Jadavpur University

Department of Sociology

Title:- Women in the City: A Cinematic Exploration of Kolkata (1960-70s)

Suparba Sil

Exam Roll No: MPSO194004

Registration No: 142307 of 2017-18

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Philosophy in Sociology

Under the supervision of

Dr. Madhuja Mukherjee

Associate Professor, Department of Film Studies

Jadavpur University

May, 2019

Certified that the thesis entitled, WOMEN IN THE CITY : A CINEMATIC
EXPLORATION OF KOLKATA (1960-70s) submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in
SOCIOLOGY ...of Jadavpur University, is based upon my own original work and there is no
plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me for the award of
any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is carried out, or to any other
Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at a
SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES, TISS
seminar/conference at ...., thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per
the M.Phil Regulation (2017) of Jadavpur University.

Exam Roll No : MPSO1974001
Registration No : 142307 of 2017-8

Suparba Sil
25/4/19 .
(Name of the M.Phil Student with
Roll number and Registration number)

On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation
work of Suparba Sil entitled Women in the City : A Cinematic
Exploration of Kolkata (1960s and 70s) , is now ready for
submission towards the partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in
Sociology of Jadavpur University.

Ali Sur 25/4/19

Head
Department of Sociology

HEAD
Department of Sociology
Jadavpur University
Kolkata-700032

Supervisor & Convener of RAC
Dept. of Film Studies
Jadavpur University.

Member of RAC 25/4/19

Professor
artment of Sociology
Jadavpur University
Kolkata-700032

Acknowledgements

Working on something as interdisciplinary as the exploration of the changing status and role of women in Kolkata through the medium of cinema, has been both challenging and difficult. As a student of Sociology, I have been trained in the sociological analysis of cultural phenomena, but thematic analysis of cultural texts (cinema in the context of my dissertation) was something that I had to learn through the course of writing this dissertation. Such a daunting endeavour would not have been successful without the able guidance of my supervisor, Dr Madhuja Mukherjee, Head of the Department, Film Studies, Jadavpur University. The last one year has been a great learning experience under her tutelage and I am extremely grateful to her for the same.

I must also thank my friend, philosopher, guide and godmother, Simsim, for her immense patience, tolerance and innovation in making this dissertation what it is. Thank you for everything.

I am thankful to my dear friend Dr Subhajit Chatterjee, Assistant Professor at Jadavpur University, for introducing me to the world of cinema and for patiently reading my many drafts and pointing out the discrepancies. I can never thank him enough for his consistent support. I'm grateful to the faculty members of my department, especially Dr Amites Mukhopadhay, for always being a patient listener and a consistent guide, and Dr Piyali Sur, Head of the Department, Sociology, for having faith in me when I have faltered.

This acknowledgement section would be incomplete without mentioning Debayudh Chatterjee, my dear friend, my pillar of strength and conviction. I'm thankful to him for attending to my frantic calls at unearthly hours. From suggestions on the theoretical coherence of my work to chiding me whenever I slacked, he has been a constant source of support and strength. Having said that, I feel fortunate to have been surrounded by many such kindred souls; my heart goes out to Daisy Bhattacharjee, Smita Dutta, Arnab Nandy and Arunoday Majumder and Abhirupa Das for being such amazing friends and supporting me on this journey in so many ways.

I am grateful to my family for being there always and supporting me as I struggled to find my ground.

****

Table of Contents

1. The City Imagined: An Introduction

A city could be imagined as a mosaic of social worlds. Sumit Sarkar in his book "*Writing Social History*" explains that a city remains distinct in terms of its residential areas, languages, cultures, subcultures etc. Having said that, one should also note that the city is ever changing, constantly shaping and being shaped by the emerging political and cultural ethos. Sukanta Chaudhuri(1990), notes that every modern city has multiple myths; none however as many as Calcutta. Calcutta, the first capital of Colonial India was once the cultural hub of Bengal Renaissance. The discourse of modernity engendered by the latter had *inter alia* a major focus on the reform of the status of women.

The early 19th century witnessed a spate of reform movements such as abolition of sati, widow remarriage, and anti-kulin polygamy and so on. A blanket statement on part of a Renaissance critic would entail complete dismissal of any real impact of such movements that aimed at the empowerment of women. However a nuanced exploration reveals that these reforms, however limited in scope, formed major landmarks leading to far greater entry of women in the public sphere in the post-colonial times. The trials and tribulations that familial and social relationships underwent to accommodate this change found reflection in various cultural mediums, a major one being cinema. The post-partition decades were characterized by alteration of gender roles and more and more women found employment in the public sphere. The debates regarding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the extent of dismantling of the same has been discussed elaborately in the course of this research.

The following thesis titled: **Women in the City: A Cinematic Exploration of Kolkata (1960-70s)** attempts to trace the historical trajectory of the changing role and position of women within the volatile urban milieu of Calcutta as represented through cinema.

With the on-going political and subsequent socio-historical crisis, cinema became an important vehicle of ideological dissemination in the decade of the 1960-70s. With the emergence of a new wave of alternative films (also known as alternative films) led by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha the on-going crises and conflict of the middle class Bengali (that included both the refugee and host population) during the turbulent decade of the 1960-70s was reflected through such 'alternative' cinema. Alongside that, there emerged a new wave of 'commercial' cinema that, though premising its commodification on the 'star' element, discussed the relevance and applicability of the cultural stereotypes characteristic of the decade. My research

attempts to decode a selection of films using them as cultural texts, to elaborate on the representation of the role and position of women in society.

Since my thesis will primarily focus on the decades of the 1960-70s, I will not dwell much on the colonial decades as far as the historical trajectory of the structural transformation of the city is concerned. The historical trajectory of the Post-Independent India brings us to the singular most important incident that is Partition; Partition of India, not only changed the topographic map of the city, but also became the premise of a plethora of problems such as struggle for space, economic stagnation, lack of job opportunities, the details of which has been discussed in the next chapter. On a more theoretical level, Calcutta was saddled with the contradictions of an incomplete modernity the seeds for which had been planted during the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. Post-Independent India was however characterized by a different form of modernity that had its roots in the Nehruvian Socialism which was the dominant ideology that resonated with the modern democratic nation. Through its representations on screen, with the emergence of a new wave of alternative and commercial cinema, one is able to understand the ongoing conflicts encountered by the Bengali 'bhadralok' as he struggled to assimilate his traditional cultural roots with his imbibed precepts of modernity. This dissertation will however focus on the Bengali 'Bhadramahila' and her changing position and role in society in the post-independence decades, most importantly the decades of the 1960-70s. The changing position and role of women in the mid twentieth century becomes most poignant with reference to the Partition of India that brought in an unprecedented influx of refugee women (and men) in the urban job market. The female refugee population in many ways was responsible for paving the way for entry of women into the public sphere.

The second chapter of my thesis titled "**Calcutta Revisited: From Partition to Naxalbari"** attempts to explore the impact of the political ethos of the 1960-70s on the lives of women. The chapter traces the structural changes witnessed by the city in the event of the Partition, in the wake of the refugee settlement crisis. Calcutta was one of the main cities that bore the brunt of Partition as hundreds of migrants shifted to Calcutta from East Bengal, also known as '*opar bangla'*. The on-going political crisis that had its roots in the economic stagnation had a major impact on the roles and responsibilities of women in the decade of the 1960-70s. This chapter primarily traces the impact of the urban space on the lives of women and the processes of renegotiation with the 'existing mores' that was impacted by this renegotiation on the cultural landscape.

My third chapter titled **"The Feminized City: Creation of a Continuum between the Home and the World"** discusses the entry of women into the public sphere within the political milieu of the

1960-70s. Drawing on the negotiations acted out by the women within the nationalist discourse that dominated the late 19th century and early 20th century, this chapter attempts to explore the nuances of the role set acted out by women in the late 20th century, more specifically the decade of the 1960-70s; This chapter further attempts to trace the existent position and status of women by tracing the representation of the same through Bengali cinema (both popular and alternative) of the decade. Using cinema as a cultural text corroborating the theoretical argument mentioned above, this chapter attempts to answer the question: Has the status and position of women changed in the late twentieth century post the event of Partition and Naxalbari? If so, how? The films discussed in this chapter are a combination of alternate and commercial cinema namely**, *Indrani(1958), Meghe Dhaka Tara(1960), Subarnarekha(1965), Jana Aranya(1976), Pratidwandi(1970), Calcutta 71(1971), Uttar Falguni(1963), Surya Sikha(1963), Mahanagar(1963) and Bilambito Loy(1970).***

The concluding chapter titled **"Conundrum of the Women's Predicament: Towards a Conclusion**" discusses the challenges faced by the woman in the 20th century and its resemblance to the nationalist discourse that operated in the late 19th century. Citing films that have been discussed in chapter 3, the conclusion brings the argument regarding the role and status of women in the mid-twentieth century to a close by dwelling on the operationalization of discourses within a Foucauldian framework, arguing that the free modern woman is a myth, that the forms of subordination might have got altered with the turn of the century and the watershed event of Partition, but the content remained more or less constant. The discourse of modernity that operated amidst the political crisis of the 1960-70s, was not unlike the nationalist discourse, but one with seemingly more flexible boundaries, and lesser negotiations. This in many ways resonates with the Foucauldian idea of the free subject. The subject notes Foucault, is always free; for the discourse of power to operate the subject needs to exercise her freedom. The power of choice however operates within a discourse of which she is a part. The individual notes Foucault, is nothing beyond the discourse, because the discourse is what made the individual. The socialization propagated by the discourse is thus the only truth that the individual has access to. This in many ways invariably normalizes the hegemony of the power structure that she is subjected to, and is a part of. What the individual witnesses as her freedom is in reality a myth that is perpetuated to prevent her from resisting against the power structure in an invasive manner that might threaten the status quo.

1.1 Methodology:

The methodology for the following research is qualitative in nature. The research which attempts to explore the cinematic representation of the changing status and role of women in the decade of the 1960-70s has primarily employed literature review and content analysis, attempting to use select

films as empirical data, corroborating the argument formulated through the course of the research. Content analysis is a research instrument primarily used in quantitative research. Berelson describes content analysis as "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. (Bryman, 2016: 18). However content analysis finds usage in qualitative research as well, where it is often termed as "ethnographic content analysis". Ethnographic content analysis is a term employed by Altheide (1996) to refer to an approach to documents "that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts." (Bryman, 2016: 228.) It is also often referred to as qualitative content analysis. Just like most approaches that are described as ethnographic, this too entails an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance of the same with reference to the context at hand. Qualitative content analysis entails a recursive and reflexive movement between content-development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data and finally analysis interpretation. This method aims to be systematic and analytic but at the same time, flexible. Certain categories and variables are decided upon at the initiation of the research, to help guide the study, but it is expected that other categories will emerge during the course of the study. Thus with this method, there is a great deal of movement back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis as well as interpretation, than involved in most other studies. Unlike quantitative content analysis, the categories are not fixed at the initiation of the research, keeping space for flexibility and alteration (Bryman: 2016). While the first segment of my research attempts to explore the socio-historical trajectory of the urban space of Kolkata that had an intensive impact on the status and role of women, the second segment locates the historical trajectory within the discourse of cinema, using citations from select films (both alternative and commercial) of the decade of the 1960-70s to arrive at an argument that is corroborated by the empirical data (films in this regard).

1.2 Limitations:

The major limitation of this research is that it entails citation of data that has been collected through the method of content analysis. As opposed to field work, where there is an active respondent, in this case of content analysis, the empirical data gathered is premised on a thematic analysis, the quality of which is dependent on the choice and skill of the researcher. The inference reached upon is thus based on a subjective understanding of the cultural text rather than on respondent's opinion of the same. However, having said that it becomes essential to point out at this juncture that cultural text especially cinema is an essential medium that represents the ongoing ideology existent in society. The institution of cinema is also responsible for the propagation of ideologies within a

temporal context. Hence studying films as cultural texts helps one understand the extent to which cinema represented the cultural stereotypes of the generation and to what extent it impacted the same. This makes the study of films of singular significance even in the face of lack of empirical clarity.

2. Calcutta Revisited: From Partition to Naxalbari

From its beginning, under the auspices of the colonial rulers, the historic city of Calcutta has been subject to multiple structural changes bringing in its trail similar changes in habitational ethos and social mores. The initial phase of structural transformation, leading to the creation of the city of Kolkata through the amalgamation of the villages of Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kolikata, that gave way to the colonial categories of the White town and the Black town.

With the shift of the capital of the colonial administration from Calcutta to Delhi, 19th century witnessed certain significant changes. Independence in trade and commerce were accompanied by the rising influence of the Bengali 'bhadrolok', most of who settled in the southern parts of the city such as Ballygunge and Bhowanipore. The emergence of the middle class Bangali 'bhadrolok' was the culmination of three distinct factors: the introduction of the printing press, the introduction of new schools considered as the indispensible entry points into modern liberal professions, and clerical jobs in government or mercantile offices. However a complete the surrender to the colonial discourse was seldom a phenomenon among the 'new literati' (Bannerjee: 2016).

Post- Independence Bengal was characterized by another major wave of structural change that altered its demographic and territorial space. This change had less to do with the economic process of urbanization and more with the ramifications of the political event that Partition of Bengal was. The flow of refugees from the eastern parts of the Bengal into and around the city of Kolkata occurred in several spurts that began in 1947 and went on till 1971. Following from Chatterjee, the 1951 census found only 33.2 % of the city's inhabitants to be Calcutta born (Chatterjee, N 1990: 70). The exodus which began in 1946 and continued for the next four decades had a traumatic impact on the lives of the migrants as well as the individuals of the host city. Thus to understand the city of Calcutta as a physical entity as well as a cultural process, it becomes significant to trace the process of migration and refugee influx. The minorities who fled from East Pakistan were not a homogenous category and could be differentiated by period and context. Migration to the city led to acute congestion and giving rise to squatters colonies characterized by forcible occupation of barracks and collective takeover of private and government lands, for the establishment of colonies. Such seizures often led to clashes between the settlers and the agents of zaminders. The plight of the refugees found sympathy from the communists and leftist opposition which led to radicalization of politics in West Bengal. The government wili-nily had to accede to

rehabilitation schemes. Urban settlement in the Calcutta region included townships in parts of North 24 parganas and mostly south parts of Calcutta (Chatterjee, N: 1990).

In general, spates of migration led to gradual immiserization of the state, more particularly the city of Calcutta. Inevitably, this rapid, enforced, and somewhat chaotic demographic change had a major impact on the political, economic and cultural character of the city. The Congress established itself as the party of the order in the meantime, appealing to the mass through its age old nationalist credentials and its new programmes of Nehruvian Socialism. However, despite multiple attempts, the government seemed incapable of tackling the rapidly escalating economic problems that threatened to tear at the social fabric of the city. The crisis of the refugee influx was tied up with the growing economic problems, the full repercussions of which were felt in the decade of the 1960-70s. The political upheavals characteristic of the decade of the 1960-70s had their roots in the Partition of Bengal which had severe impacts on the jute industry of Bengal. As Bagchi noted, West Bengal was dependent on East Pakistan for the raw products which they were denied access to, post the partition; as a result the jute mills located on the banks of river Hooghly were shut down, alongside an exodus of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. The export of tea that was transported through the waterways connected to the river Padma was also stopped short, post the Partition (Bagchi: 1998). Suddenly there was an overwhelming population in the city that could not find means of engagement in the labour market. The 1960s was characterized by severe poverty that was premised in lack of jobs. Calcutta was one of the first urban spaces to encounter industrial stagnation, rising foodgrain prices and shortage, lack of housing and the intractable problem of educated unemployment. With the Nehruvian dream of socialism reaching its decline, hundreds of educated youth found themselves without the means to sustain themselves. Instruments of mass agitation were answered by administrative measures to impede or disrupt public rallies; often such measures would include large scale arrests and shootings on demonstrators. While Writers' Buildings, Raj Bhavan and the Assembly House were the centres from which the state was being controlled, Esplanade East, the monument and the Brigade parade grounds were the rallying points of mass protest (Chatterjee, P: 1990).

The later decades of the 1960s saw a series of political changes with two consecutive United Front governments succeeding each other. While there were ruptures in the Congress in Bengal, the Communist Party was being ripped apart by internal dissentions. The 1967 rift in the communist party ultimately led to a much more radical movement noted as the Naxalbari movement. The late 1960s and the early 1970s was a tumultuous time in West Bengal that

witnessed the shift of the Naxalbari movement from the rural areas to the urban space. The movement originated in Naxalbari, a region in the eastern Indian province of West Bengal in 1967. Following from Majumdar, the Naxalite movement can be described as providing an alternate vision to the neoliberal agenda of development supported by the Indian state and the upwardly mobile classes (Majumder: 2016). The 'Naxalites' refer to the left segments of India's communist political movement that had its roots in similar movements in Nepal and Bangladesh in South Asia. The movement originated in Naxalbari, a region in the eastern Indian province of West Bengal in 1967. One of the most prominent revolutionary movements of the decade, Naxalism resonates with the doctrines perpetrated by the Marxism-Leninism- Mao Zedong school of thought. Since its origin, the Naxalbari movement has enjoyed significant support among the rural landless and lower-peasant workers and indigenous communities. The CPI(ML) faction of the communist party of India that was formed under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar, owed its origin to a series of splits within the Indian Communist movement, starting with India's war against Communist China in 1962 and the Sino-Soviet conflict over the strategies of "world revolution" in the 1960s; the Indian Communist party split in two in 1964 with the CPI(M) claiming its allegiance to Mao Zedong ideologies and Maoist China as opposed to the old Communist party of India (CPI) that was aligned with the Indo-Soviet bloc. The Naxalite movement that fought for the landowning rights of the sharecroppers and peasant workers post the failure of the post-independence land reforms was often proscribed by the Indian state for their terrorist activities. 1970s Calcutta was characterized by anti-establishment measures on part of the Naxals that was retaliated with arbitrary murders of alleged Naxal youth on part of the government. In many ways the Naxalbari movement that stood for everything anti-administration, signified distrust in the government that was unable to create productive employment for the youth. The decade was characterized by expressions of political radicalism that got manifested through street graffiti and other cultural forms.

As Chatterjee (1990) noted, the entire movement, the frenzied sloganeering, the exaggerated iconoclasm, the anger, the impatience, was premised in the economic crisis that the middle class urban youth found themselves in, in the mid-1960s. The food movement of 1962 brought a major part of the youth into active party politics primarily within the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The rapidly progressing agitational politics among the industrial working class that was hard hit by the poverty and the food shortages led the way for vanguardist action on part of the mobilized youth. Resistance on part of the state entailed

intensive state repression between 1970-73, where the city started resembling a battleground that was marked with the imprints of running footsteps, bombing, combing operations and encounters (Chatterjee: 1990). The above mentioned image of the living city of the 1960-70s has found representation in various cultural texts of the time, more specifically in alternative cinema of the decade. While factory strikes and lockouts were a major background theme in the city films of Ray, the political crisis during the years of the Naxalbari movement found representation in the city films of Mrinal Sen, more specifically, *Padatik(1973)* and *Calcutta 71 (1971).*

At this juncture it can be inferred that the structural changes that the city witnessed in the post independent decades had their roots in turbulent political ethos that was characteristic of the subsequent decades after Partition. Just as the colonial discourse had its overbearing on the cultural landscape of the city, followed by the nationalist discourse in the late 19th and 20th century, so also, Partition marked a watershed point, whereby the subsequent events that unfolded had an impact on the structural and cultural landscape of the city. Mapping the political landscape of the city in the decades of post-independence thus brings us to my first research question: What was the impact of the socio-political milieu on the role and status of women in West Bengal in the post- independence decades, more specifically in the decade of the 1960-70s?

A bird's-eye view of the conditions of women in Calcutta since 1947 explores the contradictions that women had to tackle operating between the dual pulls of marginalization and empowerment. Indeed Calcutta, the city of Renaissance, had started to shake off traditions such as Purdah in the late 19th century itself, but it was only after Independence that the tradition was swept away completely, somewhat out of compulsion. Following from Bagchi (1990), " just like in most social upheavals, it was the women who bore the main brunt of displacement, carrying the burden of day-to-day living often on the platforms of the Sealdah station, where trainloads of women arrived with their children and menfolk from the distant parts of East Bengal" (Bagchi 1990: 42). However the same fate that brought the uprooted, marginalized women to Calcutta opened up opportunities for the middle class Bengali Hindu women. This is not to say that class wasn't an instrument of stratification when it came to jobs being availed by the women. Nonetheless, the plight of refugee women that forced them to take up jobs in the public sphere made way for other middle class Bengali women of the host city to venture into the public sphere to take up public duties. This was an immediate response to the equal rights guaranteed by the Constitution to all the citizens

irrespective of gender. However, this is not to say that this led to an alteration of the role set for women; infact women's entry into the public sphere was marked by her experiences of multiple conflicts that she had to encounter in the public and the private sphere. Ironically, it was the city's economic status that accorded women more visibility in the public sphere. Calcutta no longer remained a 'male city' where women merely existed. They were active individuals taking part in public duties. The opening up of a number of new schools and colleges, as well as two new universities further led to widespread education among women. However, the spread of education was scattered and inconsistent across class boundaries.

However the entry of women into the public sphere functioned with a politics of its own. Being a working woman did not imply a change of role set for the woman. It simply implied an alteration whereby now she had to take the burden of the responsibilities within the public and the private sphere. The middle class Bengali woman now had purchasing power but that did not imply their emancipation from the reproductive sphere that Engels had discussed. Even though women had the freedom to enter the public sphere having received the education required, it was more often than not, an act out of economic compulsions. Such a stance has its premise in the notions of respectability that was synonymous with the idea of the 'bengali bhadramahila'; a nineteenth century coinage that discreetly had class underpinnings, retained its form even in the twentieth century. Such cultural constructs that the 20th century woman had to struggle with as part of her 'everyday' have been explored by various cultural mediums, most significantly cinema. Both alternative and commercial cinema of the decade of the 1960-70s have discussed the role and position of women within the purview of the then existing cultural stereotypes and the contradictions that they involved.

2.1 Medium of Representation:

Invariably, as a given probability, the radical political crisis found representation in the new wave cinema of the decade that was foregrounded in the turbulent rhetoric of the times. That way, the 1960s was a glorious decade in the world of cinema, not only in Europe, but in Third world countries as well. Biswas (1990:302) notes that the cinema of this decade was borne out of its own history and self -consciousness as an art form. As societies in Calcutta started promoting alternative cinema, cinema gradually became an important medium that resonated with the ongoing crisis and cultural stereotypes representative of the decade. Needless to say, the role and position of women within the urban space of Kolkata, now saddled with refugee crisis, featured as a central issue in many of these new wave films. Thus to explore the cultural landscape characteristic of a decade, it becomes essential to read these

new-realist films as a cultural text to be decoded, given the varied forms of realism explored through alternative cinema. The films of Ray, Ghatak and Sen expressed a certain form of humanism that attempted to locate the individuals within an urban milieu which was on one hand ravaged by the effects of Partition and dealing with the contradictions of modernity on the other. However, in addition to such high-brow cinema, as the realist films of the decade could be referred to, the 1960s also saw the rise of a new phenomenon where cinema became a star vehicle. Most of these, so to speak low-brow (commercial) films starred Uttam Kumar (Arun Kumar Chatterjee) who survived the stature of a superstar for more than two decades. If we are to look at cinema as a totality of experience in order to understand the intricacies of the social conditions that govern us, it becomes essential to use both the categories of cinema as equally relevant cultural texts, to reach a conjecture about the research objective at hand. While the high-brow films discussed the challenges of the 'bhadramahila' within the cultural contradictions of modernity, the political narrative of the times and the plight of the refugee population forced to become a part of the stagnant economy, the commercial cinema of the decade dealt with the incongruities through narratives that attempted to elaborate on the cultural stereotypes through familiarity and predictability. The family was one of the most important units of these narratives, the ideological apparatus a mechanism, never questioned. As mentioned previously, the Bengali bhadramahila played a significant role in both categories of films. The following chapter takes the discussion further in the context of the role and position of women within the urban milieu of the 1960-70s.

3. The Feminized City: Creation of a continuum between the home and the world

3.1 Women and the Public Sphere: A History

The role and position of women in society has featured as a central issue in multiple debates over social reform since the early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal, in the wake of the Bengal Renaissance. Nineteenth century Bengal was characterized by reform movements such as abolition of sati, initiation of widow remarriage etc. However, given the historical trajectory, one might note that the women's question no longer remained an explicit matter of discussion within the public discourse towards the mid- nineteenth century. Following from Chatterjee (1993), Ghulam Murshid states that the mid-nineteenth century attempts to liberate the woman in many ways entailed an attempt to modernize the woman, a kind of modernization premised in the ideas of Enlightenment. However the reform movements, according to Murshid, saw a decline towards the end of the nineteenth century on account of the nationalist discourse that tended to glorify tradition in an attempt to seize power from the colonizers. As a result, the women's question disappeared as a major topic of discussion from the public discourse altogether. However Chatterjee differs from Murshid's argument and notes that the relative unimportance of women towards the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century needs to be explained with respect to the nationalist agenda situating the women's question within the inner domain of sovereignty, one that was far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. In the process of locating women within the arena of the inner domain of sovereignty, the Nationalist discourse, notes Chatterjee, separated the domain of culture into two spheres---- The material and the spiritual. Dismissing the civilizational perspective adopted by the colonial discourse, that identified tradition as degenerate and barbaric, the nationalist discourse sought to separate the domains of culture into the two distinctive spheres mentioned above. The claims of the Western civilization found manifestation in the material sphere. The nationalist project attempted to rationalize and reform the traditional culture of the people through the use of rational forms of economic organization and modern methods of statecraft as learnt from the West. However the material sphere was the only domain in which imitation of the West was acceptable. The nationalist project recognized the increasing necessity to distinguish the West from the East, one that was achieved through strengthening the spiritual essence that was the hallmark of the East. An intricate analysis of the nationalist project further reveals that the material and the spiritual domain were constitutive of an analogous but ideologically superior dichotomy: the

inner and the outer. The inner and outer distinction separates the social space into 'ghar' and 'bahir', the home and the world. The world is the external, the treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, typically the domain of the male. The home inevitably, unaffected by the profane activities of the material world, resonated with the woman. Thus social spaces were demarcated by the nationalist project in accordance with gender roles (Chatterjee: 1993).

In many ways, this seemingly resonates with the Western conceptualizations of the distinction between the public and the private that has been the topic of social contract theory and feminist thought since the early nineteenth century.

The 'public sphere', as conceptualized by Western feminists, more emphatically second wave feminists, refers to everything outside of the familial space. Such a conceptualization conflates three distinctive analytical categories vis-a-vis the state, the official economy of paid employment and arenas of public discourse. The conflation of the three arenas serves as an instrument of misogynistic cultural representation that emphasize state censorship or when struggles to de-privatize housework and childcare are equated with their commodification. In either case the objective is to obstruct the question as to whether to subject gender issues to the logic of the market or to the administration of state is to promote the liberation of women. Fraser, following from Joan Landes, Mary Ryan et al, notes that the despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility, the public sphere rested on and was constituted by a number of significant exclusions. Landes argues that the key of exclusion in the formulation of the public sphere was gender. Masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere in France that, at the height of the Jacobin rule, led to the formal exclusion of the political life of women. Drawing on classical traditions that cast femininity and publicity as oxymoron, the republicans premised their argument on the etymological connection between 'pubic' and 'public'. Fraser, following from Mary Ryan's documentations, elaborates on the variety of ways in which the nineteenth century North American women of various classes and ethnicities constructed access routes to public political life despite their exclusion from the official public sphere (Fraser: 1990)

The distinction of the public and the private sphere has been conceptualized differently within the purview of social contract theory. Arendt begins her discussion with an acknowledgement of the private and the public as distinctive categories. The public sphere or the 'polis' is the arena of rational discussion that bears semblance to the state, more

significantly the civil society. The private sphere on the other hand is the domain of the household, the domain of nurture and socialization. The theoretical premise of Arendt's conceptualization of the public and the private sphere could be traced back to the social contract theories. As Plato stated in Republic, the main division however, a sexual one: "A man's virtue lies in knowing how to administer the state while a woman's is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband" (441).

For the social contract theorists, women were beings whose sex prevented them from taking part in the public sphere or have the same political standing as men. This is many ways demarcated the boundaries of active agency for women alongside associating fixed roles in accordance with their gender. Rousseau in his work on the "The Social Contract and Discourses" (1913) defines differential virtue and function for the two sexes that determined the roles for which women would be trained in the course of their formative years. For Arendt however, the private sphere was significant in the sense that it was a 'domain of necessity'. A key insight into Arendt's conceptualization of the private sphere is that actions within the private sphere play a significant role in restoring the pluralism of the public sphere; this in many ways is significant in restoring plurality of critical thought within the public sphere. A robust public sphere is thus a space for robust expression of plurality of views. Thus to avoid political stagnancy it becomes essential for the public sphere to exist. While Arendt's argument on the public sphere is significant in the sense that it doesn't discount the significance of the private sphere while emphasizing on the importance of the public sphere, it does not talk about the exclusionary politics involved in the distinctive categorizations of the public and the private (Arendt: 1998). As many feminists have argued, the demarcation of the public and the private is in many ways an attempt to maintain the asymmetrical power structure that restricts women from entering the arena of politics or become active agents capable of critical thought or economic independence. On one hand such theories attempted to naturalize the work done by women at home by categorizing it as work done out of 'love' while on the other they attempted to restrain women within the domains of the household and maintain the asymmetrical power structure at play.

A cursory glance at the nationalist project in India in the late nineteenth century might make it seem no different from the typical theorization of gender roles that bears semblance with the western theorizations that determine the categories of the public and private. But a closer exploration, as Chatterjee notes, reveals that the nationalist paradigm functioned on a principle of selection, one that was not premised on a dismissal of modernity, but on an attempt to make

modernity consistent with the nationalist project. While early nineteenth century writings were critical of the impact of Westernization on women and considered the western woman a creature fond of useless luxury, the upsurge of the nationalist project ushered in a change in ideology. In 1851, marshalled by an essay on "Hindu Female Education", the issue of women's education gained primacy. By the end of the 19th century, women's education was not only considered a necessity, but also a respectable affair. However, no matter the changes in the external conditions of life for women, the crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous life. The nationalist discourse ascertained that the essential distinctions between the social roles of men and women were to be maintained under all circumstances in terms of material and spiritual virtues, even if that implied different degrees of westernization for men and women. There has however been much controversy about the precise application of the home/world, the masculine and feminine dichotomies in various matters concerning the modern woman, such as her attire, her way of speaking etc. The modern woman was contrasted with the colonial woman as well as the lower class women. The modern woman came to be known for her proper demeanour, her education, sense of domestic responsibilities as well as her newly acquired freedom. The new woman was thus subjected to a new patriarchy, one that was a reformed, reconstructed and fortified against the colonial charges of barbarism and irrationality. The nationalist project however feared proselytization and thus made Bengali the official language in which formal education was received by these women. Much of the content of modern education was seen as essential for the middle class woman, but administration of the same in English language was difficult because it threatened to devalue the 'home' as the central site and social position of women. Thus the nationalist discourse marked the autonomy of the middle class woman in so far as she managed to exhibit her cultural superiority when contrasted with the Western woman. Thus the nationalist project made the boundaries flexible for the Bengali woman within a predetermined domain of socially acceptable behaviour for both men and women. The modern woman was free in so far as the spiritual signs of her femininity were marked. The modern woman was free to go out into the world and attain her freedom, but never forget that her place lies at home. Her behaviour under any circumstances must not give in to frivolity that entailed smoking, drinking or any such jocundity. In many ways, it enabled her to move out of the physical confines of home, become a voting citizen but under conditions that would not threaten her spiritual purity or her femininity (Chatterjee, P: 1993).The late 19th and early 20th century woman was thus subjected to a neo-patriarchy that involved a paradox. On one hand her freedom as an acting individual with access to the public sphere was celebrated and on the other hand, she was

expected to abide by a cultural ideal type ascertained for the respectable[1] woman. Using the above mentioned theoretical premise as the grounding for the formulation of existing cultural stereotypes of the 19th and early 20th century, my research attempts to explore the changing role and position of women within the public sphere in the late 20th century, especially in the decade of the 1960-70s. To reach upon an inference corroborated by empirical data, I have used a selection of films as cultural texts; conducting a thematic analysis of the above mentioned films, this chapter is an attempt to explore the cinematic representation of the changing status and role of women in the mid twentieth century in West Bengal within the above mentioned theoretical premise of the private and the public sphere.

3.2 Cinematic Representation of the changing role and status of twentieth century women in West Bengal:

The cultural reading of a society can be conducted by exploring the multiple forms of cultural text available, be it novels, cinema, theatre at al. This chapter will primarily focus on the reading of cinema as a cultural text in order to infer the changing status of women in the decade of the 1960-70s, in order to explore the changing economic status of women in West Bengal. Changes in the cultural and political milieu have invariable impact on the status and position of women, especially with the existence of a ready market for the products of such cultural consumption. In this regard, Bhattacharya notes that women are not simply consumers of culture but also producers of culture. The modes of representation through various cultural texts are not simply examples of the present status of women, but also ways in which the text attempts to inscribe the cultural patterns existent in society. For the purpose of this chapter, I have attempted at an analysis of popular and art films of the decade of the 1960-70s that attempt to the cultural and economic status of women. My research is entirely qualitative in the sense that it consists of content analysis of selected films that successfully

---

[1] The notion of respectability was synonymous with the Bengali Bhadramahila, more specifically the middle class women, who had access to cultural capital and subsequently a socialization that resonated with the nineteenth century notions of respectability. This class of women were the subjects of the Nationalist discourse, that sought to educate them but within the hegemonic construct of the inner and the outer domain. Given that the theorization of the Nationalist discourse pertained to this specific class of women, it becomes essential at this juncture to address the appropriateness of the citing examples of female characters from films, all of whom might, at first glance, not seem to belong to the middle class category. Given the economic stagnation of the mid twentieth century, many women hailing from middle class and aspiring middle class families were forced to resort to so called unrespectable professions to sustain themselves. As far as visual representation goes, Bengali films of the period time and again has shown that the middle class women who were compelled to take up prostitution as a means of living, bereft of all opportunity, attempted to replicate their middle class ideologies even within unconventional contexts. Curiously, one notices in many of such representations, the ingrained middle class value system that they tended to replicate in their so called non respectable roles. This drives a clear wedge between the 'low class' prostitutes and the middle class mahila turned prostitute. Nishi Padma, that has been discussed elaborately in the next chapter drives home the conjecture in question.

establish the changing position and role of women in society. The films that I will be discussing in this chapter could be categorized into two distinctive categories: The mainstream popular cinema and the more serious art films by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha, et al. Much of the popular cinema consisted of adaptations of novels, where modernity was an underlying theme that resonates with the Nehruvian idea of a Modern idea. The more serious films of the late 1960-70s that can be categorized as 'parallel cinema' concerned itself with issues such as the recognition of women's oppressed and marginalized predicament. While this 'othering' of cinema is problematic in the sense that it creates an audience divide, the women here were represented as products of diverse social formations, seeking to transcend their difficult circumstances, caught in the contradictory whirlpool of modernity and tradition, the past and the present.

The city (Calcutta), in the process, became an object of documentation in films, attempting to depict the immediate and contemporary. Mapping the city through the films of the decade one is able to understand how the ethos of modernity within the discourse of the nationalist project had ramifications that transformed the worldview of the 'bengali bhadralok' and 'Bhadramahila'. The decade of the 1960-70s was characterized by more and more women joining the workforce to earn sustenance for the family. Films and novels of the period abound with instances of women resorting to prostitution out of sheer economic desperation. They also document the experiences of the middle class woman whose domain of existence was not limited to the private sphere any longer. Of the various cultural expressions, cinema is one medium that has majorly explored a nuanced expression of the encounters on part of women as they ventured into world.

3.3 Twentieth century Bengal: An Introduction

The nationalist discourse, by the end of the 19th century had ensured that the boundaries had become flexible for the modern Indian woman. She now had the right to education and the freedom to seek employment in the public realm. By the beginning of the 20th century the respectable working woman was no longer a myth. Mid-twentieth century on the other hand brought Independence in its wake. With no colonial enemy to challenge, the nationalist project gave way to newer sets of problems. The new challenge now entailed issues regarding the exact constitution of the modern nation state and the problems that the Partition of India brought in its wake. This is not to say that the way in which the nationalist discourse envisaged the private and the public sphere completely disappeared. In other words, the content remained the same, while the form altered with relevance to the current problems of

the nation. The mid twentieth century, which is the focal timeline of my research, witnessed political turbulences in the wake of Partition, the subsequent refugee crisis and the failure of the union front government to procure jobs for the ever increasing population finally culminating into the Naxalbari movement of the 1970s (discussed more elaborately in the second chapter).

3.4 Films marking the footsteps of women in the world outside

One of the most important social events of Post Partition Bengal was the massive refugee influx from East Pakistan that had major reflections on the urban landscape, particularly on the city of Calcutta. The refugees entering the city largely settled down in the southern parts, mostly wet and fallow lands belonging to zaminders who from time to time used to send *lethals* to evict them. Suddenly there was an overwhelming population in the city that could not find means of engagement in the labour market. Ghatak's films such as *Subarnarekha* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, both of which had female protagonists, discuss the plight of the refugees post their migration from East Bengal. Both of the films highlight issues such as poverty (premised in lack of jobs) , search for a home and most importantly elaborate on how the political event of Partition was responsible for tearing the social fabric of the 'everyday' in the lives of the refugees. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, a poignant narrative of refugee family trying to make their ends meet within the politically discursive urban space, narrates the story through the life and sacrifices of Nita, the oldest female of the younger generation as she strives to provide sustenance for her family. Realizing that the family cannot depend on her older brother for sustenance, Nita steps into the domain of public sphere, to earn a living.

Nita (Supriya Debi) in a shot from Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960)

One of the most iconic sequences from the film captures her footsteps as she walks back from her workplace, through the city, to the home that never has been. Ghatak, just as in most of his films, relies on sound and affect to represent the complexities and predicaments of the new urban space as well as its ramifications on the life of the protagonist. While Nita's brother pursues his dream of becoming a singer and her sister decides to get married to escape the poverty and complexity of migrant existence, Nita has no option but to seek economic pursuits to look after her ageing parents. However her entry into the public sphere is met with pity rather than acceptance; her sister's affluent marriage with the man Nita was supposed to marry is met with nonchalance portraying a certain selfishness as she is the breadwinner of the family. The nationalist discourse might not have had concrete existence during the decade of the 1960s, but the working woman was yet to be valorized for her independence. Infact what gained primacy in contrast was a successful marriage and a wholesome life. Nita's life of compromise ultimately ends in sudden death, but the narrative seamlessly discusses the existent position and role of women in society. They may have had to venture into the public sphere but it was only an act out of compulsion, not independent choice. The place of the ideal respectable woman was still within the spiritual domains.

Subarnarekha (1965), another stellar film by Ghatak, narrates the story of a man who travels from East Pakistan to West Bengal with his little sister and an estranged young boy in search of a new home. While he sends the young boy to Calcutta for education, the young girl, his sister, stays at home learning music, in other words, the respectable upbringing for the middle class Bengali woman. Beyond the immediate narrative of the film, one is able to understand the cultural stereotypes that revolved around the lives of the women. While in the first segment, the elder brother made the choice of her pursuits, in the second segment, her husband does the same, when he refuses to honour her wish to contribute to the family earning by making singing a profession. The film reaches its climax with the death of the husband and Sita's compulsion of taking up prostitution bereft of any other means of sustenance for herself and her son.

Still from Subarnarekha(1965)

The 1960s was characterized by severe poverty that was characterized by lack of jobs. This was accompanied by factory strikes, bank liquidations, lockouts, food movement, strikes by workers' unions and an increasing disdain for the union front government that was unable to create job opportunities for a large part of the population. To combat the enemy, this was unemployment and poverty, more and more women starting entering the public sphere in order to sustain themselves. At this juncture one could raise the question as to why the entry of women into the public sphere was a reason of compulsion rather than a normalized affair. Hadn't the nationalist discourse already legitimized the existence of women within the public sphere? There can be two ways of answering this question. One, that the nationalist discourse primarily talked about middle class and upper middle class women who had access to education and for whom it was a respectable necessity. Many of the films that I have cited in this segment discuss the lives of lower middle class women who neither had the privilege of receiving education nor were considered a part of the category "bhadramahila" that the nationalist discourse had pondered upon. Second, the nationalist discourse consistently sustained the paradox that even through women had the freedom to enter the public sphere, it was preferred that she remain within the domains of the private sphere so as not to tarnish the spiritual domain of traditional purity. Thus from this standpoint one can understand the significance of economic compulsion in pushing women out of the domains of the private sphere even in the mid twentieth century. The following films, discuss the conditions under which lower middle class women entered the public sphere in the decade of the 1960-70s; the compulsion of economic independence became a reason for blasting the iconic identity between 'home' and 'woman'. But in a constantly shrinking job market, modes of earning could take quite unanticipated and extreme forms which in no way was in sync with the much valorised middle class respectability.

The first film that I want to cite as an example of the above discussed statement is *Pratidwandi(1970). Pratidwandi (1970),* a film by Satyajit Ray that primarily explores the struggles of an unemployed young man in his mid-twenties, explores through isolated shots, the daily routine of a lower middle class woman, selling her body in order to earn a comfortable living. While this is certainly not the thematic thrust of the film, this independent shot is a window into the world of the lower-middle class woman who had to dismantle her sense of morality to overcome poverty.

Calcutta 71(1971), the main theme of which is poverty and its consequences uses the plots of the 4 stories that do not to delve into the socio-economic reasons of poverty but on the human reactions to debasement and misery. The film begins with a montage of newsreel shots of Calcutta (now Kolkata) bound together by a violent soundtrack that firmly establishes the milieu and the zeitgeist of the city in the early 1970s. The second segment of *Calcutta 71(1971)* set during the Bengal famine of 1943, portrays the narrative of Shobhana – the young woman who along with her teenaged sister is forced into prostitution with the active complicity of their own mother.


Still from Calcutta 71 (1971)

Shobhana, the protagonist, protests against the terrible injustice by committing suicide unable to bear the hypocrisy of the attempt to maintain the pretence of middle-class dignity. The segment also subverts the persona of the self-sacrificing mother so common in mainstream Indian cinema – it is the mother, despite her squeaky clean appearance, who forces her progeny into a life of misery for her own material and social comforts. The segment is devoid of any sense of melodrama nor there is any overt attempt to draw empathy – the characters remain true to their social types and the sparse dialogues convey nothing beyond the minimum information necessary for the progression of the story. The second segment of

Calcutta 71(1971) thus explores the interaction of women with poverty as they resort to selling their bodies to provide for the sustenance of their family. The climactic moment of the segment revolves around intra-familial clash over the compulsion of making this choice.

Jana Aranya (1976) even though outlining a similar thematic, is a bolder statement on the harsh choices that women and even men had had to make to sustain themselves. The climactic moment of the film witnesses the moral dilemma faced by the protagonist as he realizes that while playing pimp for a client, he is infact being forced to deal with his friend's sister, who has resorted to prostitution to keep her family afloat. The film is significant in the context of this study not only because it portrays the occupational choices that women had to make in the throes of economic crisis, but also because it highlights how the sense of morality deemed appropriate for the middle class Bengali woman was losing its hegemonic control. The film narrates the protagonist attempting to rescue the woman from the immediate situation as well as others, but the woman exercises her choice to go ahead with the services for which she was being paid for. Such ideological clarity that resonates with independence on part of the woman hailing from the 1960s marks a significant juncture implying a change of time and subsequently the ideological discourse that visibly had ramifications on the position of women in society.

While *Calcutta 71(1971)* depicts the moral dilemma being experienced by the women who had no choice but to choose the aforesaid profession, *Jana Aranya(1976)* represents a stage beyond that where the inner conflict on part of the lower middle class bengali woman has been replaced by an instrumental attitude towards the job that facilitated her survival

The blurred boundaries between the private and the public sphere can also be understood as a signifier of a changing worldview of the 'bengali bhadrolok' who could no longer afford to maintain his stance as the sole bread earner in the decade of unemployment and factory strikes. *Mahanagar (1963)*, a film by Ray reflects the changing ideology of the 'bangali bhadrolok', who, disdainful at first, is ultimately forced to accept the woman in the family as the primary breadwinner of the family after he loses his job. While the first half of the film narrates the experiences of a woman entering the public realm on account of economic crisis, as the film proceeds, the narrative starts exploring the agency of the working woman who has newly discovered economic independence and the significance of purchasing power.
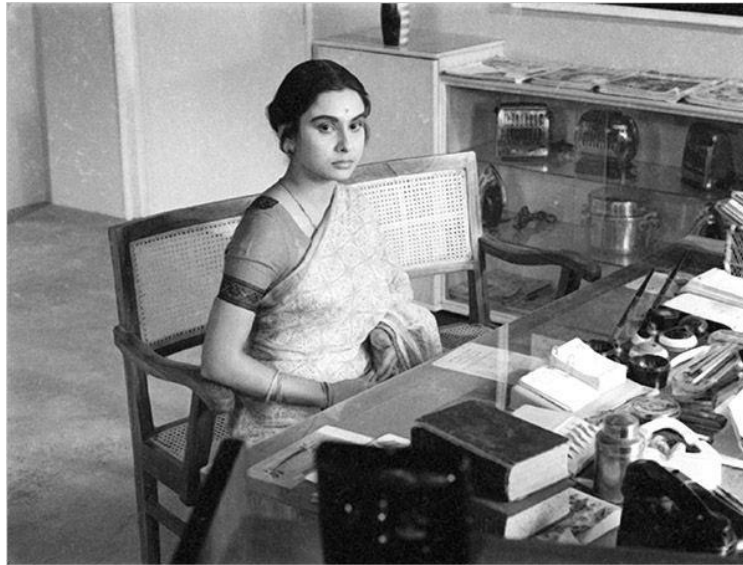
Arati(Madhabi Mukherjee) in a shot from Mahanagar (1963)

One of the landmark shot sequence in this context is that of the protagonist distributing gifts to the members of the family, that she has bought with her own money. Her role within the private sphere also entails certain changes in the sense that she is no longer expected to perform the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning etc. One cannot however say that the content of the role within the private sphere is altered completely, bringing back the significance and lasting impact of the nationalist discourse into the picture. The protagonist, now a working woman, is first and foremost a mother, a wife and a daughter in law. Her sense of domestic responsibilities might have witnessed alternations but only mildly so, as she is still expected to be responsible for the upbringing of her child even though the husband is primarily the one present at home.

While exploring the negotiations of the modern woman in the private and the public sphere and the nuances of the same, one should take note of the fact that the decade of the 1960-70s was a time when women had started to assert themselves within the discourse of the public sphere as well as the private. However the assertion of the woman at home can be further problematized in the sense that in no way did it lead to breaking the stereotypes formulated by the nationalist discourse about the ideal role of a modern Indian woman. Representations of the same are found in popular and art films of the decade that discuss the working woman asserting her newfound agency within the discourse of the public sphere and the private sphere.

For instance, *Bilambito Lay (1970)* traces the life of a successful as she makes her way into a male dominated arena of films and music, while she deals with the struggles in her marriage

with a painter whose art was far too progressive to receive the deserved acclaim at the time. The narrative of the film portrays her successes and her failures, but most importantly elaborates on her agency as an independent woman capable of creating a niche for herself in a previously male dominated public sphere.

Still from Bilambita Lay (1970)

As she becomes a prominent singer, the audience can note certain significant changes that have come into her personality. At some point in the narrative her relationship with her husband becomes one that is premised on competition, where she chooses to go ahead in her life at the cost of crushing the patriarchal gestures exhibited by her husband. She refuses to put up with the arbitrary and egotistic rants of her unemployed artist husband, chooses to divorce him, subsequently opting for a lonely and peaceful life. It is representative of the modern woman who is no longer afraid to live her life on her own terms, asserting her agency, even if that comes at the cost of the loss of marital privileges. The ending of the film however portrays her loneliness with the film ending with her going back to her husband. However one cannot find traces of the woman as envisaged by the nationalist discourse in this context. The protagonist of Bilambito Lay is the quintessential modern woman who exercises her agency without feeling guilty about her role as a woman in society.

Uttar Falguni(1963), a popular film of the decade, portrays the protagonist asserting her agency to work as a 'baiji' to bring up her daughter. Fleeing from an abusive marriage, she does not give in to the sentimental nuances of her pre-marital love with an established lawyer. Rather, she chooses to continue with her profession in an instrumental manner in order to provide for herself and her child. The second half of the film in many ways contrasts her life with that of her daughter's, who has been privileged enough to receive a foreign education and obtain a degree as a lawyer. The contrast between the two women in many ways portrays the difference of social status relating to the nature of profession. The whole idea of

respectability is in itself a nationalist construction and in this context, we find it lurking within the façade of a now modern society that valorizes the independent woman.

Surya Sikha(1963) is another film worth mentioning in the context of female agency as it stands out as an exceptional example. The female lead of this film, Achena, a surgical nurse, chooses to give up her career to build a family with her husband inspite of repetitive persuasive efforts on part of her husband to continue with her job. One of the most iconic scenes from the film narrate how the protagonist, Achena, telling her husband that a woman's role and responsibilities are within the private sphere. An ideal woman needs to realize the same and work on that. When her husband, a doctor, disagrees and wants her to continue with her job, her passion, she leaves him and decides to raise her son on her own. While feminist arguments would focus on the protagonist's right to choose the life she wants for herself, a significant inference that might be drawn from the same is the persistence of the internalization of the discourse of the ideal woman. Achena is an example of the extent and impact of age old socializations that were still thriving within the liberal discourse of the mid twentieth century.

Indrani (1958) another film from a similar period elaborate on the existent conflict between the age old patriarchal traditions that demarcate the boundaries of the woman within the private sphere and the liberal norms that were gradually allowing entry of women into the public sphere. Though the birth of Indrani, the protagonist, is not a matter of celebration for her father, he decides to educate her. Through her dialogues we see the impact of education on the mindset of the younger generation who refuse to accept the private sphere as their domain of existence. When she marries a research scholar fresh out of college, she is nonetheless pushed into the roles and responsibilities within the private sphere. Additionally, she has to face harsh criticism from the rest of the family because of her husband's incompetence in securing a job. On one hand the audience is made aware of the gradual entry of women within the public sphere and on the other they are made privy to the fact that inspite of the existence of such liberal norms, the patriarchal traditions that make the stature of the woman synonymous with her husband's financial competence, reign supreme. However, giving in to the liberal socialization that she has been subjected to, the protagonist decides to take up a job to support her husband's research. The narrative further highlights the take of the society on such an arrangement. Multiple shots of the film explore the reaction of people to the dynamics between the husband and wife as they engage in mockery about the husband for depending on his wife for financial support, all of which later culminates into

the marriage temporarily falling apart. This film is significant because it portrays that even though women are allowed entry into the public sphere, the liberal ideologies existed within a niche that did not find manifestation in the larger society that still believed that the place of the woman was within the private domains. The film highlights that even in the mid twentieth century, where the boundaries for women had apparently become flexible, the role and position of the woman had barely encountered alterations within the larger framework of society.

Thus, the above discussion should not lead one to assume that a linear trajectory of women's emancipation from home is being proposed. It was an enormously amorphous milieu that contained pulls and strains from various directions, often jostling against each other. The 'city air' might not have made women free but it certainly put her to new challenges that fractured the 'traditional' worldview in a very significant way.

4. Conundrum of the Women's Predicament: Towards a Conclusion

My research titled "Women in the city: A Cinematic Exploration of Kolkata (1960-70s) is primarily an exploratory study that has attempted to investigate the changing status and role of women within the urban space of Kolkata. To understand what the modern woman came to be defined as in the post-independence decades, it becomes essential to explore the role and impact of the city in the making of the modern woman.

Modernity as it germinated in our colonized world was in many significant ways coterminous with urbanity. To be modern also meant to be urban. It was in this urban space, that the idea of the new woman with its exclusions and inclusions was conceived. Thus the changing role of women which my thesis aimed at exploring had to accord centrality to the city and its structural changes under the impact of political and economic pulls and pressures. Using Bengali cinema of the decade of the 1960-70s as a form of cultural text, my research has attempted to trace through the thematic analysis of a selection of films, the conceptual contradictions that resonated with the decade.

Post-Independent India was torn apart by the political incident of Partition the ramifications of which can be felt till date. The decades after Partition were especially difficult as it led to a complete structural transformation of the city. Sealdah station became a signifier of the loss of social fabric of the migrants as thousands would crowd the station unable to find shelter within the city. The most visible impact of the refugee influx was the lack of job opportunities for both the host and the migrant population, an additional reason for the same being the stagnant economy of the state at the time. However, a nuanced exploration of the city would reveal that Partition led to the entry of women into the public sphere in a major way. Rampant unemployment and poverty meant that the cultural stereotype that made men the sole earners, providing them exclusive access to the public sphere, got dismantled. Partition in that way became a watershed moment that marked the entry of women into the public sphere. In many ways, hundreds of refugee women started seeking job opportunities in the public sphere, paved the way for the entry of all middle class Bengali women into the public sphere. Many Bengali films of the decade discuss the entry of women into the job market, seeking sustenance through means irrespective of the respectability of the profession.

The narratives of the films that I have analysed for the purpose of my study elaborate the nuances faced by the working woman. While on one hand, her role as the breadwinner was

accepted in the face of the poverty of the decade, the hegemonic stereotype regarding the ideal role set of the woman hardly went through any major transformation. Employment for the woman in most instances was out of economic compulsion rather than independent agency. The liberated woman was still treated with apprehension and scepticism as to what such liberation might do to her respectability. Frivolity that allowed her to trespass the hegemonic stereotypes perpetuated by the nationalist discourse was looked down upon. An example of the same can be found in *Mahanagar (1963),* where the protagonist, a working woman, has to face hurdles in the public sphere, as her respectability is questioned when she wears lipstick (an alleged signifier of the modern liberated woman), by her husband. Wearing makeup was acceptable for the colonial woman, not the nationalist one. Just like the petticoat and blouse worn by the colonial woman (for example the wife in *Ghare Baire* by Satyajit Ray), the lipstick was a western product which like many other Western products was deemed a frivolity by the nationalist discourse. Subsequently, in the film *(Mahanagar),* the husband expresses his disdain for the makeup worn by his wife, post which she throws out the lipstick. This sequence is especially significant because it elaborates on the politics encountered by the so to speak liberated woman. The female protagonist was allowed entry to the public sphere, her responsibilities at home experienced alterations under certain conditions, but her role as the ideal 'Bengali Bhadramahila' required her to maintain her respectability, ascertaining to the cultural norms predefined for the same. She was free, in so far as she was toeing the discursive line set out for her.

Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee) in a shot from Mahanagar (1963)

The entire discourse of the working woman within the trajectory of post-independent India thus bears much resemblance to the nationalist discourse that Chatterjee (1993) had elaborated on. The nationalist discourse that has been discussed elaborately in the previous chapter was constitutive of a significant paradox that the twentieth century resonated with. Women were given access to the public sphere, provided education and respected while seeking equality, in so far as she remained the torchbearer of domestic sphere, her spirit untainted by the modernity characteristic of the twentieth century. This was even more problematic in the mid twentieth century, since the decades resonated with the Nehruvian ideals of Socialism and modernity. The modern nation was to be constituted with women as active citizens, but modernity in regard to women could not traverse the boundaries of respectability. Such selection criteria revolved around the conceptual notion of respectability. To be independent was admired, to be respectable was necessary. This invariably brings us to what exactly respectability meant in the mid twentieth century (the decades of 1960-70s) in this regard. Ironically, it meant almost exactly what it did in the late nineteenth century. What was different in the twentieth century was that the form of manifestation of such neo-patriarchy that the woman was subjected to, had become more discreet. Having said that, one can argue that a film like *Surya Sikha (1963),* where the woman chooses to be a housewife, nullifies the entire argument. However, one can also understand the choice as a result of a deeply imbibed socialization, where she has been taught to accept her role as the nurturer of the 'spiritual domain' of purity.

The discourse of modernity that operated amidst the political crisis of the 1960-70s, was not unlike the nationalist discourse, but one with seemingly more flexible boundaries, and more discreet negotiations. This in many ways resonates with the Foucauldian idea of the 'free subject'. However to understand the Foucauldian subject one needs to go back to the Foucaudian conceptualization of discourse. While tracing the origin and transformation of the nature of discourses in the context of sexuality, Foucault notes that different periods are characterized by different discourses, even though the essential interaction between the subject and power remains the same. In this regard, Foucault elaborates on the forms of power, the channels that it can take and the discourses it functions through, to control the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour. While 17th century was characterized by repressive discourses that made sex and the notion of sexuality invisible from the public discourse, 18th century and the end of the 19th century saw the proliferation of discourses around the notion of sexuality; suddenly sex was a visible phenomenon in the public

discourse, that on one hand gave the couple their discretion, while on the other put sexuality under scrutiny through institutions such as school, family and later medicine. The repressive mechanisms of the 19th century thus did not exclude sexuality, but included it as a mode of specification of individuals who were put under constant scrutiny (Foucault: 1976). It becomes essential at this juncture to point out the significance of institutions such as the family in the proliferation and maintenance of discourses. The family, the primary unit of socialization, becomes the primary unit of dissemination of the ideologies propagated by a given discourse. The above examples of from *Mahanagar(1963)* and *Surya Sikha(1963)* highlight the importance of socialization in the functioning of the nationalist discourse that permeated across generations, finding existence, albeit implicit, in the mid twentieth century. Given the above understanding of discourse, it becomes easier at this point to understand the way in which discourses function. Roughly then, discourses are sets of practices that exist to define the normative pattern of behaviour to be exhibited by an individual who is part of that discourse. It becomes essential at this juncture to add to the understanding of discourses, the understanding of how power that operates through discourses turns an individual into a subject. Following from Foucault, "this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects" (Foucault 1976: 782). Because the individual is a part of the discourse and is formed by the discourse, it becomes difficult for her to resist against the discourse. However because the operation of discourses is put forward as implicit socialization, the repressive nature of the same is not understood by the subject in most instances. Also, the subject in a Foucauldian power relationship is always free. Or she assumes that she is free. For the discourse of power to operate the subject needs to exercise her freedom (Foucault: 1982). Choice is a construct in the Foucauldian definition of the power. The subject is manipulated discreetly, by giving her the impression that she has the power of choice. The power of choice however is limited in so far as it does not traverse the boundaries set by the discourse i.e do not deviate from the normative code of conduct. The individual notes Foucault, is nothing beyond the discourse, because the discourse is what made the individual. The socialization propagated by the discourse is thus the only truth that the individual has access to. This in many ways invariably normalizes the hegemony of the power structure that she is subjected to, and is a part of. What the individual witnesses as her freedom is in reality a myth that is perpetuated to prevent her from resisting against the power structure in an invasive manner that might

threaten the status quo. Resistance is not found within such discourses because the individual being a part of the discourse is not aware of her position within the discourse, nor does she have the means to resist. The eventuality that the above theoretical argument points to is that the mid twentieth century woman was free in so far as she did not deviate from the normative conduct set out for the respectable Bengali 'Bhadramahila'. She was allowed entry into the public sphere in so far as she did not forget that her responsibilities as a nurturer of the spiritual domain required her to remember her boundaries, the notions of respectability set out for her and abide by them. In conclusion, what could be inferred through the cinematic references and the theoretical premise is that the status and role of women might have gone through alterations, but the normative ideologies surrounding the ideal woman and her respectability have pretty much remained the same as it was in the late 19th and the early 20th century. One of the difficulties however is that one is faced with the essential question of the cause of such alteration. Was it the socio-political milieu that was responsible for the massive entry of women into the public sphere, the reason behind the alteration in the position of women or was it the ushering in of modernity that the mid twentieth century resonated with, that led to this change? In my opinion, it was a combination of both the factors, but one thing that needs no further clarification is that the nationalist discourse though not existent in form in the mid twentieth century, existed very much in content, through the existent ideologies, the imbibed socialization and frequently found manifestation through notions of middle class respectability, the role of the ideal woman etc.

References:

1. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

2. Bagchi, Amiya. "Studies on the Economy of West Bengal since Independence." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. Nov-Dec, ser. 47, 1998, pp. 2973–2978. *47*.

3. Bagchi, Jasodhara. "Women in Calcutta: After Independence" *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 42–49.

4. Bannerjee, Sumanta. *Memoirs of Road*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

5. Bhattacharya, Malini. "Culture" *The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal, 1970-2000: The Challenge Ahead*, by Jasodhara Bagchi, Sage Publications, 2005, pp. 96–110.

6. Biswas , Moinak. "Modern Calcutta Cinema ." *Calcutta: the Living City*, by Sukanta Chaudhuri, vol. 2, Oxford Univ. Press, 1990, pp. 316–320.

7. Bryman, Alan, and Edward A. Bell. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

8. Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

9. Chatterjee , Nilanjana. "The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival" in *Calcutta: the Living City*, by Sukanta Chaudhuri, vol. 2, Oxford Univ. Press, 1990, pp. 70–77.

10. Chatterjee , Partha. "The Political Culture of Calcutta" in *Calcutta: the Living City*, by Sukanta Chaudhuri, vol. 2, Oxford Univ. Press, 1990, pp. 27–33.

11. Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nation and Its Women " in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1993, pp. 76–94.

12. Chaudhuri, Sukanta. *Calcutta, the Living City*. Vol. 2, Oxford Univ. Press, 1990.

13. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, Princeton Univ. Press, 1976.

14. Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." Vol. 8, ser. 4, The University of Chicago Press Journals , 1982, pp. 777–795. 4.

15. Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, no. 25/26, 1990, pp. 56–80., doi:10.2307/466240.

16. Mukhopadhyay , Ishita. "Economic Empowerment " in *The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal, 1970-2000: The Challenge Ahead*, by Jasodhara Bagchi, Sage Publications, 2005, pp. 71–80.

17. Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Appendix

List of Films:

1. Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960) ; Direction: Ritwik Ghatak

2. Subarnarekha (1965) ; Direction: Ritwik Ghatak

3. Jana Aranya (1976) ; Direction: Satyajit Ray

4. Mahanagar (1963) ; Direction: Satyajit Ray

5. Pratidwandi (1970) ; Direction : Satyajit Ray

6. Calcutta 71 (1971); Direction: Mrinal Sen

7. Uttar Falguni (1963); Direction: Asit Sen

8. Surya Sikha (1963); Direction : Salil Dutta

9. Bilambita Loy (1970); Direction: Agragami

10. Indrani (1958) ; Direction: Niren Lahiri