence and quietness, which is often interpreted as sweetness and docility, and hence lauded. Basu Bhattacharya writes of a discussion that was held after a performance by *Bahurupi* in their neighbourhood in Murshidabad:

> I remember we were sitting in the courtyard, where the Pujas happened every year, like devotees. In front of us there was the Maharshi290, Sambhu and Tripti Mitra and some other people. There were many questions. Most questions were answered by the Maharshi and Sambhu Mitra. Tripti Mitra sat quietly throughout the discussion. [...] when there was a request for another recitation, Sambhu Mitra said, ‘We will recite something together and this is the last one, because we are very tired.’291

The Mitras appear to have been colleagues as actors, who prepared poems for recitation together and performed them in unison in a way that fascinated their audience. But in

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290 Manoranjan Bhattacharya was popularly referred to as ‘maharshi’ in the Bengali theatre world, initially after a character he had played in one of Sisir Bhaduri’s plays. The word means ‘great sage’. It appears from narratives of the time that the appellation stuck on later because of his own sage-like qualities and ascetic life-practices which people greatly respected.

discussion, one half of the companionate couple seems to have been largely silent and spoken for. This seems, at least, to have been the case in the early years of Tripti Mitra’s acting life.

It would be interesting at this juncture, perhaps, to explore the reasons why the trope of a ‘companionate marriage’ for the sake of a common ‘mission’ (political/artistic/social/religious) became so important for nationalist movements and for processes of nation construction and consolidation in the twentieth century. The now almost obvious connection between ‘romantic love’ and ‘companionate marriage’ seems to have been an idea of very recent invention even in other parts of the world, as the work, for example, of important Iranian and Turkish feminist scholars goes to show.\textsuperscript{292} Deniz Kandiyoti argues that it was the “male longing for the ‘modern’ woman” that was “expressed through clamorous demands for ‘love’”\textsuperscript{293} The ‘modern’ woman or the ‘new woman’ for the Indian nationalist and reformist movements was, of course, the \emph{bhadramahila}. She was necessary not just to meet the male need for ‘modernity’ in women (in order to be able to desire them on novel terms, besides procreate with them), but also as a token of the nation’s progressive yet inviolable spirit. Partha Chatterjee points out:

The nationalist paradigm in fact supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of modernity; the attempt was rather to make modernity consistent

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Afsaneh Najmabadi, the Iranian feminist historian, writes in a piece called ‘Love: Modern Discourses’ in \textit{Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures}: “Modernity, of course, did not invent tragic romance. What distinguished the early modernist tragedies was the employment of tragic love as political and cultural critique. […] The frustration of erotic desire in the text was employed to produce a different kind of desire in the reader: the desire for political and cultural transformations. \textit{The political work of romantic love seems to have been critical for its own emergence}. It is as if romantic love needed a patriotic mantle to establish its own viability […] further consolidated heterosexuality of love by its intense focus on a \emph{female beloved, now the homeland, now the woman compatriot}. […]”. [Afsaneh Najmabadi, ‘Iran: Love: Modern Discourses’ in \textit{Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Family, Law and Politics Vol. 2}, ed. Suad Joseph, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005), 232. Emphasis mine.] While simple equations are unnecessary, certain theoretical-historical parallels with India are not difficult to draw. If this was indeed some part of the nature of the symbolic burden placed on women and on the idea of ‘romantic’ love, it is not hard to see why the new patriarchy (spawned by the new nation) was so insidiously difficult to resist for most women. Najmabadi goes on to speak of the way in which marriage began to fit into this framework of heterosexual romantic love: “There is another important difference between modernist and classical tragic romances. In the latter, love, sex, and marriage were not necessarily connected […] union of lovers in heteroerotic tales did not necessarily translate into a wedding. Marriage was dominantly a procreative contract. This is reflected in the structure of books of ethics and advice with separate chapters on love and marriage, and in the arguments for the necessity of marriage. Until an important paradigm change in the nineteenth century, the important goal of marriage remained procreation.” [Ibid, 232 -233.]
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with the nationalist project. […] the crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. […] The ‘new’ woman defined in this way was subject to a new patriarchy.  

In the new patriarchy, the bhadramahila was created only to be subjected to newer kinds of disciplining. Tokenism and the preservation of the ‘progressive’ nationalist face were the most pressing concerns for the reformers of the time, rather than the actual fate of women themselves. This becomes clear from the work of scholars like Mrinalini Sinha. She writes:

In colonial discourse the status of women was the index of the social backwardness of India. Likewise, an emerging section of elite in colonial India saw the modernization of the social condition of women as part of the reformation of its class and caste identity. […] Yet women themselves, in Lata Mani’s pithy formulation, were neither the subjects nor the objects of these early imperialist and reformist initiatives at social reform for women. Rather, as a metonym of indigenous culture, women were merely the ground on which British officials, missionaries, indigenous social reformers, and their opponents elaborated competing interpretations of culture and traditions.

Anne Mc Clintock writes on the subject:

Women’s disempowerment was figured not as expressive of the politics of gender difference, stemming from colonial women’s ambiguous relation to imperial domination, but as emblematic of national (that is, male) disempowerment. […] their emancipation was still figured as a handmaiden of national revolution. Only recently has women’s empowerment been recognized in its own right, distinct from national, domestic and social revolution.

Women, therefore, were standing, for an incredibly long time, in a mediated and metonymic relationship to the nation, which was in itself a product of male anti-colonial speech-acts. These speech-acts were gendered and perhaps also deeply authoritative in their domestic framework of operation. The new and legitimate hegemonic forms of control that arrived with the new nationalist patriarchy appeared to have been acceptable even to women themselves. For them perhaps, the first entry into public life that the nationalist struggle

offered seemed too great an event (and perhaps in some ways, rightly so) to be refused. It would be interesting to note here that, in another context, the Iranian feminist historian Afsaneh Najmabadi discusses the possible reasons for the failure of a parallel process of seeming ‘liberation’. In a section of her essay entitled ‘Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran’, she writes:

It was the moment of ‘freedom and sharing life’ with men that made self-policing not only workable but a desirable project for women. And, conversely, the new disciplinary and regulatory practices defined the acceptable social space for freedom for the modern woman. The success of this double work made her place in the nation possible. [...] Having mothered the nation, they could now serve the state.  

Post-independence, however, in India, this process of transition seems to have led to the brief flicker of a hope that the newly-formed democratic republic would be the place where women found their real lives and bodies brought into consideration and where they appeared as subjects of freedom, rather than as spectres carrying the burden of the symbolic and metonymic identities of mother, sister and beloved of the nation. But this did not in fact seem to be happening with any degree of expediency. Women continued, for most part of the 1950s and 1960s, hoping for an end to their mediated relationship to the state, waiting for a time when they may begin to be considered independent citizens of the nation. Nirmala Banerjee writes in ‘Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity?’ The Nehruvian Era and Women’s Position about how women throughout this period remained targets of the state’s household and motherhood oriented welfare services. She speaks also of how certain radical potentials and possibilities that had emerged for the women’s movement (vis-à-vis their position in the new nation) in the 30s were brushed under the carpet in the first few five year plans. A report had been prepared in the late 1930s for the Congress by a committee (composed entirely of women) on the status of women in India. This report was titled ‘Women’s Role in Planned Economy’ (WRPE) and it made several very radical recommendations. Banerjee writes:

The terms of reference given to the WRPE had been very broad and fairly conventional; so it was rather remarkable that the latter chose to concentrate heavily on women’s economic rights, which incidentally got the longest chapter. [...] the WRPE deserves credit for recognizing right at the outset that economic rights for women were contingent on each woman being treated as a separate unit in the economic structure.\textsuperscript{300}

Hence, the WRPE had stood clearly against the ‘tradition of making the family a unit of economic activities’\textsuperscript{301} because of the subsidiary or subservient position it granted to women. There was even a note of dissent added at the end by Kapila Khandelwal, who wrote: “The sub-committee has not made it (sufficiently) clear that in the future planned society what would count, and count alone, will be the individual personality of each woman…and no relationship that she or he may have to bear with their fellows.”\textsuperscript{302} One of the most radical recommendations of the WRPE (a claim which women in India are still fighting for) was the recognition of the economic value of women’s unpaid labour at home. The WRPE recommended that in return for this unpaid domestic labour, “[…] the woman should have absolute control over a share of the family’s income, and also an inalienable right to share in the husband’s property.”\textsuperscript{303} There is also an additional comment about the need for men to learn and practice household skills. It was 1948 by the time this report was finally published by the National Planning Commission under the editorship of K. T. Shah; but by then things seemed to have changed. Banerjee writes:

From these lofty heights of a radical ideology, the policy-makers’ descent into a safe and innocuous welfarism started almost immediately. Already at the plenary of the NPC where the report was presented, there were signs of the quiet burial that was to be the ultimate fate of the report. […] it firmly left out the more radical and therefore dangerous sounding recommendations of the WRPE. Instead, it concentrated on issues that were of interest to men who obviously formed the mainstream.\textsuperscript{304}

The first two five year plans saw women’s education and health as primarily oriented to the needs of the family unit i.e. women as educators of children/efficient organizers of

\textsuperscript{300} Ibid, WS-3.
\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid.
households and women as nurturing mothers (women’s reproductive health was of greatest priority). Nehru himself spoke in his lectures of about how women were important for making better homes and families, and he was backed by the voices of many prominent women who formed a part of the government and/or represented the state. It is difficult to explain women’s participation in this regressive construction except through the sense that being within the system came with its costs. Also, as Nirmala Buch writes, “[…] women who had participated in the national struggle had been conditioned to subsume all their concerns under the national issues and it was not easy for them to raise their issues when the task of new nation-building with comprehensive planning was undertaken. […] There was implicit trust in the sincerity, ability and power of the state to look after the welfare of every citizen.”

Once again, then, the transition from struggle to institution appears to have been a journey that involved an ideological lag. Radical possibilities were left outside the realm of intelligibility in favour of those promises which would fit in most readily with the rhetoric of the dominant mainstream. This would not have been possible without the participation of the ‘others’ themselves, and it would be detrimental to our search to underestimate the import of women’s complicity in this process. However, the analysis of the reasons for this complicity and the reasons for loss of radical potential demands great care in handling. The atmosphere of hope and the new, cherished belief in ‘our own state’ cannot be cited enough in the context of the participation of various marginal groups (not just women) in the very process of nation construction that continued and intensified their oppressions. To quote Susie Tharu:

As for the miraculous utopic subjectivities, one might look to Nehru himself and to liberal narratives of self-fashioning that project the attainment of a full-blown individualism and the abstract identity of the citizen as predicated on a mythical transcendence of distinctions based on caste, religious community, language or gender.

The possibilities women’s tokenistic and symbolic roles had been exhausted to a great extent by the nationalist movement. Now that the nation had been given birth to, and in the face of simultaneous exhaustion and euphoria that had appeared at the wake of the event of ‘freedom’, a certain benevolent welfarism seemed enough. Reforms for women which were

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oriented towards the total good of the ‘new Indian family’ were seen as sufficient concession for Indian women’s demands for state concern. Even these welfarisms were contingent on the kind of woman you were; within the urban middle class, they depended on whether you were indeed enough of a bhadramahila (docile and chaste) or a ‘good Indian woman’ to deserve welfare. If you lacked a husband or a father’s protection (and god forbid by choice), you were most likely to be invisible to the state.

For actresses in the new theatre of 1940s and 1950s Bengal, proving that they were befitting the stature of bhadramahila seemed to be doubly important. It was of immediate and urgent concern. They were bearers of a history, the marks of which the new theatre movement was desperately trying to erase. It became almost, on occasion, a question of survival, as the following anecdote from Tripti Mitra’s memoirs will show. Mitra here speaks of a time in the 1940s when she was travelling with other members of the IPTA in what was then East Bengal. They were stationed at a place called Narayangung, where the show was to take place in the evening. Mitra writes:

The show was quite a few hours away. We were waiting. It was around 3 pm in the afternoon. Some of the boys were sleeping, the others were not there. We looked here and there for some water. There was none to be found. A few yards away there was a house. Tin-covered roof. Lots of mango trees all around it. You would feel like visiting, if you just saw it. So we decided we won’t disturb the boys, we would just go and drink some water there. We went and stood at their gate. From two or three rooms five or six women came out. We said we were thirsty. They asked who we were. We told them in detail. They looked at each other’s faces. Then one of the elderly women brought us a big jug of water. She asked me to cup my hands, so she could pour the water into it. At first I did not understand. I thought this must be the custom here. It was after we had drunk that we realized what the matter was. An old man was screaming from inside the house: ‘What is there to talk about with these girls from the theatre?’ Then he called us a name, which it took me a little time to understand. When I understood what he had meant, I wanted to disappear into the earth. with shame and anger Alas, tree-covered house! Alas, thirst! We came back. I remember I just at one corner of the auditorium and cried for hours.[...] I needed

307 They were travelling all over for performances in order to collect money for the famine in Bengal, hence circa 1943.
308 This idiom of ‘wishing to hide or disappear into the earth with shame’ appears at several times in the course of Mitra’s writing in different contexts and circumstances; this maybe interesting for us to take note of as a continuation with our themes in the first chapter. A woman who brings her body out into the public: for politics (as Mitra was, indeed, at this point – she believed this theatre was ‘desher kaaj’) or play seems to have been constantly confronted with the spectre of shame. The purdah that was physically absent on her body would somehow appear to have invisibly stuck on somewhere between her soul and the outer world.
Indeed, the judgement had already been passed at this time on women who brought their bodies out into public space for either ‘desher kaaj’ or theatre. The first generation of Indian middle class women who came to work onstage or to speak at public political meetings was carrying the burden of a history, the verdict on which was a foregone conclusion. Women in theatre found it more difficult to negotiate respect than women in politics for reasons that have been mentioned earlier. In both cases, however, the movements needed their presence – their respectable presence – in order to build a wider mass base. [There is an interesting reversal of this trajectory of transition from prostitute to bhadramabila actress in Tripti Mitra’s solo performance of Nitish Sen’s 1971 play Aparajita. Here, the protagonist Aparajita, an aspiring group theatre actress, is forced to turn prostitute in order to keep surviving in a world that consistently aims at wiping out her existence. Crucially, this play, that ends in utter defeat for the female protagonist seems one of the few direct articulations of feminist questions in Bengali group theatre in the period under study. The play is discussed in further detail in the Epilogue.] One effective way for women to deal with the expectation and blame associated with the absence of the purdah (an absence which was forever so palpable that the purdab may just as well have been there) was to find some effective way of turning themselves into men – to desexualize themselves, and to deny their own gender in some way in public parlance. Even when women themselves were not ready to do so, the world around them found it easiest to deal with their unveiled (and articulate) presence by treating them as men, for all practical purposes. It seemed that the public life of these women would entitle them to the status of ‘honorary men’ (albeit with the essential femininity and ‘purity of spirit’ associated with the new bhadramabila, as Partha Chatterjee has so deftly pointed out) that set them apart from ‘ordinary’ women who were still largely creatures of the domestic interior. The following anecdote from Manikuntala Sen’s Shediner Katha illustrates this process perfectly:

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309 Majumdar ed., Tripti Mitra, 11. [Translation and emphasis mine].
310 A book by the CPI activist that has been discussed in some detail in the Introduction, where we have also learnt that Sen performed one of the brief but crucial roles (in fact, the role of the freedom fighter Matangini Hazra) in IPTA’s 1944 production Nabanna.
Let me tell you the story about Banaripara. Biswanath and I were put up at a house in the village. [...] All the doors were closed from inside. None of the women were coming out to meet me or calling me in. I felt a little angry. Did they think I was a man? A little later Biswanath left with his gang. But how do I go in if they don’t open the doors? I wanted to change my saree, have a bath. Or would I just have to sit here as the netri? None of the men came out to meet me because I was a woman. And women were not coming because I was a netri – almost like a man. I went up and banged on the door. I said ‘Could you please open the door once? I would like to change my saree.’ The door was opened just a little. The gentleman left the house from the door at the back. I entered. The lady of the house was standing with another woman, with the ghomta over their faces, as they would do in front of a man. [...] Later, I said to them in the kitchen, ‘If you don’t open your ghomta, I won’t eat.’ Then I bent forward and removed her ghomta. I said: ‘Look at me, am I a man?’ That seemed to break the ice. Someone spoke. They started laughing. They said, ‘What if you are not a man? You are so learned, what can we say to you?’ I said: ‘Why? We don’t need learning to talk of daeel-bhaat.’

At times then, the bhadramabila seems to occupy a strange ‘no-man’s-land’. She belonged neither entirely to the world of men (since she had to guard bastion of her alleged spiritual ‘purity’) nor did she fit into the world of ‘common’ women. Within the new patriarchy then, the new woman was isolated as never before, divided from her male counterparts by what was perceived as the threat of her sexuality and divorced from a larger community of women. She was caught between what I would call (somewhat after Raymond Williams) residual and emergent patriarchies that competed with each other in claiming her identity.

In Ritwik Ghatak’s Komal Gandhar (a film made in 1961 which narrativizes the trials and experiences of a Bengali theatre group in 50s Kolkata) for example, the female protagonist is constantly referred to as ‘moshai’ by her colleagues in the theatre group. Moshai is a term generally used to address men and roughly translates to ‘mister’. The gap in communication between the protagonist Anasuya, a young and articulate theatre activist (seemingly capable of engaging with men on equal terms) and the ‘common’ women in the story is palpable.

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311 Netri: female neta (leader).
312 The part of the saree that covers the face: a variation of purdah.
313 This conversation is recorded in the Bangal dialect. Manikuntala Sen was from Barisal hence shared the dialect that these women spoke.
314 Daeel-bhaat: literally lentils and rice in the dialect of East Bengal, but signifying day-to-day domestic concerns which women share.
315 Sen, Shediner Katha, 47-48. [Translation and emphasis mine].
The other women seem to see her simultaneously as an object of threat and admiration, of resentment and pity, of respect and ridicule. Anasuya has successfully made it to the status of ‘honorary man’ - making decisions, organising group activities, engaging in argument - but her position as bhadramabila (especially in the sense of ‘decent’ woman) seems to be the most precarious thing for her to sustain. It is forever under threat as character slurs keep being thrown at her in the film from both men and women.

Even the group’s director Bhrigu, who has fallen deeply in love with her, is unable to resist the pressures of these aspersions cast on her, for no other reason than the fact that be too intensely suspects her emotional spontaneity and is unable to deal with the unease generated in him by her seeming lack of restraint. While her ability to be emotionally expressive touches him, their growing intimacy also makes him deeply uncomfortable - especially after he hears that she is engaged to a man in France to whom she writes long letters. Within the terms of the new patriarchy, there could be only one interpretation of Anasuya’s openness in these circumstances – she was ‘easy’. ‘Tui shabdhane thakish, meyeti ekta flirt’ (‘you be careful, the girl is a flirt’): Bhrigu is told by one of his colleagues in the group. Anasuya’s Achilles heel, and that which seems to keep her from entering completely the secure space of acceptable new womanhood, is this perceived absence of emotional restraint on her part.

In Komal Gandhar, Anasuya never completely becomes a character in her own right. She shifts forever between symbol and subject. While through the theatre group, young men and women of the first generation of independence try to build a commonality that will heal the memory of the split nation that haunts them, Anasuya’s consciousness becomes the metaphoric site for this split. She is caught between her love for two men (both absent to her in different senses), between homeland and a strange foreign land that she is unable to imagine or realize. This land is ‘France’, metaphorically represented through linguistic love-games as Prospero’s fantastic and illusory isle (where Ferdinand and Miranda meet in Shakespeare’s The Tempest). The journey on which Samar and Anasuya meet is the journey by a steamer across the river Padma from the homeland that has been left behind (East Bengal, now East Pakistan) to the new homeland perforce (independent India). But this journey, that is represented as painful uprooting, is proleptic for Anasuya in that it looks forward to another
journey that she will have to make soon in order to join her new husband (and possibly start a family) abroad.

Standing against this future family to which she is betrothed, is the present and ostensibly radical space of the theatre group where she works. Here, familial relations are seemingly formed outside the traditional family. The prologue to the film states this in no uncertain terms: “From many places young boys and girls come together to share their passion for the theatre. They make a group together. In this group, their family is built amidst love, affection, jealousy and envy. They do not have a family life to speak of in the ordinary sense. This film only tries to tell the story of a chapter in one such family’s history.” In this family then Anasuya is the locus of desires and commitments. She is a sister to some people, friend to others and the beloved of one. She is the focal point around which several affective bonds of kinship and love converge.

The theatre group itself is both a microcosm and an affective denial of the outer world of the nation. It both mirrors and rejects a network of dominant political relationships always figured in familial terms. In this case of course, the symbolic meaning of the explicit parallel points towards a broken family (unlike in Bahurupi) that represents the nation’s memory of a split homeland. Thus, when the political leader of a left-wing party comes and asks for Anasuya’s purse on the street (in order to help some old school teachers to return to their villages from the city) he does so, on the claim that he has recognized her. This recognition is not literal but metaphoric – he means he has recognized the kind of woman she is. He tells her that it is because there are women like her in Bengal still that people like him are able work. It would be unwise to underestimate the emotional force of such a statement for the woman of the 50s who is still trying to find her rightful place in the new nation. Indeed, this moment in the film, when the working-class neta tells her that she should stop standing with her head tilted just so because it reminds him of his dead sister (lost perhaps also at the time of partition), is a moment of pure emotional force. The authorial perspective allows no critique/objective distance from this moment.

But on analysis, the problems of this moment’s almost irresistible emotional pull are suggestively revealed. Anasuya is never simply herself in the film; she is always the memory of
someone or somewhere else. It is her duty to heal breaches and splits (as when she tries to bring together a broken theatre group for a common project), to salvage repressed traumatic memories (as when she manages to make Bhrigu speak to her of home on the other side) and to sustain the process of radical cultural and political action (as when she gives her purse to the neta or sells her jewellery for the group’s performance – as thousands of women during the independence movement are known to have done). Of course, she is the heroine of this film because she is the kind of woman who is able to do all this with relative ease. However, this does not lessen the force of the burden on her that leads her almost to a breaking point at the end of the film. The narrative of the film never seems to recognize the symbolic burden that Anasuya seems to struggle under. Since the nation has moved from struggle to institution, it is this micro-space of the theatre group that continues to address the breaches and traumas that the dominant discourse of nation seems to have forgotten or repressed. It is the radical space where both memory and desire come together in ways that are marginal to the institutional performatives of the nation. In that sense, the theatre group in Komal Gandhar aligns itself more to the radical and unrealized memory of revolutionary struggle than the contemporary process of institutional consolidation. The men and women in this theatre group exist almost in a time lag, living within a historical memory that they do not seem to share with the outside world and which continues to mark their lives through recurring tropes and symbols.

For example, when they perform successfully in a village (in order to collect money for people afflicted by floods), a very poor old woman comes up to Bhrigu to give him a medal. This medal is her only memory of her son who was killed years ago. She tells Bhrigu to perform more, to perform all over the country because it is her son’s story they are telling through their play. Bhrigu talks to her of his mother. She is the only other person in the film besides Anasuya who hears of Bhrigu’s mother’s death, as a result of the poverty that traumatized their family post-partition. In the end the woman leaves (having shared the story of the absent mother and the absent son) saying: ‘Baba, tomra amar Mukunda Das’. Mukunda Das was, of course, the legendary revolutionary poet-performer of pre-Independence times in India. The absent mother returns again and again in Komal Gandhar, as the camera tries to heal a breach it cannot bridge. Anasuya and Bhrigu stands on the broken railway tracks on the river Padma and look over to the other side. They look at the homeland that is physically
present but cannot be reached, because it is, in reality, a breach in time as well as space. This scene is where the intimacy between Anasuya and Bhrigu reaches a crest and it does so over memories of what has been left behind. Their desire for each other is, for all practical purposes, a product of memory. And the figure which always hovers around the margins of this memory (that produces desire for the thing which cannot be had or returned) is the figure of the absent mother. At the end of the very scene where the two central characters realize that they have fallen in love with each other, the camera runs hopelessly along the railway tracks (accompanied by the sounds of a ghostly, absent train) towards an invisible barrier on the connecting river that it cannot possibly cross. Hopeless desire and impossible memory come together irrevocably in this scene.

But for Anasuya, the burden has shifted from the absent mother to a symbolic sisterhood to the nation. Anasuya bears the legacy of the women of the ‘agnijug’ (the age of fire i.e. the time of India’s revolutionary struggle for independence). She carries around, till she meets Bhrigu, the physical and fetishistic symbol of this burden – her mother’s diary. On meeting Bhrigu and recognizing him (once again in a metaphorical sense, as ‘her mother’s son’ and the kind of man who remembers what everyone else has forgotten), she hands this diary over; as if she was only the bearer of a revolutionary responsibility she could not possibly actualize on her own. This memory then, through the fetish-object of the diary, is one which, while symbolically raising the mothers of the nation to lofty pedestals of memory, reiterates patrilineality in that it cannot be actualized in the present without the discovery of the suitable son. Anasuya, the symbolic sister to the radically imagined nation, can only be an incomplete signifier in herself – she is the bearer of the burden of freedom, never its agent or subject. She is, in that sense, a predicate looking for a male subject to take on her task. The subject of freedom, of course, cannot but be Bhrigu (whose name refers to the mythical sage of Vedic times). Anasuya’s own name means ‘she who is without impurity’. And indeed, Anasuya is pure symbol, bearing numerous meanings derived from the memories and desires of others, none of which are her’s to own. Even the little (almost spectral) orphan-child she meets twice on the streets of Kolkata says to her: ‘Didi, de na!’ (‘Sister, give me!’). What this child is asking for is never spelt out by the narrative, but it is clear that Anasuya bears something that is her duty to hand over to her brothers and lovers in the new nation. Moinak Biswas has written in his essay
A traditional marriage song sung by women works as the *leitmotif*; marriage and love become depersonalised through ritual enactment. In the tussle between the two rival theatre groups Anasuya, the heroine, works as a mediator; but her crossing over to Bhrigu's group is also an anthropological act of exchange between two sides, *here put into effect by woman herself.* The love story, thus refracted, connects with the theme of re-unification of the divided Bengal.  

I do not feel that the narrative allows this kind of agency to Anasuya. What looks like agency on the surface is not really so, because *Anasuya never acts for herself - but always on behalf of a symbolic and memorial burden.* Anasuya’s move from one group to the other engenders accusations of disloyalty not very unlike those generated against a woman who leaves her affinal family for another within traditional patriarchy. When she goes to Bhrigu in order to join his group and once again at the end, when she asks for his hand in marriage, Anasuya asks: ‘*Tumi amake nebe?’* (‘Will you take me?’) It does not seem to me that she *puts into effect* any anthropological act of exchange between two sides; rather she *makes a gift of herself* by stripping her own self of agency, and admits with this *disempowering act to the fact of belonging nowhere.* It seems that she does not have the right to exist anywhere without the necessary sanction of the men she loves. She waits for Ferdinand/Samar to ask her to make her passport to join him, waits again for Bhrigu’s permission to join his group. If there is anyone that is a refugee in this film, anyone who is essentially homeless and uprooted in this narrative - it is Anasuya, and she makes no attempt to redress this non-belonging. Through her sweet complicity and her constant asking for permission to *simply be anywhere,* she reiterates a woman’s *essential homelessness within patriarchy.* She does not belong in this world until a man has willingly taken her in, allowed her a place to be. Anasuya is, like all woman, seeking refuge and sanction in a world where she has no claim. In this context, it is difficult for me to accept as unproblematic the film’s appropriation of the marriage song and its ‘depersonalization’ to tell a nation’s partition narrative. Homelessness and uprooting are new for the nation and hence *clearly political,* but homelessness has always been the quintessential reality of women’s lives in patriarchal societies and has rarely been seen as a ‘political’ question.

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Even in the characters that Anasuya plays as an actress on stage she mirrors the roles she plays in real life – never completely herself, always someone’s daughter, mother or beloved. In the first play we see her perform in she is the daughter of an old man (played by Bhrigu) who is in the throes of being uprooted – the dominant melody is the man’s trauma of having to betray and leave his motherland. The daughter only adds a high-pitched harmony. The primary relationship is that of the man to his homeland, the girl’s relationship to her homeland, if any, can only be mediated through him. Next, Anasuya plays Shakuntala (the mother of Bharat, the mythical king after whom the nation is named318). Here Ghatak creates a conscious parallel between Anasuya’s own life (waiting for Dushmanta/Samar, being uprooted from the homeland) and Shakuntala’s narrative. However, here too, in the asrama as in the theatre group, she is the locus of certain affective bonds that centre on her because of their need of her. It is the desire to be needed in relational terms that appears most strongly in Anasuya’s personality and in the characters she plays, never the need to become a subjective agent in her own right. In this sense, Moinak Biswas’ praise of Ghatak’s politics as it emerged through his portrayal of women seems slightly off-the-mark:

His politics becomes emotionally so rich because, alongside the bold picturing of everyday struggles, he repeatedly captures the necessary but tragic denial by individuals to tread into the full light of the day. Nita, Anasuya or Sita are fully engaged individuals in relation to labour, daily hardships and challenges of survival, but they also seem to be unspeakably tender, almost luminous beings. […] Partly unprepared to deal with the cruelty of the world, they cling to the one who is part of their own selves. The fullness of being is gathered into this fold, the implacable sense of pain in Ghatak’s cinema seems to stem from this hidden enclosure.319

My argument is that they appear often to be so tender and luminous simply because they are never allowed by the narrative to make any move towards agency. They continue to bear passively the burden of symbolic luminosity and implacable pain that is thrust upon them, by a history-making process that now needs to make use of their spectral presence. Hence, their real bodies and desires remain almost always hovering outside the reach of the narrative, and neither sexuality nor day-to-day hunger is ever articulated by them for themselves. This denial is tragic indeed, but for whose sake is it necessary? What sort of figuration of history do these tragic symbols of unspeakable tenderness make possible? Is it their own history they help to

318 In Kalidasa’s play, Anasuya is one of Shakuntala’s companions, a minor character.

319 Ibid.
write? Or do they stand in for an absent and split mother-nation in a male authoritative imagination? Do they help to make fetish objects for a traumatic breach that cannot be healed or figured without their image? Do they thence participate in the denial of their own freedom and their own bodies? These are questions that need to be addressed urgently.

If Anasuya is an example of a feminine subject, more specifically a *bhadramabila*, who bears responsibility without exercising agency, we witness another kind of figuration of the *bhadramabila* in the Bengali group theatre of the time. The difference, of course, is that here the depiction of the *bhadramabila* appears as an ostensibly harsh critique of the lack of real agency that the middle class Bengali woman face within her own household. For Bulu, in *Bahurupi*’s 1958 production *Putul Khela*, an adaptation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, docility is strategy. The play centres on the marriage of Bulu (Nora) and Tapan (Torvald), as in the original; except here, we are looking at the new Indian *bhadralok* family of the 50s that rests on the premise of their companionate marriage, a trope we have discussed earlier on in the chapter. Bulu is in every sense the *bhadramabila*, a good wife and housekeeper, obedient to her husband and yet articulate in conversation, talented when necessary. Bulu, like Nora, engages in various minor deceptions through the play (which reveal the shifting nature of her relationship to Truth with a capital ‘T’) but always in order not to offend her husband. She is all docility and submissiveness, infantile on purpose and like a child, apt to play games in order to escape punishment. Here, Sambhu Mitra is not very far in terms of characterisation from the Ibsen original. Homi Bhabha writes in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in *The Location of Culture*:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct [...] the effect of mimicry is camouflage [...] It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. [...] colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.320

Here Bhabha is speaking of the relationship of the colonial subject and ruler, but this same formulation could occasionally be productive in explaining the strategies that the oppressed

of other categories sometimes adopt in their dealings with the dominant group. In this sense, Bulu is very much the ‘good native’, adept in the art of mimicry and also highly skilled at working out strategic and effective bargains with patriarchy. She effectively disguises her intelligence and how much she really understands her own situation vis-à-vis Tapan. Her infantile behaviour is part of the same mottled camouflage aimed at not rocking Tapan’s or patriarchy’s boat more than she needs to. She survives through negotiations and bargains, rather than direct statements of recalcitrance. She believes she cannot afford outright rebellion, in fact, she never even considers it, until perhaps at the very end. In this text, Mitra makes perhaps his most progressive statement about the position of women in contemporary Indian society. One could conjecture that this might have required a fair amount of honest grappling with himself and the facts of his own marriage, especially given the fact that he dedicates the text to his wife. On inspection, some possible biographical parallels also begin to emerge. Just as Torvald does not approve of Nora’s macaroons, Tapan does not allow Bulu to eat spicy *dalmoot* as this is liable to make her sick. Bulu, like Nora, hides her bag of *dalmoot* from her husband, like a child who finds little, harmless ways to escape the strictures of a disciplinarian father without ever wishing to come to a hurtful and head-on confrontation.\(^{321}\) It is a moment of revelation for someone who has read carefully the text of *Putul Khela* and wishes to understand Tripti Mitra’s attempt to play it, to suddenly come across this in Rekha Jain’s piece about her in *Sudraka’s* memorial collection after her death:

> She loved to eat Agra *dalmoot* which she called *chanachur*. Sambhu-da would not allow her to eat it as it was bad for her throat, but she could not resist it. Later when she was sick, her diet was limited and medicines unlimited.\(^{322}\)

When we look again at the text we find the infantile, playful and slightly-too flamboyant Bulu, who almost (but not quite) fits the bill for the new *bhadramahila* just like Anasuya in *Komal Gandhar*, albeit for different reasons. Like Bhrigu, Tapan rules out ‘play’ and too much flamboyance. However, the authorial distance from Tapan is much greater in *Putul Khela* (than what we have found in dealing with Bhrigu in *Komal Gandhar*) and this allows us to preserve a crucial critical distance from Tapan’s disciplinary zeal for most part of the play.

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\(^{321}\) Ironically, this is exactly what Bulu has to do, in much worse circumstances, at the end of the play.

\(^{322}\) Rekha Jain in Debashish Majumdar ed., *Tripti Mitra*. 12. The piece was translated from Hindi by Yama Shroff.
just as we are able to do in the original text of *A Doll’s House*. In the text, Tapan explicitly tells Bulu what he wishes of her. I quote:

Tapan: No, no. I want you to stay just like this. Just like my little pet bird. Why are you fidgeting? Look at me.

Bulu: What?

Tapan: Have you eaten *chanachur* at the market?

Bulu: Honestly, no. I swear on you (‘*ga chhuye bokhbi*’).

Tapan: Then? Spicy peanuts?

Bulu: Not at all.

Tapan: Then *dalmoot*.

Bulu: I have said no so many times, but you keep asking.

Tapan: Come on, I was joking.

Bulu: Do I ever do anything that you dislike?\(^{323}\)

The audience, of course, has already seen Bulu enter the stage with a bag of *dalmoot* at the beginning of the play. The situation is hardly different from the original, except perhaps in one minor detail: a certain inflection of language. The audience that came to see *Bahurupi*’s production in 1958 was largely a Bengali middle-class Hindu audience. To a lot of them perhaps Bulu’s ‘*ga chhuye bokhbi*’\(^{324}\) would be almost an admission towards being willing to lose him forever, a much greater lie than Nora’s ‘I promise you’ in the original.\(^{325}\) My apprehension is that it is through inflections of language such as these, that Bulu in *Putul Khela*, ends up being *slightly more culpable* to Tapan than Nora is to Torvald; this, simply because of the ‘Hindu wife’ image within which she operates. There are certain statements that appear here on Bulu’s lips that are non-existent in the original. For example, she says at one point in the play to Krishna Lahiri, her widowed school-friend: “*Shay ki re? Swami nei, ebbele-pule nei, taka nei. Tabole tor ki roilo*?” (‘You have neither husband and children nor any

\(^{323}\) Sambhu Mitra, *Putul Khela*, 68. [Translation mine.]

\(^{324}\) ‘Let me touch you and promise this’, the premise of the superstition being that the person touched would die if the promise proved false.

money. Then what do you have left?)

While Bulu’s rejection of home and hearth appears to be as strong as Nora’s, *Putul Khela’s* ideological investment as a text in the family-children-husband- patriliny complex seems to be a notch higher. In the original text, when Nora leaves at the end, she slams shut the door to her home; the sound reverberates. In lieu of this, Sambhu Mitra makes Bulu do something shockingly unexpected. She says some of her last words to Tapan: “I cannot live with a stranger anymore. Here’s your ring.” This is followed by a short but extremely crucial stage direction: “Bulu wipes off her sindoor.” The shock of this action cannot be overestimated in the context in which it was performed; *it is what widows do in Hindu culture on having lost their husband.* For the ‘Hindu wife’ in a traditional Bengali patrilocal household, the primary duty was to protect her husband’s life at all costs. To willingly make oneself resemble a widow in her husband’s presence was, in a sense, to negate his life and existence. Tripti Mitra writes: “As the last scene approached, the audience would begin to become more and more frozen in their seats. Finally, when I used to wipe the sindoor off, there was a choric, subdued exclamation from the audience. I felt it again, when at the very end I left (i.e. the stage/ Bulu’s home).” This was undoubtedly a theatrical moment of immense radical potential. However, unfortunately, it was strangely undercut by what happened afterwards in performance. This is an event that cannot be unearthed simply by reading the literary text itself and reiterates for us once again, the indispensability of the performance text in deciding where a play has taken us. Instead of closing the performance immediately with the banging of the door as Bulu leaves, the lights lingered for a while, in 1958 Kolkata, on Tapan’s body - captured in silhouette. According to Samik Bandyopadhyay, his body then mirrored, in its stooping, cringing brokenness, the arches that had been created by Khaled Chaudhuri for the sets. They were highlighted by a ghostly light by Tapas Sen at this juncture, setting the scene for the beginning of Tapan’s desolation and loneliness. *This brokenness,* rather than Bulu’s courage and rebellion, became the last emotional note of the play, one that lingers on after the text itself has closed. To quote Prof. Bandyopadhyay:

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326 *Putul Khela*, 70. [Translation mine.]
327 Ibid, 147.
328 In the tradition of Behula or Sabitri.
The pattern of the arches was created with such care in this play only so that *this visual could be achieved* in the final scene. The question at the end is not where Bulu will go, having lost her home completely, but *what will happen to Tapan*. This is ironic, because the middle class audience of *Putul Khela* is then left with the niggling feeling that she should, after all, have forgiven him. She should not have been so cruel.  

Bengali group theatre of the 1950s, then, touches certain radical possibilities briefly in performance only to return hastily from them into the safe environs of middle class domesticity. This is perhaps because the space into which Bulu walks out from the claustrophobic lies of her homestead is not a space that can be easily imagined just yet. It is possible to conjecture that Bulu has walked straight out from her home *into the space of the new liberal state*, in order to look for her place in it as an independent citizen of the new nation (‘without family, children or any money’ as she has told Krishna earlier: but this time, by choice). The problem is that (as we have already examined) the new liberal state promises almost nothing to the woman who does not have a family to sanction, mediate and voice her demands. When Bulu questions the law of the land, asking *what law can forbid a woman from saving her husband’s life* – we realise once again, the plight of a woman caught between two patriarchies (one residual and one emergent) that makes contradictory and competing demands on her person. She is caught between the classical patriarchal duty of guarding her husband with her life and the new paternalistic law of the land. But in coming back and lingering on a broken-down male body, the ostensible ruins of which a rebellious woman leaves behind, Bengali group theatre of the 1950s once again leaves behind *radical struggle for institutionalism*. *Where Bulu is to go* is a question that is not confronted as yet. And it is possible to imagine that once she leaves the stage (stepping into the space between patriarchal home and paternal state - which is ‘no-space’ at all) Bulu vanishes into thin air.

Chapter Three

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330 Samik Banerjee on Sambhu Mitra (Recorded at Sayak Memorial Lectures: April, 2008, Recording, translation and emphasis mine).
331 Bulu’s forgery of her father’s signature, as in the Ibsen original, was primarily intended to safeguard her husband’s (and her father’s) life and happiness.