

(Mis) Reading Romance: An Enquiry Concerning Representation of 'Love' in Bengali Literature and Cinema

(Abstract of the PhD thesis submitted to Centre For The Study Of Culture & Society, Bangalore, affiliated to Manipal University)

Abstract

This research project is an enquiry into the cultural imagination of romance within a specified historical domain. The dissertation is a study of certain moments within the cultural history of Bengal when representational constructions of 'romantic intimacy' get meshed with other socio-political dimensions of modern Bengali subjectivity. I have chosen Bengali literature of the colonial period, especially of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a specific genre of Bengali popular cinema of the post-colonial period, as two sites of enquiry into the cultural trajectory of romantic love. The argument shall chart this specific trajectory of the romantic imagination that is intimately linked to the substantive reformulation of cultural 'identity' in relation to the other socio-political parameters, which oversee the historically defined 'identifications' of the Bengali subject. My arguments demonstrate through illustrations from various literature and cinema, how such creative reconceptualizations in the field of romance enable the Bengali subject to gain a critical perspective on the very historical frameworks and social mandates that locate him within the aegis of modernity.

Instead of tracing the linear evolution of Ideas of romance or sociological transformations within the community, my argument seeks to trace a series of significant

moments which as products of creative imagination and representational work problematize the dominant ways in which the modern frameworks overseeing social life have been appropriated by the colonial and post-colonial subject. My investigation attempts to identify a specific cultural imagination that confronts the impingement of modernity on its own terms and effectively deflects its mandates thereby creating a rupture within its gaze, and correspondingly a split in the location of the historical subject.

The dissertation begins by charting the specific scope and nature of my investigation and the particular notion of historical overview that animates my arguments. I proceed by locating the significant transformations in the colonial world afforded by the birth of the indigenous novel and the various consequences that the moment generates. The following discussion will focus on the ways in which the discursive conflicts operating in the colonial milieu negotiates the literary production of a new 'interiority'. The argument traces the process through which such a productive articulation leads to a substantive reconstruction of social relationships through a reformulation of romantic desire as a form of private exchange. While the ongoing social discourses attempt to appropriate and neutralize the expressive charge of such cultural constructions, I show how another set of representational interventions seek to elaborate a new and distinctive dimensions of the same. Following from a discussion of literary works that mediate such reconstructions I arrive at the significant moment when a series of interventions by Rabindranath Tagore deflects the trajectory of romance towards an obtuse path. I shall

discuss how in various phases of his literary work Tagore analyzed and reproduced 'privacy' as a substantive aspect of subjectivity and thereby redefined the meanings of modern romantic attachment. Through a further set of negotiations Tagore effectively produces a split in the self-articulation of the historical subject and elaborates a new idea of temporality enabling the subject to devise ways of inhabiting modernity without being wholly determined by its operational parameters. I shall argue how the critical distinction between 'identity' as an imaginative locus of habitation and 'identification' as a domain of structural mandates splits up the core of the historical subject thereby producing a reflexive perspective on modernity. Such a move builds on a sense of directionality and affords the subject a way out of the domain of colonial conflicts to produce a specific perspective for its post-colonial incarnation.

Representational work by its very nature enables cultural effects beyond their own contexts, which go on to determine and validate many historical imaginations that are removed from its own context. With such historical movement and theoretical orientation in mind, the rest of the two chapters in the dissertation will try to arrive at an understanding of this post-colonial predicament through critical readings of the distinctive form of romance that characterizes this historical moment in the field of popular cinema. I shall elaborately discuss the production, evolution and reception of 50's romantic *socials* emblemized by the star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, as a distinctive and significant form of regional romantic imagination. The discussion shall begin by charting the field of reception of 'romantic socials' where this new cultural

object functions as a locus for reconstruction of a community network under the transformed socio-political conditions. The various public discourses around romantic desire and its value implicates the film romance within a set of ongoing conflicts and thereby uses the cultural object as a locus for redefining modern nexus of community values. The following discussion will focus in detail on the narrative elaboration of romantic aura and identify how such representational work again critically negotiates and consequently moves beyond the logic of various social processes that attempt to resist or appropriate its disruptive charge. I shall show how the new cinematic imagination not only produced a distinctive figuration of romantic desire within the domain of social and regional film history, but also how the shadow of a particular formulation of identity haunts such a figuration. I would argue that such specific figuration of desire signifies the attempt to chart new ways of belonging to the modern, new formulations of identity that foreclose itself out of the dominant 'identifications' constitutive of modern social habitation. Finally I contend that all these critical and creative moments of imagination marks various points in this specific trajectory of an intimate history of the Bengali subject, a history that uses creative energy to imagine a horizon of possibilities to critically inhabit modernity. Simultaneously all such moments would also produce a rupture into the ways in which dominant negotiations within the field of the modern attempt to appropriate the historical subject.

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'LOVE' IN BENGALI LITERATURE AND CINEMA**

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to

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Declaration

I, Subhajit Chatterjee, do hereby declare that this thesis entitled **(Mis)reading Romance: an Enquiry Concerning Representation of 'Love' in Bengali Literature and Cinema** contains original research work done by me in fulfillment of the requirements for my PhD Degree in Cultural Studies from the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society and that this report has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma in this or any other institution. This work has not been sent anywhere for publication or presentation purpose.

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Certificate

Certified that this thesis entitled **(Mis)reading Romance: an Enquiry Concerning Representation of 'Love' in Bengali Literature and Cinema** is a record of bonafide study and research carried out by **Subhajit Chatterjee** under my supervision and guidance. The report has not been submitted by him for any award of degree or diploma in this or in any other university.

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Dedicated to -----

*all those encounters which made me reflect on the meanings of
romance...*

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Our imaginations are inhabited by ghosts.”

Theodore Zeldin

(from the Preface to *An Intimate History of Humanity*).

This research project is concerned with an investigation into cultural imaginations of romance within a specified historical context. I begin by charting the scope and limitations of the project and the particular theoretical orientation that drives my argument. The project is designed to be an enquiry or more suitably a range of critical readings on various representations of intimate relations during the modern period of Bengal’s cultural history. The dissertation will undertake a study of certain moments within this history when cultural constructions of ‘romantic intimacy’ get meshed with other socio-political dimensions of modern Bengali subjectivity. I have chosen Bengali literature of the colonial period, especially of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a specific genre of Bengali popular cinema of the post-colonial period, as two sites of enquiry into the cultural trajectory of romantic love. Though the two moments are separated by a considerable gap in time I will try to show that they are linked as events within a broader domain of ‘intimate history’. This project is by no means an attempt to write the history of intimacy as evolution of traditions or Ideas of love or of sociological

facts. I conceive of 'intimate history' as a local history of production of intimacy as a modern mode of belonging through the cultural work of representational forms. Such a historical gaze would enable us to unravel a certain narrative in the productive circulation of 'love' that leads to the reorganization of affect in a specific way for the post-colonial subject. In other words the project intends to identify a certain historical journey that defines the post-colonial subject's intimate predicament.

My argument seeks to trace a series of significant moments, which as products of creative imagination and representational work problematizes the dominant ways in which the modern frameworks have conceptualized the notion of social inhabitation. The critical analysis of modernity in the context of colonial encounter has often led to an assumption of its gradual and pervasive penetration into the social fabric despite certain uneven ruptures that characterize any post-colonial transfer. Such assumptions often lead to read the historical configuration of social networks and discourses as a process of becoming; a process of gradual liberation from the ties that bind communities to their earlier senses of belonging. The already available grid of contrasts (between the 'modern' and 'traditional') in such cases work as an index for the degree of modernization of a community.¹ Another trend of critical analysis often reads the absorption of modernity as a process of local appropriation rendering and transposing a series of concepts into locally convenient hybrid forms. Often such processes of selective absorption are

¹ Such frameworks are often pervasive in sociological studies of colonial and post-colonial societies under dynamic transformation owing to the influx of modern ideas (Donner 2002; Mody 2002). However the notion of a normalization of modern discourses animates many other analyses in the field of social sciences.

imagined to be aided by conceptual categories derived from the popular or traditional vestiges of knowledge.² My arguments on the other hand, seek to identify a certain cultural imagination that confronts the challenging intellectual stakes of modern transformations within their own conceptual field but works towards a deflection of those through the creative work of representations. Such a conceptual move would animate the spaces of negotiation with a range of complexities and often work towards a production of indeterminate ruptures within it. I would argue that the field of romantic imagination happened to be the most palpable ground for building such conceptual stumbling blocks into the process of penetration and absorption of modern mandates. On the whole such a distinctive structure of negotiation enables the subject of intimacy to speculate on its historical predicament within the aegis of modernity while remaining partially transcendent to its operative mechanisms. My arguments will strive to explicate how such a notion of ‘transcendence’ differs substantively from any regressive or non-modern senses of the term. On a broader level, the arguments regarding transformations in ‘intimate history’ seeks to speculate how forms of modern consciousness open up creative possibilities of critical negotiation that moves beyond the deadlock of absorption and resistance and thereby alters the predicaments envisaged by dominant terms and conditions of the colonial encounter.³

² These trends frequently theorize about local consumptions of modernity or formulations of alternatives to a Western model of modernity as the quintessential mark of post-colonial social formations (Chakrabarty 1994, 2000; Chatterjee 1997; Breckenridge 1996). However these arguments also pose themselves as critiques of a theory of ‘resistance’ which tend to read indigenous conceptual frameworks or familial structures as fundamentally different from the ones that Western modernity seeks to impose and therefore capable of offering resistance or a distinctively radical appropriations of the same (Nandy 1983, 1995b; Kakar 1981; Anantamurthy 1998, Ramanujan 1999).

³ The contrast between ‘local appropriation’ and ‘resistance’ arguments are explicitly elaborated in the debate between Arjun Appadurai and Ashish Nandy around the nature and function of the game of cricket in the colonial and post-colonial context (Appadurai 1996; Nandy 2000).

I use the term ‘intimate history’ in a very specific and determinate sense to chalk out the ideological effects that representations of the concept bring to bear upon the ways of mapping cultural identity vis-à-vis other socio- political mechanisms that implicate the subject in its historical location. In the next section of this introductory chapter I seek to clarify my approach so as to distinguish it from other ways in which the histories of intimacy have been charted. The primary task of this discussion is to explain the connotations of the term ‘intimacy’, which is the central subject of my enquiry, so as to delineate the specific historical trajectory of the concept that I wish to draw attention towards.

The second chapter takes up the birth of romantic love as a modern form of imagination of interpersonal relations and the problems associated with its circulation in the colonial period. I intend to approach the moment of birth of ‘romantic love’ in its modern incarnation through the ‘cultural work’ of literary representations during the colonial period. Here I would propose a specific use of the notion of ‘literary history’ as a history of productive manufacture that intervenes into the discursive milieu of colonial modernity. I shall look at how themes of romance, marriage, companionship etc. as articulated in fictional and non-fictional representations of late 19th century and early 20th century got implicated in the broader debates regarding the consequences of colonial modernity. The idea is to identify how the notion of love gets transformed and solidified into a specific form through literary interventions that seek to elaborate a new register of

‘privacy’. I will try to trace how scholarly works on the subject of intimacy indicate the role of fictional and non-fictional contributions to social dynamics. The discussion will be followed by my reflections on how such cultural effects contribute towards imagining a structural notion of identity within the prevailing socio-political registers.

The third chapter will take off from the debates around changes in social life in the colonial period and try to chart in detail, the formulation of intimacy as a register for cultural imagination of identity in progressive stages. I will concentrate on the literary work of Rabindranath Tagore and its critical reception to discuss how his literary work marks a significant point of departure towards the elaboration of romantic affect. My arguments shall take a distance from the celebratory and reverential reception of Tagore’s work in field of Bengali literary criticism, owing to Tagore’s magnanimous stature in the popular Bengali imagination.. Rather the chapter would identify three broad productive moves in Tagore’s work, which are linked to the making and unmaking of the historical ‘subject of intimacy’. The idea is also to try and understand how Tagore’s work appears as a significant cultural mediation in the imagination of romantic love as a locus of identity for the post-colonial subject. Thus I will take a critical look at some instances of (mis)reading and remembering Rabindranath Tagore, which indicate the ways in which his literary mediation produces cultural effects and opens out a zone of imagination to locate intimacy as a critical ‘perspective’. The arguments will proceed by way of a reading of some of the major novels and short stories by Rabindranath Tagore as well as contemporary and traditional critical commentaries on them. The discussions shall serve

to specify how the attendant transformative effects are relevant in understanding post-colonial discourses on romance.

The fourth chapter deals with the important post-colonial cultural event of the rise of romantic star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in Bengali popular cinema. The discussion will centre on the critical ways in which the 'romantic moment' has been conceptualised as a new face of cultural modernity. The argument proceeds through a critical discussion of the debates around intimacy or romance as a contemporary cultural phenomenon and how Bengali popular cinema of the 1950's was implicated in such ongoing critical discussions in various journals, newspapers and other scholarly writings and try to understand the cultural logic of the ensuing criticisms and celebrations. The chapter seeks to trace the previously uncharted territory of critical reception and public reactions to towards the foregrounding of a certain form of romance, as evident in numerous instances from the print media of 1950's. As I shall argue, through such debates the mainstream middle class readers and spectators were attempting not only to articulate an aesthetics reform of popular cinema but also to re construct a modern community network in relation to the post-colonial conditions. I shall argue that popular cinema gets implicated as a cultural object around which a communitarian imagination establishes its contours and attempts to refashion and appropriate the modern ways of social belonging. I wish to show that such cultural dynamics have a significant contribution to formulation of cultural identity.

The final chapter focuses on the logic through which the realm of cultural representations of romance were destabilizing the very conditions that led to its formulation and appropriation. I will concentrate on the films of the 1950's and early 60's where the major thematic concerns of film *socials*, 'romance' and the 'family', were treated in a different manner from the earlier decades. I will chart the evolution of *socials* from the 40's to the new sub genre of romantic *socials* in the 50's. I analyze the process of transformation as a form of negotiation of cultural identity under transformed socio-political conditions. The arguments will consider in detail how certain established themes and narrative devices in the 40's *socials* gets a differential treatment in order to articulate a new romantic imagination. The chapter will focus on the major popular hits of the star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen as well as many other films of the decade, to help us understand the audio-visual elaboration of the romantic aura in its relation to various social concepts. I will show how the narrative of production of romantic love as a transaction of identity haunts the imagination of the post-colonial subject and simultaneously affords him a critical perspective on its social habitation under the aegis of modernity. The concluding section looks back at the arguments regarding a specific narrative of 'intimate history' as it takes shape across various social negotiations and cultural effects of representational work. I would focus on the various possible theoretical consequences of the specific mode of imagination and how they critically reorganize the location of the historical subject as a reflexive agent. I will also speculate on how such a procedure of imagination enables the subject to foreground significant questions regarding its self and its predicaments within history.

The 'Subject' of Intimacy

My approach to the subject differs from other perspectives that seem to discuss very similar concepts such as 'romance' or 'identity' but employing them in a different sense. Most of these use the term 'romance' or 'intimacy' in an unqualified manner as designating a specific orientation of private relationship amongst individuals across a wide range of historical paradigms or implicitly assume that the designations are valid for a modern paradigm and require no further historical reflection. Such approaches evidently fail to point out the substantive qualities that the terms might have come to acquire in the process of their reconstruction across historical periods. The critical literature on the theoretical aspects of love mostly comes under the guise of philosophical reflections of the analytic variety. The broad attempt of such treatises is to arrive at a definition of love as articulated in contemporary human societies. The primary problem with such accounts follows from the theoretical framework guiding such enquiries, which concentrate on the semantic interpretations of romantic utterances. Thus most works on 'love' in the tradition of analytic philosophy proceed through an analysis of meanings of romantic statements. Here the notion of 'analysis' directly derives from the 20th century positivist trends, which were instrumental in the critique and rejection of metaphysical discourses in the field of philosophy. The logical positivist orientation centered in Vienna and discernible in early works of Ludwig Von Wittgenstein, took their departure from the empiricist frameworks of 18th century to cleanse philosophical discourses of its attendant obscurities thereby defining the limits of philosophical enquiry as a logically valid

discourse. Their arguments implied that if all statements are truth functions of elementary propositions, which report observations then they will either be empirical themselves or else tautologies or contradictions. But metaphysical statements do not seem to be classifiable under any of these categories and could therefore be rejected in principle as meaningless (Stroll 1999). Thus the notion of ‘analysis’ employed in such framework entail a replacement of one set of words for another to sharpen and clarify the logical validity or truth function of statements. The contemporary reflections on love and other such seemingly metaphysical concepts seek to reorganize the field to speculate whether the discourse of analytic philosophy through the applications of recent advances in ethics and philosophy of language, can appropriate and justify certain everyday concepts as philosophically valid categories. Thus as seemingly metaphysical concepts and human emotions gradually gained currency as legitimate subjects of ‘analytic’ reflection in the later half of 20th century, the enquiry into ‘romantic love’ becomes an enquiry into whether the description of love when translated into a semantically clarified set of statements is a meaningful discourse at all in the philosophical sense. The drive is not to locate the ontological origin or specificity of love but its semantic role in facilitating human communication of a specific order.

Most often ‘love’ or ‘romance’ is identified in such discourses as a conceptual notion related to cognitive and /or emotional states that enable a broader range of social networking such as friendship, kinship relations, family bonding etc. Debates in these fields are concerned with an understanding of romantic attachment as a human

orientation in order to clarify its specific characteristics distinguishing it from a range of similar emotional conditions such as anger, jealousy, and pride and so on so forth. In other words such enquiries tend to raise semantic questions regarding the nature and specificity of the range of concepts classed as belonging to the domain of intimate relationships and in some cases moves on to consider ethical implications pertaining to the subject of passion. To offer a random example Gabriele Taylor in her philosophical analysis of love begins by charting the logical conditions necessary for classification of emotions of which 'love' happens to be a specific case. Thus her argument concerns a validation of 'love' as general emotion oriented towards an object bearing certain characteristics and then specifies a configuration of conditions enabling such emotions to be defined and mapped as romantic desire for the object concerned. She goes on to discuss the question, " ...whether love belongs to the class of emotions characterized by the conditions set out...and can therefore be judged to be on occasion justified or otherwise" (Taylor 1979, 152). The justification itself seems to follow from the possibility of defining and characterizing 'love' as a semantically valid category within the discourse of analytic philosophy. Bennett W. Helm similarly forwards a critique of a range of emerging and insufficient descriptions or commentaries on 'love'. Helm discusses both what he calls the *union accounts* or the *robust concern accounts*, brings to the fore a set of descriptive categories in relation the intimacy's dynamic relation with questions of identity.⁴

⁴ Helm describes *union accounts* as those theoretical tendencies that understand 'love' as a mode of intimate union often dissolving identities of subjects. Whereas the *robust concern accounts* tilts to the other extreme in characterizing the nature of romantic love as one directed towards solely at an external object bearing specific characteristics and therefore necessitating a firm distinction and distance between subjective identities. I have come across Helm's essay manuscript on the Internet in 2005 and the referred draft does not provide the date of posting or any indication of published versions. Bennett. W. Helm.

It is important to note that Taylor's subject of affect whom she consistently designates with a 'x' is characteristically deplete of any socio-cultural determination or rather as I shall be arguing attempts to erase its historical determinations. Some of the descriptions provided by Helm use terms or phrases such as 'commitment', 'bond of trust', 'shared secrets' or 'mutual affection' etc. all of which seems to take for granted notions of the 'subject' and 'identity' which have several historical determinants. The further point to be noted about such critiques is that they often implicitly assume the nature of love as a pre-given component of communications in modern society. In other words the arguments at best seek a clarification of the specific usage of the 'love' in everyday communication in contemporary Western society and thereby implicitly generalizes those significances as universal features of human nature. The only qualification comes through the consideration of cultural specificities, which they assume deflects expressions without substantially altering their meaning.⁵ Thus such perspectives seem to imply a linear continuity between production and use of concepts across history based on certain universal characteristics embedded in human nature. A somewhat hesitant registration of such problems come comes from Velleman's discussions of love as a moral emotion when he reflects:

"Love, Identification and the Emotions" (draft manuscript).
<http://edisk.fandm.edu/bennett.helm/Papers/Helm-Love_Identification.pdf>

⁵ This is implied by the number of books and essays which clarify their discourses as applicable to the Western context and could have further qualifications when applied to other cultural ie, non Western contexts. For a relativist accounts of social construction of emotions see the collection of essays in *Divine Passions* (Lynch 1990; Trawick 1992).

Unfortunately the philosophical tradition of reducing all motives to propositional attitudes has left us with no generally accepted vocabulary for describing most of the ways the value of one thing can be reflected or refracted through another. This tradition treats all value as emanating from states of affairs... maybe we need a language of 'valuing as' analogous to our language of 'seeing as' to describe how we respond to a person's looks or acts... as conduits rather than sources of value. We might then feel more comfortable with the idea of appreciating these features as expressions or symbols of a value that isn't theirs but belongs instead to their inner ---or as Kant would say, merely intelligible---person (Velleman 1999, 371).

Velleman's comments draw attention to the limits of such a discourse. The hesitant reflection in the above paragraph does establish the growing discomfort with semantic translation of discourses and the aspiration to center the discourse on a more reflexive intentional subject. Intimacy as a cultural discourse must be understood within the context of its historical formation or in other words in the context of the formation of the subject that articulates it. As I shall argue in relation to a specific historical context in the following chapters, the discourse of romantic love in the modern context arrives through a reconstruction of the human being as socio-political subject. One cannot speak meaningfully about love if one does not designate the specific formulation, which facilitates its enunciation in a social context. What one would require then is not philosophical analyses of various meanings of the romantic utterance but rather a history of the very 'subject of intimacy' that allows such utterances to occur at all. The meanings implied by those utterances would be clarified if one can locate the nature and structure of such an enunciation.

The historical studies in evolution of love are implicated in a different sort of a problem. Irving Singer's multi-volume work of the evolution of love in Western world attempts to study its trajectory within a specific framework of concepts that is oriented towards a history of ideas. As he argues in the context of the birth of Romantic love in the West:

19th century Romantic love arose as a response to the thinking of 17th and 18th century rationalists who followed Montaigne's lead and asserted that passionate love was incompatible with the demands of a happy marriage (Singer 1987, 7).

Singer clearly traces the history of love as an evolution of philosophical ideas that impinge upon the Western world in the form of influences. Thus he proceeds to elaborate the critical influences whereby the distinctions between traditions of courtly love and Romantic love get established as a defining marker of modern conceptualization of love in the 19th century. He claims that:

Where the medieval storyteller recounts perilous events that befell their lovers, the Romantic novelist describes their feelings at various stages within the relationship"(Singer 1987, 19).

His argument proceeds by placing the dominant formulations of love by the eminent thinkers in the modern era, such as Nietzsche, Freud, Proust and Satre, within the conflict between what he calls the Idealist and Realist theories of love in earlier centuries. While such accounts provide vivid descriptions of the complex origins of contemporary

literature and philosophy they do not give us an idea of how the subject of intimacy comes into being outside the sphere of influences afforded by high art. Over and above a distinction of formal structures of storytelling owing to philosophical influences one has to understand the substantive significances and consequences of such distinctions. In other words one has to ask what it means to recount one's feelings rather than describe a set of sensational adventures in the elaboration of love? How and why do such transformation come into being and what could be their effects for the historical subject of intimacy? Intimacy precisely because it is formulated in negotiation along with other socio-political determinations of the subject cannot be conceived as a mere history of Ideas. The subject itself in the West or in India would always appear as a site of conflict where various social determinations as well as new ideas would lay their contested claims. One has to consider the possibility of recounting the history of the subject as distinct from a history of Ideas.

In his book *Love as Passion*, German philosopher Niklas Luhmann interestingly conceptualizes the history of romantic love in the West as a series of discursive formations, which play different roles in specific socio-political contexts. He draws attention to the need to take into account the social genesis of individuality, which cannot be understood, by merely anthropological constants or even linear historical mapping of ideas. Rather he argues that, "such a need and its possible expression and affirmation, in communicative relationships corresponds to a specific socio-cultural framework, especially to the complexity and particular form of differentiation adopted by that social

system.” (Luhmann 1986, 14). Luhmann’s theoretical framework sensitizes us to the need for understanding the socio-cultural extensions of the subjectivity in order to comprehend the implications of a specific historical articulation of romance. Commenting on the nature of subjectivity charactering modern communicative networks he argues that:

Possessing a name and a place within the social framework in the form of general categories such as age, gender, social status and profession no longer suffices as a means both of knowing that one’s organism exists and of self-identification—the basis of one’s life experience and action. Rather individual persons have to find affirmation at the level of their respective personality systems ie. the difference between themselves and their environment and in the manner in which they deal with this difference --- as opposed to the way others do (Luhmann 1986, 16).

The idea of self-reflexivity of the subject and the development of a critical perspective that Luhmann describes as ‘the process of learning to make an impenetrable world into one’s own’ is, I would argue, central to the elaboration of intimacy in the modern context. But as Luhmann himself acknowledges the elaboration of intimacy and its implications depend on the nature of socio-political circumstances that implicate the subject of intimacy. However his book is designed to pursue a rather different project where he does not wish to treat the ‘social genesis of individuality’ and its attendant semantics *in extenso* but rather, “the question of the genesis of a generalized symbolic communicative medium assigned specifically to facilitating, cultivating and promoting the communicative treatment of individuality” (Luhmann 1986, 14). Thus he proceeds to the investigation “concerned with the differentiation of this medium and with accessing the durability of the semantics it created” (Luhmann 1986, 17).

My current project on the other hand is to specify the very elaboration of the subject in and through the work of representation and indicate the sort of semantics it is implicated into through their negotiation of broader social forces overseeing cultural production. I wish to arrive at the romantic predicament of the post-colonial subject or in other words try to understand the making and unmaking of its imagination.

Such a narrative can only be deciphered if we trace the constitutive forces that lead to its present incarnation. To put it explicitly the question would consider how and why does the romantic imagination take such a form as it does in the present ie. the post-colonial moment?? What are the forces, which propel the subject towards such an articulation of desire? What enables such a production and what then are its implications? Perhaps in a narrower sense one can describe it as a genealogical understanding of intimate history. Michel Foucault had used such an approach in his later works where he was analyzing the codification of morality in the modern West. In one of his interviews with Paul Rabinow in 1984 Foucault reflects on the possibility:

to describe the history of thought as distinct from the history of ideas (by which I mean analysis of systems of representations)and from the history of mentalities (by which I mean the analysis of attitudes and types of action). It seemed to me that there was one element that was capable of describing the history of thought—this was the element of problems or what one could call the more exactly, problematizations (Rabinow, 2000, 117).

Such a historical attitude can conceive of the present or a certain articulation of thought in the present, as a problem, and trace its formative history, not as a history of ideas that influence it or a history of evolution of similar recognizable attitudes in the past but as a product of conceptual differentiation enabled by complex or even conflicting set of circumstances. The ‘thought’ could then be shown to emerge out of a set of negotiations to produce a historically singular event that can and exist such as it is, only at that moment. Jean E. Howard observes the use of an idea of ‘transhistorical human essence’ in Jonas Barish’s study of the ‘anti theatrical prejudice’ where he claims that such ‘prejudice’, while taking different forms from antiquity to the present, in essence reflects a variation of such fear or distrust which is innate to the human mind. Howard observes that:

“ Barish does not really entertain the possibility that a phenomenon in one period, which seems analogous to a phenomenon to another, may arise amid such different social conditions and play such a different role in a culture’s power relations and discursive systems that the two phenomena cannot be seen as continuous with one another or as products of the underlying human nature” (Howard 1986, 20).

In his unfinished study of the history of sexuality Foucault provides us with a model of enquiry that enables us to frame important questions regarding the historical production of concepts and its directionality (Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986). While Foucault’s genealogical model often stress on the dimension of discontinuities and ruptures in history, I would like to focus more on the productive aspects of the method itself. It is seemingly clear that a linear recounting of histories of ideas and representations of love will not suffice for the sort of project I have in mind. In his later writings and interviews

Foucault often talks about the transformation of his perspective that led him to rethink and revise his works on sexuality and more importantly conceptualize his earlier writings in light of his current speculations (Lotringer 1996; Rabinow 2000). In the original write up intended to be the preface to the second volume of *History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure* which Foucault published after a gap of many years, he recounts his process of speculation and comments that:

In this series of researches on sexuality it is not my aim to reconstitute the history of sexual behaviour---by studying its successive forms, their models, how they spread, how they conflicted or agreed with laws rules, customs, or conventions...my object was to analyze sexuality as a singular form of experience...[as a] correlation of a domain of knowledge, a type of normativity, and a mode of relation to the self..(which enables him to recognize himself as a sexual subject amid others....(Rabinow, 2000, 199-200).

Thus Foucault envisions a way in which one can talk about production of categories like sexuality or intimacy as within a particular socio-political framework, but the very process would lead us to concentrate on the notion of a difference rather than a continuous evolution. It is only by marking this specificity as a difference that one can formulate any historical enquiry into the present as a productive culmination of many pasts, which haunt it through representational work. By their very nature representations have the capacity of transcending historical and geographical boundaries to produce a rupture in the fabric of imagination.

The historical task that Foucault implies however is a much broader project that bears no direct relation or resemblances to my own work, which is much less ambitious in scope. In fact in his earlier essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* Foucault pointed out that:

Genealogy, consequently requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. Its ‘cyclopean monuments’ are constructed from ‘discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to rigorous method...in short genealogy requires relentless erudition (Bouchard 1977, 140).

I should confess that I lay claim no such vast and detailed historical erudition and my project does not wish perform any magical mimicry of Foucault’s voluminous researches. More importantly as one can see clearly from the published parts of Foucault’s projects the method requires a notion of historical juxtapositions between periods and cultures far apart in history.⁶ My deployment of the genealogical orientation lies in the attempt to formulate a historical explanation of the way in which one specific modality of experience and imagination comes to represent the modern idea of intimacy. The invocation of a genealogical perspective flows from the realization that such a history cannot have been derived from any process of linear evolution of ideas. It is a product of representational work and is significant because such a romantic imagination is tied intimately with the modern subject’s ways of inhabiting socio-political worlds that situate him as a citizen with specific qualities and limitations.

⁶ My project does not operate with such a notion of difference and similarity across historical cultures, which in Foucault’s case helps him to understand the ways in which morality as an experience constitutive of the Western subject, came to be formulated under a certain historical conditions. Foucault’s methods and his descriptive elaboration of sexual dynamics of ancient age have been critically commented upon by variety of scholars (Giddens 1992; Halperin 2002). However for my present purposes I am more interested in the sort of question and enquiry Foucault’s work enables one to formulate.

The ways in which historian Daud Ali uses Foucault's critique of the 'repressive hypothesis' in his introduction to the *History of Sexuality* to read into the dynamics of erotic life in ancient India, gives me a departure point to approach my own concerns.⁷ Ali identifies two broad approaches to the study of sexuality in the Indian context. The psychologically oriented sociological works draw their conclusions on the specificities of Indian experience of sexuality with reference to the indigenous familial framework or other cultural specificities. The copious literature often talks about the 'Indian psyche' as specific cultural frame that is somehow connected to its mythical past through a network of spontaneous ties that enable appropriation and sometimes wholesale resistance to the invasions of modernity (Kakar 1990; Kakar and Ross 1996; Trawick 1992). However I would be talking about the very process whereby such a cultural move is rendered impossible within the realm of modernity as it reconstructs the subject and also its imaginations of cultural pasts as authentic or fabricated. In my analysis I shall refer to such instances of (mis)remembrance which try to demarcate the indigenous reaction to modernity as a form of resistance or construction of pure tradition. The other approach Ali identifies is of rewriting the intimate history as a history of Ideas where the notions of intimacy in India vacillate between the restrictive transcendent dimensions and the sensuous or materially oriented dimensions of love. Ali reads the discourses of love in ancient India by juxtaposing ancient erotic manuals along with the traditions of courtly poetry and several other discourses on love and politics, to show how rather than form of

⁷ I am indebted to Moinak Biswas for drawing my attention this essay published in *Modern Asian Studies*. It turned out to be more illuminating than I had imagined through my successive readings.

social restrictions, the network of social and political relations in ancient India actually produce sexuality as a dynamics aspect of social reality. As he argues, “ the desires of the courtly texts, thus, are encouraged and formed positively and internally by the call to self mastery. Self mastery did not bear down upon desire, but instead cultivated and operationalized it” (Ali 2002, 107). The sexual dynamics characterizing such historical conditions therefore constitute and signify various orientations of the erotic subject within the hierarchical system of courtly love and other social practices. He gives extensive examples from the literary and prescriptive texts of various periods of ancient India to show how notions of romantic love were operative and encouraged albeit within a network of ethical relations that orchestrated their modalities and effects. Ali’s analysis of courtly traditions of love apart from its informative critique draws attention to a problem that he himself does not take up in the essay. Ali’s invocation descriptions of love and erotic communication often raises the important question whether the affective conditions described and discussed in ancient texts could be considered as an expression of romantic love? ⁸ In other words, could the social and historical conditions analyzed by Ali indeed produce certain sentiments that are structurally similar to the idea of romance, as we understand it in a modern context? Ali speaks of how there are set of words designating inner romantic states of mind over and above those that designate purely sexual relations.

in the early texts one can distinguish between two different types of words : those which refer to physical desire for and pleasure arising from sexual union , terms like *kama* and *rati* and those terms which refer to the more

⁸ Ali himself does use the term ‘romantic love’ although he does not speculate or analyze the specific connotations of such an usage in such a context. He comments “Understanding the discursive provenance of the terms which come to refer to romantic love in medieval India is particularly because their inter-relations shifts between aesthetic and religious traditions...”(Ali 2002, 105).

general dispositions of adoration, attachment affection and participation that lovers were to share in varying degrees with one another, typically designated by terms like *raga*, *anuragam*, *sringara* and *bhakti*. ... both sorts of the terms must be distinguished from sexual union itself (*samboga*, *surada*) and were uniformly deemed to arise within the mind/heart of the lover (Ali 2002, 105).

He goes on to argue that in the *Mahabharata*'s account of the love between Nala and Damayanti, Nala's desire for Damayanti and his romantic afflictions which lead him to leave the court are cryptically referred to as an isolated event. But in the writer Sriharsa's rendition, the episode of Nala's leaving the court out of romantic affliction takes up an elaborate description of the progressive stages of Nala's amorous condition and consequent inner turmoil. While the description itself and the array of Sanskrit terms it employs suggest that there were specific references to passionate relationships amongst men and women, I would refrain from describing them as 'romantic love' in the same sense as we use it in the modern context. Discussing the notions of subjection that the ancient self was implicated into Ali argues:

“if we see the problem of attachment as one not simply between the self and the world but between selves, then we may see the role of the mind in courtly discourses slightly differently. The mind was the ‘zone of engagement’ for the dynamics of attachment and detachment, which articulated the relations of courtly selves. As the locale of social dispositions and sentiments, the mind was the place where affiliation resided, and where the battle of affections took place. The texts most often speak of the attachment of people's minds as a sort of ‘capturing’” (Ali 2002, 123).

However, I would argue that the modern elaboration of romance requires a form of subjectivity and imagination that the ancient world could not have access to and therefore the terms designating affect and privacy would have significantly different meanings in the ancient Indian context. Ali himself in his essay refers to a section of Vatsayana's *Kama Sutra* where the author describes the various stages of affliction of the senses as erotic desire impinges upon the subject. Evidently, as the discussion indicates, the notion of desire and affect is understood as a field of force which transforms the subject's orientation within a hierarchical system of relations rather than a private feeling to be distinguished and valued on its own accord. In another context Ali points to the discussions of the notion of attachment in ancient writing:

Overattachment and its attendant wasting was not seen as simply a dissipation resulting from pleasure itself, but instead as a disarticulation of selfhood. The wasting of *rajyakshma* could in some cases, Caraka tells us, be caused by excessive reducing (*atikarasana*) from prolonged pining for a lover (*utkantha*) (Ali 2002, 116).

In fact Vatsayana actually elaborates ten stages in the progression of romantic desire in the heart (*kamashthana*) starting from pleasure of the eyes (*cakshupriti*) to fixation of the mind (*manasanga*) and ultimately leading to severe physical affliction causing even death. Vatsayana follows his description by an advice given to avoid the process of physical degeneration, "when he sees desire progressing from one stage to the next, then, with the goal of preserving his own body from harm, he may approach another's wife" (Ali 2002, 116-117).

It is interesting to note that Sriharsa's description quoted by Ali, in the context of Nala's romantic affliction by the desire for Damayanti, refers to very similar stages as recounted by Vatsayana. It is quite clear that inner affliction here is understood through a different conceptual filter where the mind is conceived as an entity in relation to the subject's other orientations in the social network. Thus afflictions afforded by love or any other intense emotion could destabilize the function it performs in other contexts (such as ruling, or judging for eg) and even degenerate the body on which the mind has concrete effects. It is to be noted that meaning and value accorded to the interior self or mind in such contexts follows from its position within a set of other elements that makes the person a subject in the network or relations defining the court. Courtly love, therefore with all its intricate elaborations of erotic pleasure and dalliances, constitutes one set of social practices that requires regulation in order to be fruitfully enjoyed.

The notion of self that is invoked in ancient writings on ideas of self-preservation or self-mastery involves an imagination of the self as having an orientation but not an interior substance that marks the birth of the modern self. Therefore self-mastery must be understood as distinct from self-reflexivity, which the substantive element of the modern subject. Here one requires a distinction between the notion of 'orientation' as a modality of ethical operation within a network of relations and the notion of 'perspective' that affords the subject a reflexive access to its own operational subjectivities. It is such

elements of subjectivities that would provide love and romance significantly different meanings and functions in the modern context.

Chapter 2

That Obscure Object of Literary Desire: The Problem of ‘Interiority’

It has often been claimed that ‘History of Literature’ and ‘Literary History’ might not necessarily refer to the same critical approach in spite of certain overlaps. My intention in revisiting some of the debates within the literary field is not to trace the history of such debates but rather to identify certain semantic possibilities that can perhaps be extracted from the distinction at hand. The field referred to as ‘History of Literature’ locates its ‘object’, by means of definition, classification and normativization however rudimentary or contested they may appear consequently. While such a field can possibly provide typological or generic distinction or explore interconnections between a variety of literary styles, their evolution in the course of history and their relation to socio-cultural contexts of production, it cannot possibly spell out the variety of consequences that literature produces through its historical encounter with other literary or non literary forces. In this other sense ‘Literary History’, then can be thought of as a field that defines Literature as an essentially heterogeneous object and chart its broader histories of production, conceptualization and imagination that literature in its various guises have dynamically enabled, yet which do not fall strictly within the domain of the evolutionary history of Literature itself. Just as there can be many histories of ‘Literature’ depending on the ideological location of the critic’s discourse, there can also be many ways of conceiving

its functions or ‘cultural effects’ within or beyond a given historical field that seeks to act as their determinant. In other words one can possibly think of literary histories of non-literary cultural concepts or objects, as one of the various determinants shaping the broader historical determination of such objects. I am suggesting that Literary History can be thought of as a sort meta-history that can analyze the trajectory of effects produced by ‘literary work’.¹

In the introductory chapter I sought to locate the enquiry concerning ‘intimate affect’ within a broader interdisciplinary field so as to propose a specific historical orientation of towards the study of such concepts. In the discussion to follow in this chapter and the following one I will concentrate on the question of how one can fruitfully approach representational work regarding intimacy in various media such as literature, in order to arrive at a substantive understanding of ‘romantic love’ as a modern form of affect vis-à-vis its conceptual structuring within a broader social history. This chapter will discuss certain significant moments in conceptualizing intimacy as a modern object of literary desire as evident in fictional and non-fictional writings from the colonial period. The following chapter would concentrate on Rabindranath Tagore’s intervention and the particular reflexive trajectory that ‘intimacy’ as a modern concept traverses through literary treatment, thereby enabling it to act as a point of departure for moving

¹ The notion of ‘work’ under discussion here does not refer to a theoretical distinction between ‘work’ and ‘text’ (Barthes 1979). One can rather think of a more psychoanalytic inflection where ‘work’ refers to a transformative mechanism that produces certain non linear but real effects often observable in behavioural terms. The use of this word intends to stress on the productive aspects of literary effect rather than its merely mimetic aspects.

out of vicissitudes of colonial modernity. Thus the discussions would also serve to delineate the particular theoretical connection that I seek to establish between literary representations of ‘romantic affect’ as an object of enquiry and the specific functions that such representations perform in relation to historical reality. Although I shall be concentrating primarily on certain discourses of the colonial period, the observations offered in this section do not intend to constitute a history of any particular era of Bengali literature, neither is it a tabulation of the various formulations of ‘romance’ within any period of literary production. Rather I seek to investigate the structure and function of romance as discursive effect of ‘literary history’ in the sense I have been using the term. The discourse of ‘romance’ here refers to the generalized attempt to reformulate the contours of intimate relations within and outside the domain of marriage in face of a wide range of historical upheavals undergone by turn -of –the- century Bengal. I argue that fictional literature is one of the discourses whose ‘cultural work’ produces a range of ideas that consequently redefined the structure of affective relations. I contend that tracing its ‘literary history’ can reveal an important trajectory of historical determinants of ‘romantic affect’ as a modern social phenomenon.

At the outset it is necessary to differentiate my theoretical purpose from the more usual attempt at analyzing the history of cultural influences over social ideas. The argument does not build on the mundane assumption that ideas or concepts pertaining to the social (such as that of ‘romance’) enters the domain of history through a range of influences foreign or indigenous, which it must do in some form to explain the fact of

their circulation. It is more important to draw attention to the obverse reality whereby beyond the range of concrete influences that literature can have on reading communities it has a more abstract function in intervening into a range of historical discourses, which follows from the very nature of its representational activity. Rather than merely reflecting and commenting on an existing social reality, 'literary texts' knowingly or unknowingly generates objects that might produce critical ruptures in the very field of historical imagination that facilitates their production. To put it cryptically, I contend that the story of the productive work of literary representations in culture is far more thrilling than that of the 'influences' on such representations. This in short might be the lesson of many ongoing debates around relationship of literature and history. Let us briefly explore this question of productive work of literature as they appear in the well-known field of contemporary historicism as a mode of intellectual enquiry.

Scholars with revisionist approach to literary history have questioned the oppositional relation often assumed between text and context. On the one hand the critique demolishes the assumed externality of a historical reality that influences textual structure and thereby also stresses the dynamic interrelation between the two realms of reality. As literary historian Louis Montrose has put it :

...the newer historical criticism is *new* in its refusal of unproblematized distinctions between "literature" and "history", between "texts" and "contexts"; new in resisting a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual ---whether an Author or a Work---to be set against a social or literary background" (Montrose 1986, 6).

Montrose goes on to perform the critically indispensable task of implicating the historian her/himself into the act of historical reconstruction thereby drawing attention to the dynamically transformative nature of historicization that reverberates at many levels. However for me the even more interesting aspect of the new critical programme was its stress on the productive role of representational work. Montrose points out that:

to speak of ...the social production of “literature” or any other particular text is to signify not only that it is socially produced but also that it is socially productive---that it is the product of work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted or read (Montrose 1986, 9).

A more dynamic sense can perhaps be teased out of the notion of ‘production’, which within the critical sphere of New Historicism relates to the process of ideological reproduction of the social world, its dominant, often oppressive value systems and of course the various subject positions that such a world envisages. Montrose implicitly and sometimes explicitly in the text invokes the recent developments in historiography under the influence of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. Althusser’s rightful insistence on the relative autonomy and mutual determinations of base and super-structural elements coupled with Foucault’s description of the pervasive but abstract social penetration of technology and relations of power has led to many debates about the possibility of resistance and its modalities (Althusser 1971, Bouchard 1977, Foucault 1978). Naturally, the very same ideological grids Montrose uses restrict him to consider only those aspects of production, which allow for hegemonic and subversive effects in the representational forms.

Jean A. Howard's essay on the legacy of New Historicism elaborately comments on the theoretical context and efficacy of such historical approaches through a detailed discussion of the work of Stephen J Greenblatt's and Montrose himself.² She identifies the root of the problem in the central question regarding the precise relation between literature and reality, "does the text absorb history into itself? Does it reflect an external reality? Does it produce the real?" (Howard 1986, 25)

The historicist move, she argues, is instrumental in according literature real power:

Rather than passively reflecting an external reality, literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality. It is a part of a much larger symbolic order through which at a particular moment the world is conceptualized and through which a culture imagines its relationship to actual conditions of its existence (Howard 1986, 25).

Literature as he rightly argues is, "one amongst many elements participating in a culture's representation of reality to itself, helping to form its discourse on the family, the state, the reality to itself, helping to make the world intelligible, though not necessarily helping him to represent it "accurately"³". (Howard 1986, 27) Though Howard's text doesn't foreground it explicitly, a frequent investment of intellectual energy following from such historicist approaches centers on the question of hegemonic and resistant

² This essay, already referred to in the earlier chapter, is more or less lucid representative of the innumerable article and book length commentaries written in the 80's and 90's to confront the explosion of Neo Marxist and so called Post Structuralist interventions in the field of humanities.

³ Such paragraphs in the text explicitly draws from the description of the function of 'Ideological State Apparatus' by Althusser whom Howard acknowledges later in the text.(Althusser 1971,127-188)

aspects of literary work. That in itself is not problematic as an intellectual concern but at the same time such a focus in another way often loses out on other equally crucial functions of literature that might not be amenable to merely functional descriptions. I would like to maintain that literature over and above its political functions in reproducing subjectivities in various hegemonic or subversive capacities also engages in a form of 'production' that is directly linked to its creative energy. Like the former effect this capacity is also determined by its formal structures but unlike the other it enables literary work to transcend its immediate context and work towards a reconstruction of history itself as we conceive it in the present. In other words Literature as representational work often produces the paradigm of what we perceive as our domain of imaginations. This effect is not so much a matter of producing subject positions but rather producing points of departure for the subject who is always already located in ideology.

Stephen Greenblatt's work on the ideological contradictions in the Renaissance period talks about historical formations of selves and subjectivities.(Greenblatt 1980) Rather than conceiving such reproductions as merely ideological operations, which they obviously are, one could reflect on how a substantive notion of self and the consequent conditions of its refashioning are produced by literary work in its encounter with historical forces. In effect such productive determinations often hold the key to the constitution of many presents and thereby their appropriations of the 'past'. In the context of intimate relations under conditions produced by colonial modernity in India, the central point is how fictional literature in conjunction with other literary forms mediates

and reconstructs the senses of notions like ‘interiority’ and ‘affect’ and simultaneously produces these categories as palpable to a community. The consequent task would be to analyze how such literary histories of intimacy then go on to creatively articulate a location from where these concepts transcend their production contexts and produce an universe of accessible signifiers that could in principle fracture or refashion the senses of self and identity. Contemporary critics have often expressed their political distrust in the notion of ‘narrative’ as an historically specific ordering of space and time such as that of the old historian’s ideological filter for interpreting and connecting objectively ‘real’ events. I would not like to restrict myself to such reflexive foregrounding of contradictions within representations, which shall be revealed to some extent through the analytic work itself. Rather my intention is to read into such contradictions to see what productive functions the web of complex contradictory forces that oversee literary productions enables. A non-narrative discourse on history on the other hand has to on principle reject any spatio-temporal ordering to dwell on the surface of signs as they randomly collide with one another. If signifiers do not have referents they at least have signifieds whose effects are frequently palpable. Literary history of intimacy therefore deals precisely with the narrative of signifieds; their journeys across time and space, which charts the broken, discontinuous trajectory of ruptures that constitute the present and its imaginative capacities. One could argue that literary history of intimacy is precisely a encounter of narratives in the occasion of which sensibilities get reshaped and transformed semantically; the colonial encounter being one such formidable context of encounter that makes claims on the historical subject’s states of being. In other words I wish to stress the point that literary effects have a capacity for productive interventions in

an ongoing field of discourses around ideas of intimacy. Moreover by virtue of the creative energy at its disposal the interventional acts of literature have the capacity of formulating semantic ruptures in those fields. Thirdly the productive work as an act of imagination often plays around with the spatio-temporal registers that over determine location of concepts vis-à-vis cultural frameworks. While history of literature attempts to linearize this narrative as with its story of dynamic influences, evolution and differences in socio-political contexts, a literary history attempts to unravel literature's aspirations to destabilize these barriers. In the process literary history disentangles itself from its own space and time and enables us to gauge literature's contribution to the broader history of making and unmaking of the subject, in our case the subject of 'intimacy'.

The 'Novelty' of Fiction

A considerable amount of critical anxiety in the colonial milieu was concerned with the impact that the novel as a modern literary form had managed to generate within the social field. The concerns shared by vast majority of educated intellectuals centered around two related aspects: the novel form's widespread influence on the literate section of society and on the other hand the reception and creative response that virtually revolutionized the indigenous culture of storytelling. It is also important to note that the range of concurrent historical processes involving literary interventions, spread of education and social reform initiatives also served to include a section of women into the domain of readership. The colonial and nationalist thinkers were not so much concerned with

formal or stylistic changes as they were with the fact that the nature of changes facilitated penetrations into unknown territories such as the human psyche and its intricacies. It is such an anxiety that makes the issues of intimacy and sexuality key discourses in the hegemonic contest over appropriations of colonial modernity and its consequent elaboration of the women's question. The novelistic discourse in its very inception articulated a sense of the modern by virtue of its formal specificities. Furthermore such features enabled a set of techniques that could produce the semblance of an 'interiorized gaze' within the narrative universe that could perceptively reflect on the ongoing conflicts in which the community in general and women in particular were implicated.

A host of critical writings have already elaborated the many sided historical context of the rise of the novel of which a few need recounting for our purposes. The socio-political environment marking the birth of the novel has been elaborately discussed by critics who draw attention to the pan-Indian nature of the novelistic revolution as a consequence of the rise of a class of English educated readers. Saroj Bandopadhyay notes the socio-economic dynamics in terms of the crucial differentiation between feudally inclined 'babus' and colonially educated middle class 'bhadralok', soon to be imbued with modern aspirations and nationalist agendas.(Bandopadhyay 2002) Not surprisingly, the novel form had acted as a significant ground for the formulation of conflicts that haunted the growing critical response to colonial domination. It is precisely in this nationalist context that the novel retains its importance as a creative coalition of foreign influence and its indigenous restructuring as is evident in the array of early narratives all

over India from 1860's onwards. (Padikkal 1993) The more important aspect of the literary form was its conflicted location within the discursive orientation towards reality and fantasy. On the one hand early novelists were driven by the zeal to describe their own social reality while on the other hand there was the crucial task of negotiating 'foreign' interventions that would enable this sort of literary activity itself. It is precisely within the realm of such conflicts that the issue of sexual intimacy created a rupture and enabled the articulation of a new object namely 'psychic interiority'. In his introduction to the Marathi novel *Manjughosha* (1868) Naro Sadashiv Rasbud articulates the problem of literary expression:

Because of our attitude to marriage and for several other reasons, one finds in the lives of us Hindus neither interesting vices or virtues, and this is the difficulty which we find on trying to write novels. If we write about things we experience daily, there would be nothing enthralling about them, so that if we set out to write an interesting book we are forced to take up the marvelous... (quoted in Mukherjee 1985, 7)

It is interesting to note the oppositions developed in conceptualizing the task of fictional writing. On the one hand the writer acknowledges the need to concentrate on contemporary social experience as the inspiration for writing, but at the same time he also acknowledges the necessity of delving into sensational aspects of psychological and behavioral patterns to make such experience worthy of representation. The actual opposition here is between a subject conceived as an agent performing relevant social duties in its fields of operations and the alternative conception of the subject as an agent who could reflexively speculate on those experience and associated conflicts. The underlying premises of the 'predicament' Mukherjee speaks of, lies in the desire to

conceptualize an entity or a zone of imagination that would serve the dual purpose of documentation of embedded experience and revelation of its sensational nature. (Mukherjee 1995, 7). It should not be difficult to imagine that the notion of ‘psychic interiority’ that permeated the Western novel form provided the artists with the speculative entity to serve this very purpose and thus its mobilization would require as a precondition, the construction of representational subjectivities that could house such an entity. It should not be surprising to realize that this object of desire, like many others, would necessitate a creative task rather than an ethnographic one.⁴ No wonder two decades later O. Chandu Menon in his Introduction to *Indulekha* (1888) confidently celebrates such a constructive feat:

...my object is to write a novel after the English fashion, and it is evident that no ordinary Malayalee lady can fill the role of the heroine in such a story. My *Indulekha* is not, therefore, an ordinary Malayalee lady (quoted in Mukherjee 1985, 8).

By the 1880’s Menon or other early writers such as Bakmimchandra Chattopadhyay had encountered major ‘sensational’ conflicts in everyday life owing to the dynamic social transformations that stormed the nation through colonial discourses and initiatives of reform. Therefore it is not surprising that romantic love and man-woman relationships forms the focus of Menon’s as well as many other early novels. The reason over and above influences of Victorian romantic narratives was the desire to lay bare the

⁴ However it has to be remembered that writers like Menon were also concerned with the complex social dynamics that were altering the internal fabric of many Malayalee communities during the period. G. Arunima forwards an interesting analysis of ethnic self-articulation in the early Malayalam novels by undertaking what she calls a ‘literary-ethnographic’ exercise to unravel the novelistic mode’s negotiation of the conflicts within the contemporary social fabric (Arunima 1987).

sensational, problematic aspects of the colonial subject's relation to their immediate context, an act best accomplished through elaboration of the indigenous psyche, particularly that of the woman who was the subject of reform and debates in the colonial sphere. The ironical fact is that these 'sensational' elements had to be mediated through a suitable representational medium and thereby affect the mental constitutions of the educated Indian before they could gain any currency in social reality, a phenomena about which I will elaborate below. Thus the most significant aspect of the work of early novelist was their encounter with the entity called 'interior self' and the ways in which they would put it to use in their attempts deploy a critical gaze on social reality or to make critical departures from the same.

Historians of literature identify several points that characterizes the indigenous novel amongst which they mention the tendency to portray situations of conflict but through the patterns of experience set against a historical spatio-temporal register. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay himself points to the 'poetic' qualities inherent in the process of revelation of the inner world of characters (Bandopadhyay 2002, 28). Evidently, the description, which by according a value to it, sets apart the psychologistic discourse of the novel from other forms of literary prose, that also attempts to talk about the colonial subject's social predicament. Thus the novelistic recounting in the indigenous context is elaboration of a specific kind of experience of history, which as we observe, requires putting certain literary constructs such as individuality or psychic interiority in place. The question that confronts us is the specific modalities of such

discourses as one amongst many literary discourses, which sought to tabulate the effects of colonial encounter. The further question would be regarding the consequence that such a mode of literary production has for formulations of intimate relations and their vicissitudes in the colonial climate. One could argue that the birth of the novel in India in a sense also marks the precondition to the birth of the modern subject of intimacy, which is another way of emphasizing my argument that intimacy has among others a strictly literary history. Some of the methods of elaborating such modernity comes through the novel's drive towards describing reality as a ground of embedding the modern subject, or sometimes also as a way of charting such modernity through depiction of differences. Historians often refer to Bankimchandra's quest for a 'totality of vision' as a defining feature of modern novelistic fiction. In all probability the phrase is intended to indicate over and above an eye for detail, a deep symbolic orientation in the author's interpretation of reality that is evident in the linguistic ordering of space, time and psyche. The artistic excellence of the novel therefore would reside in the way linguistic descriptions are employed to capture the symbolic aspects of reality under focus. Often the influence of Sanskrit prose traditions would retain their influence on the artiste, which could give the descriptions a philosophical dimension helping it to transcend the conundrums of everyday life and language (Bandopadhyay 1993, 75). Kaviraj's analysis of Bankimchandra's writings identifies such a philosophical overtone in his approach to historical descriptions. Kaviraj argues that, "Bankim's concern with morality is of a very different kind. Morality is of wonder to him because it seems to touch the ontological. To reveal a romantic and fearsome darkness at the center of the world" (Kaviraj 1995, 3). He tries to illustrate his point by drawing attention to the protagonist's dark encounter of the

universe in the very first scene of his very first Bengali novel, *Durgeshnandini*(1865) where Jagatsingha would encounter his romantic destiny in the form of a chance meeting with Tilottama on a dark and stormy night. While he quotes the opening paragraph to describe the protagonist's encounter with impending gloom and foreboding expression of nature he strangely leaves out the very first sentence of the novel where Bankimchandra writes: “ in the Bengali year 979, at the end of the day a man was traveling on horseback all alone from Bishnupur towards Mandar”(Chattopadhyay 1953,1: 1). However fictitious, the spatio-temporal location of the crucial event is specified even in this tale of adventurous romance where an invocation of historical concretization was not absolutely necessary. While Kaviraj correctly identifies the primacy of ornamental description and grandeur of scale evident in his historical romances one cannot generalize on Bankim's attitude towards social reality on that basis. Inherent in his historical and social romances even in their melodramatic incarnations such as his first novel written in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) or *Indira* (1873) one could observe a specific agenda behind his attempt to locate events within a realistic social space. While such descriptions of social spaces might not be meticulously naturalist or endowed with grave sociological import, their symbolic value could lie elsewhere than in the ontological realm. One remembers the vivid page long description of a disorderly household interior in *Rajmohan's Wife*, as the protagonist Madhav approaches the women's quarter at his uncle's house, which in its exaggeration takes up farcical proportions but serves no great dramatic function within the narrative.⁵ However such descriptive accounts often serve to prepare the ground for a

⁵ The description is too long quote in its entirety. Recounting a part would suffice to convey my arguments. Seeking an explanation for the strange letter regarding a property will the protagonist Madhav enters his uncle's house to encounter an everyday scene at the women's quarter: “...there was a servant woman,

drive that literary fiction sought to explore apart from its philosophical preoccupations. Often the starkness of social reality or the mundane-ness of colloquial speech serves as a ground to frame the outward and inward gaze of a modern consciousness. The vivid anomaly of the household serves as a symbolic ground against which the modern protagonist would deploy its inquisitive and reformist gaze. The earlier conversation sequence between English educated Madhav and his uneducated, rural cousin Mathur serves to illustrate this angle in another way. The sequence begins with a vivid description of a normal village exterior, as observable from the verandah of an accompanying house, followed by lengthy and detailed descriptions of the contrasting body languages and dress sense of two cousins representing the rural and urban faces of social reality respectively. The two of them stand on the verandah chatting and looking outwards as two village women pass by on their way back from the pond where they went to fetch water. Mathur in his rustically inflected colloquial humour, enthusiastically enquires about the prettier young lady to learn that she is the wife of Madhav's paternal cousin, Rajmohan. As he proceeds to jokingly enquire more about the possibility of promiscuity in the woman's character Madhav becomes visibly irritated:

...is she a good woman?

What do you mean by a 'good woman'?

black, rotund and eloquent, demanding transmission to her hands of sundry articles of domestic use without however making it at all intelligible to whom her demands were particularly addressed. There was another, who boasted similar blessed corporal dimensions but who had thought it beneath her dignity to shelter them from view; and was busily employed broomstick in hand, in demolishing the little mountains of the skins and stems of the sundry culinary vegetables which decorated the floors, and against which a half naked dame never aimed a blow but coupled it with a curse on whose duty it had been top prepare the said vegetables for dressing ...in another corner might be heard those sounds so suggestive of an agreeable supper, the huge *bunti* severing the bodies of fishes doomed to augment the labours of the conscientious cook aforesaid..." (Chattopadhyay 1998, 17).

Mathur: Oh the college has done for you! It is impossible to talk to people who have gone there and recited the jargon of red faced sahibs. What I mean is -----has she--The stern frown from Madhav cut short the coarse speech forming on Mathur's lips.

Madhav said haughtily: You need not be so outspoken. You have no business to prattle about a respectable woman passing along the road.

Mathur: did I not say that a smattering of English converts our brethren into fiery sahibs! Well if one is not to discuss one's sister- in- law, whom is one to discuss his grandmother? (Chattopadhyay 1998, 7).

It is quite clear that the realistic outlaying of the rural landscape and its inhabitants serves to propagate a crucial distinction between the two gazes that perceive it, signified at another level by the distinction in idioms of speech.⁶ More significantly it serves to distinguish between two contrasting notions of beauty, one that is available to the erotic gaze of the rustic subject and the one that is under formation under the speculative gaze of the modern subject. Evidently it is the latter subject who has access to intimate charms of romance while the former would dwell under the watchful forces of reformist discourses. The distinction at work is not merely about the opposition between physical beauty and an inner, spiritual one but rather about modalities of relationships made possible under the operation of the speculative entity called 'interiority'. It is Madhav who consequently realizes the worth and charm of his oppressed sister-in-law and

⁶ The contrast of attitudes implied through the dialogue comes out much better in the Bengali translation as it has the freedoms of using colloquial expressions aptly, which lose their coarser connotations in English.

Rajmohan's Wife, a self that is not observable to the gaze of her kith and kin in the diegetic world.⁷

Meenakshi Mukherjee talks at length about the early reformist agendas working behind the indigenous novel and its connections to a more didactic, pre-modern mode of storytelling. She elaborately discusses the employment of realistic detail in early missionary novels to house a narrative that is oriented towards communicating the need for social reform and transformation of traditional ways of social inhabitation, which are detrimental to the progress of the civilization (Mukherjee 1985, 19-37). What marks the break into the proper incarnation of the novel according to her is the inflection of social description with an interiorized psyche that perceives its nature. One of the major expressions of such a move lies in the modern novelists' narration of romance as a central plot device. It is precisely romantic passion, which allows the psyche to articulate its perceptions about the social norms that bind them to negative and repressive aspects of tradition. She argues that Bankim's attempts to articulate such expressions through psychological discourses of his men and particularly women protagonists remain somewhat unfulfilled in his social novels where the very social context of action restricts the intervention of modernity. Thus as Bandopadhyay and Mukherjee both argue Bankim's displacement into historical romances allow him a fuller elaboration of the romantic passion and the psyche that houses such passions (Mukherjee 1985, 8 and 70 ;

⁷ There are explicit descriptions of the afflictions and oppression she has to suffer in the hands of her husband and his unscrupulous friends or relatives. Marakand Paranjape explores such socially symbolic themes as allegorical representations in the context of nationalism (Paranjape 2002).

Bandopadhyay 2002, 39). In other words early novels display an inherent contradiction between the desire to portray modernity in various aspects of indigenous forms of subjectification and its submission to the restrictive demands of a traditional social norms. Thus unlike his historical novels such as *Durgeshnandini*, *Mrinalini* (1869) or *Rajsingha*(1882), the social novels such as *Bishabrikha* (1873), *Indira*(1873 revised in 1893) or *Krishnakanter Will* (1878) invoke the erotic passion relegated to modernity only in such forms so as to be appropriated or vanquished by societal overseers.⁸ The novelist's registration of the gap between Indira's romantic conjugal aspirations and the conditions leading concretization of the bond at the end of the novel⁹ is instructive in this context. Mukherjee points out:

On the surface the novel ends happily enough and the darkening of the tone between the beginning and the end is scarcely admitted, but the quality of Indira's language and the imagery she uses suggests such a sense of loss (Mukherjee 1985, 74).

Bankimchandra ascribes poetic quality to the nature of psychic aspirations, which remain unfulfilled within a social order that does not comprehend such forms of imagery. The idea is fore grounded towards the end of the novel where following the resolution of a set of cursory misunderstandings at Indira's native village; her husband recognizes her true identity and her conjugal rights are reinstated. The following chapter goes into a detailed and somewhat sarcastic elaboration of the array of ongoing rituals, rowdy celebrations

⁸ Scholars have commented on Bankim's tendency in his social novels to relegate the more passionate dimensions of romance to illegitimate affairs such with the character of the widow. See his *Bishabrikha* and *Krishnakanter Will* (Chattopadhyay 1953, 1:487-554).

⁹ For the contrast in Indira's description of the desired and actual journey to the husband's household see the opening and closing sections of the novel (Chattopadhyay 1953,.1: 291-336).

and colloquial humour centered around the new bride and groom at the native village house. Towards the end of the description of the *majli*, the narrator acknowledges the reflexive function of the narratively unimportant section through a direct intervention as he claims:

I could have written [this novel] without having written this chapter. But I believe this part in the life of rural women of the country has been rendered extinct. It is a good thing that these have been rendered extinct; because they would be often be mixed up with eroticism, shamelessness; sometimes even corruption. But I have written this chapter with the desire of giving a picture of whatever has vanished (Chattopadhyay 1953, 1: 330-335).

The chapter aptly titled “As It Used To Be In Those Days’ is followed by the epilogue where Indira describes her much aspired journey to her in law’s house with a transformed consciousness. It is quite clear that the elaboration and juxtaposition of the two descriptions serves to foreground the psychologically modern aspirations of the protagonist condemned to operate within realms that restrict their realizations. Moreover Indira’s insistent longing for her urban friend Suhashini as described in the epilogue, attempts to fill the gap through its ornamental and emotive articulation in language that retains the radical expressivity inherent in the imaginative domain of the psyche.¹⁰

¹⁰ “At that point Suhashini touched my neck, I touched her neck. Kissing each other in a deep embrace, we both cried for along time sitting intimately together. Can such love be found anywhere? Does anyone know the art of love as Suhashini does? I will die but will not forget Suhashini” (Chattopadhyaya, 1953, 1: 318). The intimate encounter between Indira and Suhashini and Indira’s intense reminiscences undoubtedly has erotic overtones that serve to act as reflexive commentary on the incompleteness of social expression of romance within the domain of conjugality (Chattopadhyay 1953,.1: 291-336). However I agree with Mukherjee that the almost explicit lesbian connotations were in all probabilities unintended by the author

However, I would argue that the degree or explicit-ness of expression of romantic affect is not as significant an issue as the cultural work that novel enabled in opening up of a new conception of the subject. This phenomenal intervention of fictional writing in the latter half of 19th century had reverberations beyond the literary realm as fiction and other forms of literary and non-literary discourses mutually negotiated this new cultural object trying to make sense of it within the ongoing discourses of social reform. It is in this context that the desire of discursive narration in elaborating and simultaneously charting the limits of the woman's psyche becomes implicitly revealed. If the novelistic discourse indeed gave voice to a new cultural concept or object such as the 'interior self', it would in its immediate incarnation often feature as a problematic entity for appropriation precisely because its semantic implications are not wholly fathomable to existing grids of comprehension. The route of negotiation often verges either on rejection or on appropriation through the attempt to incorporate it within a familiar network of social discourses and channelize its energy towards desirable directions. Udaya Kumar has recently drawn attention to the tendency of modern novel to devise ways of conceptualizing modernity and its array of associated artifacts as an alien domain. In such cases, as Kumar shows in his perceptive analysis of *Indulekha* and other early Malayalam novels, the very vision that confronts the indigenous subject is interpreted within the intelligible language of traditional discourse so as to render the object meaningful and

and signify a displacement of affect due to the normative repression of male female bonding in the social field.

appropriate it as within its own domain.¹¹ One can discern a conflicted use of both modes of rejection and appropriation if we look at the surrounding discourses which were gradually registering and negotiating this problematic entity called the 'interior self' and its indeterminate desires.

Interiority and its Vicissitudes in a Colonial Milieu

Much has already been written on the nature and function of early reformist discourses in the form of various guide books, educational tracts, farces or skits and domestic manuals that sought to regulate women's activities in the wake of colonial onslaught of critiques of indigenous social conditions. The reformist critique of colonizers and English educated Indians in the 19th century led many sections of the traditional community to consider a reorganization of the domestic realm. Reformist zeal was directed against traditional practices such as child marriage, oppression on widows or the practice of Sati. The indigenous domains were clearly conflicted in their reaction leading to the reformulation of liberal Hindu reformist agendas as well as conservative Hindu nationalist discourses

¹¹Kumar 2002a, 162-164. Udaya Kumar has also elaborated on other aspects of the notion of self-fashioning and the body in early novels (Kumar 2002b).

that vigorously debated on the limits of reform initiatives and definition of national culture.¹² Implicated within many such conflicts was the desirability of love as a component of conjugal relations that the novel form had already brought into the domain of imagination through its creative work. Most of the educational tracts belonging to the liberal reformist faction were engaged in defending the need to educate women by citing reasons from India's historical tradition or justifying the need with more modern reasons. Some of them would elaborate on the nature of duties and responsibilities that the new, educated woman must assume in the wake of socio-economic changes that were disrupting the traditional flow of life through new professional and reformist demands.¹³ Often the transformations were justified as a need to equip the Bengali woman to handle the social duties within the household rather than as an independent means of personality building. The modern education and scientific methods to manage households would enable them to work efficiently within the extended family and parallelly make them suitable for engaging in conversations with their educated partners. Not to mention the women's education would also serve to groom the young child as a future citizen of colonial modernity and therefore was useful to their effective role as mothers as well (Borthwick 1984; Murshid 1983; Walsh 1995). Interestingly, some of the educational tracts and manuals directly invoked the debatable issue of romance as a component of conjugality with the implicit intention of appropriating the erotic charge within the ongoing negotiation of women's issues. A wide range of these tracts would focus on the

¹² For detailed historical analysis of the distinction and conflict between the forms of reactions and resistances to Western liberal ideas see Tanika Sarkar's illuminating essays on domesticity, conjugality and its relationships to various nationalist factions in 19th Century Bengal (Sarkar 2001, 23-54 and 191-225).

¹³ For examples see the tracts by Gourmohan Tarkaratna, Tarashankar Tarkaratna and Dwarkanath Ray and Kailabashini Devi anthologized recently.(Bosu 2005).

behavioral and ritualistic aspect of women's behavior attempting to instill reforms to render them appropriate in accordance to the definitions of a 'new patriarchy' as conceptualized in the critiques of older patriarchal norms by liberal thinkers.¹⁴ Along with other similar magazines *Bamabodhini Patrika*, was launched in 1863, under the influence of Brahma reform movements with the intention of spreading the need for women's education in the inner quarters of society. Although with the inauguration of Bethune School in 1849, Brahma women had started getting education and in a few decades a small section of girls from Hindu families started attending schools.¹⁵ However the dominant conservative Hindu section of society were not in favour of public education of women, who were mostly married off at an early age even up till the end of the century despite the reformist agitations which ultimately led to amendment of the Age on Consent Bill in 1891. Under such circumstances the practice of education at home is where the liberal reformers could hope to float their reformist agendas, thereby leading to a production of journals to fulfill such ends. Some of the early tracts published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* sought to discuss the values such as honesty (*saralata*), gratefulness (*kritagyata*), kindness (*daya*), affection (*sneha*), devotion and respect (*bhakti o samman*) etc. as ideals to be inculcated in the Hindu women. These were published as a series of short tracts in the form of advices to women by their husbands.¹⁶ The tract on

¹⁴ Bankimchandra made a paradigmatic distinction of the 'old' (*prachina*) and the 'new' (*nabina*) on which many liberal critiques were modeled (Chattopadhyay 1953, 2:249-256).

¹⁵ Bharati Ray notes that according to the statistics given the 1950 centenary volume of Bethune College and School, the number of schools in 1863 was 35 and approximately 1180 girl students were admitted (Ray 2002, 3).

¹⁶ See the series, "Streer Proti Swamir Upodesh" in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Ashwin, Poush, Falgun and Chaitro, 1863. A selection of early tracts on women and family is now available in a collection edited by Bharati Ray (Ray 2002).

honesty proceeds through a series of ethical treatises whereby the virtues of honesty are propounded:

She who speaks something and harbours something else in her mind, whose belief and act are not the same, is known as a deceitful or pretentious person... Deceit is hated by both God and society. There are many whose hearts are full of sin but who appear to be profoundly pious. They are worse than those who are obvious sinners. God judges by looking into the heart. Therefore never be deceitful, if you bear evil in your mind do not show yourself to be thoroughly moral. God will punish you seeing your mind, in fact you will have to face greater punishment for being deceitful (Ray 2002, 19).

The same kind of advice is repeated throughout the tract. At another part the writer insists:

You should not show false affection towards your friends in external behaviour; you should act on genuine affection. You should actually express to others in words and action exactly as you feel inside (Ray 2002, 21).

Similarly in the tract on respect and devotion the imaginary husband urges the wife to pay due respect to elders and persons and virtuous people. But he goes on to make a substantive distinction between devotion and respect:

...devotion is a mental state, devotion is a matter of the heart, not of the exterior. You should be genuinely be respectful of people you are showing respect outwardly. The expression of devotion (*bhakti*) is called respect (*samman*), respect is the function of devotion. Devotion is not accomplished without respect, but respect can be shown without devotion. Respect is external, devotion internal (Ray 2002, 27).

Although the tracts on the surface appear as a rehash of traditional ethical sermons, an underlying tension becomes quite apparent. While most other traditional advice concentrate on the question of correct attitude and behaviour, these tracts focus more on the beliefs underlying those attitudes and actions. In other words a mere show of respect is now not deemed to be enough; the mental state corresponding to the action requires being transparent. The contradiction obviously lies in the fact that the task is impossible for any moral overseer, as the so-called genuinely deceitful woman would still pass the test. Hence the invocation of God as all perceiving entity! But such anxieties draw attention to the interior (*antar*) as a new problematic zone whose very impenetrability makes it an object of reform. The new woman comes across as a problematic entity as this conceptual incarnation carries with it the gift of a certain degree of self-reflexivity that was also being fore-grounded in the novels. Thus the 'interior' and its dubitable content now becomes more significant as an object of reform rather than the social conduct of the subject itself. The attendant anxiety increases, as the creative experiments in the novel lay out the mystically complex qualities and possibilities inherent in the human psyche. Thus the corollary of liberal education also spells it out as an exercise in control of emotions and passions. Needless to mention the first and foremost capacity of the mind is its vulnerability to erotic passions that could severely disrupt the social self-image of the social community. The notion of 'love', which was mostly equated to erotic passions, was relegated to the outside world where its existence was acknowledged to be steeped in illegitimacy. But such unruly domains of passion were strictly demarcated and dissociated from the inner world of household duties. The noted Bengali writer

Annadashankar Ray in his analytic musings on love and friendship notes that in his childhood days:

On hearing such things like those who get married also fall in love each other, the society of those days would shudder. How terrible! Love! For those who were married love was a terror in life just as in lives of those who were unmarried. Love by definition was forbidden love. The love of husband for wife or wife for husband was a discreditable affair. Have they been married so that they could engage in dalliance? Or for performing their social duties? (Ray 2000, 1).

Many scholars have elaborately commented on the status of affective bonding within the colonial world. The primary obstacles to the formation of matured romantic longing were the traditional systems of child marriage and polygamy.¹⁷ The child bride most often given away to much elder man could hardly initiate any social communication let alone develop romantic feelings. The marital life of most middle class women was passed in daily household toil and other social hassles. Within the extended family network a wife had to perform myriad duties among which informal communication with the husband was a minor one if at all. As social historians have noted, the reigning patriarchal norms in joint families would not allow any playful dalliance between couples that was deemed as condemnable, thus the husband could be available to the wife only

¹⁷ Historians have also discussed the specific case of Kulin polygamy practice which resulted in innumerable miseries such as enforced spinsterhood in women's lives who would not even get to see their husbands again as he, owing to his caste specificity would often practice numerous marriage as a way of earning a living (Ray Chaudhury 1999, 68-70).

during the nighttime if he did not happen to be a wayward lecher¹⁸ On the other hand men's published memoirs does indeed reflect happy memories of conjugal life with relatively elaborate descriptions of the development of a romantic bond with their partners. The liberal orientation initiated by Brahmo liberal reformers led to partial emancipation of women in Brahmo families who were allowed to a limited account of freedom and often men and women could correspond before developing conjugal ties. Tapan Ray Chaudhury and Sambudha Chakrabarty have both discussed the memoirs of Girish Bidya Ratna and Dewan Kartikeya which refer back happily to their sexual and romantic dalliance with their much younger wives (Chakrabarty 1998; Ray Chaudhury 1999).¹⁹ The description of reminiscences clearly indicate the influence of romantic novels which led a number of young men to engage in one sided or mutually sanctioned romantic endeavors, which owing to the repressive social conditions could lead to violent consequences. However as Ray Chaudhury argues, the gap in reality led to the reconstruction of conjugality as the only available domain to express legitimate amorous passions. The domain of romance in practice would be relegated to post marital life, which soon became an object of attention of conservative and liberal reformers alike. As I mentioned the primary thrust in invocation of marital romance as a possible phenomena

¹⁸ Haimabati Sen describes a rather shocking scene when on waking up she saw her husband engaged in sex with a prostitute. On the other hand Rasasundari Devi describes a relatively happy life as a child bride with ample showering of affection from in-laws (Ray Chaudhury 1999; Ghosh 1986; Ray 1991a). The published memoirs and autobiographies of 19th century women such as Prasannamayi Devi, Rasasundari Devi, Haimabai Sen which gives quite contrasting accounts of women's experience at the in-law's household as child brides.

¹⁹ Chakrabarty's references to Rabindranath Tagore's correspondence with his wife, which speak volumes about the development of an intellectual bond over and above a personal one (Chakrabarty 1995, 317, 1998). Tagore's *Gora* in fact dynamically elaborates on the question of emancipation and romance within the context and contests over Indian nationalism and its imagination of a national culture.

was to make the unhomely notion of romantic longing a comprehensible object within the boundaries of colonial modernity. The illegitimate relations and erotic sentiments widely propagated by traditional customs (*deshacar*) concerned men and widows and women of disrepute, such forms of involvement while acknowledged could be easily be dealt with through existing reformist framework. However the new sentiment of affect propagated by the novel could not be directly deemed illegitimate in the same sense even though its foreign root was often criticized and ridiculed in various social tracts. Nirad Chaudhury in his books *Bangali Jbane Ramani* (Women in Bengali Society) and *Atmaghati Bangali* (The Suicidal Bengalee) offers a vivid account of the indigenous the evolution of erotic passion as apart of his recounting of the history of the mental life of the Bengali community during the colonial period (Chaudhury 1967, 1988). He consistently argues that the new ideas of romance propagating amongst men and women during the 19th century was derived from the West and restructured into an indigenous framework through the representational work of the novel. Chaudhury vacillates between a theory of pure influence and dynamic exchange of concepts across the colonial encounter but his extensive analysis clearly claims that certain substantive changes had occurred in the mental life of the colonial subject about which there have been no substantial analytic discussions (Chaudhury 1988, 57-85). He argues that the primary condition of the psychic revolution is the impact of Western language and education, which is but natural in any colonial context. He quotes the synopsis of his own thesis in from his other book *The Continent of Circe*:

It was the revelation of the passional life of Europe through English Literature which took the Bengali Hindus by storm and its impact led them to recast the love of Europe in a Bengali Hindu mould, and bring into

existence one of the most beautiful passional creation in literature and life ever seen in history (Chaudhury 1967, 20).

He cites Bankimchandra's literary work as the innovative precursor to the romantic revolution in colonial India:

...in the later half of 19th century suddenly appeared a revolution of mentality. In this flood love –that is romantic love—appeared in Bengali life. Through his creative strength in a single day the personal lives of Bengalis were permeated by a madness (Chaudhury 1967, 33).

While this formulation seems a bit too mechanical and clearly stems from Chaudhury's self professed admiration of the Western social norms, his observations about the transformations in society seem partly illuminating. The revolution indeed centered around the construction of an entity called interiority that provided the grounds for a different notion of imagination of beauty and affect quite unknown to the traditional discourses on love. While poetry and prose from pre-colonial and colonial period are full of commentaries on eroticism and romance as Chaudhury seems to suggest as I argue that they involved a deployment of gaze which differentiates them from literature of the pre colonial period. He elaborately argues about the difference through a contrast from literary instances and historical incidents from both pre-colonial and modern period of Bengal's history. In one instance Chaudhury cites a poem from the pre-colonial period, which clearly sums up the notion of beauty and attendant passions elicited by it:

I went to the pool to have a bath
And saw a luscious woman.

European Literature. However, it should also be noted that the difference is more substantive as the latter clearly refers to a longing for affective bonding that imagines a certain degree of interiority in the object of attraction. It would be the words 'dear' or 'dearest' that would produce a sense of rapture by conveying a sense of affirmative desire on the woman's part over and above the joyful beauty that she objectively possesses. The two examples clearly demonstrate the two deployment of gazes by Mathur and Madhav in Bankim's English novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, referred to above. In fact the novel itself like Bankim's other social narratives goes on to depict the problematic zone where the erotic orientation exemplified by what Chaudhury describes as *kama* (erotic passion) continued to permeate traditional customs the latter one to be distinguished as *prem* (love) seemed to be the only legitimate form or affect available at least to the imagination of the reformed colonial subject, if not in practice extensively. Moreover it should be noted that a mere difference of orientation towards beauty is not the only substantive aspect serves to distinguish a modern conception of love from the pre-colonial notions of passion. It has been often claimed in populist as well as analytical literature, that love is a product of natural human instinct, which survives across centuries albeit in various forms and expressions. In such a conception the erotic nature of pre-colonial or medieval passionate articulations could under analysis reveal a universal affect whose expression has merely changed through external influences. The noted Bengali writer Annadashankar Ray points out, as indicated earlier, that 'love' had to operate within social conditions that were detrimental to its proper flowering but he articulates the populist assumption when he claims that:

Yet [notwithstanding the operative social restrictions] the order of love has been flowing alongside the order of marriage from time immemorial. In

childhood days my grandmother used to narrate folktales, in those, even though the word 'love' was never mentioned, I could understand that the prince was charmed by the appearance of the princess, [so much so] that his eyes would cease to blink...it was not difficult to imagine that these marriages were out of love. I would also wish to be charmed with beauty and then marry. I used to gear innumerable stories from the *Mahabharata*. All of them were stories of love and ended in union (Ray 2000, 2).

Following from such an observation he goes on to argue that:

...with increase in age of marriage there was a new age of romance in European literature. After so many years in this country we can observe a similar phenomenon. Love existed eternally and will remain eternally. But the idea of falling in love before marriage, like it existed in the folk tales, like in the era of *Mahabharata*, likewise has started anew in this age (Ray 2000, 5).

It has to be noted that the modern conception of love, which the mental transformations mediated by literary effect called into being, was marked by the operative centrality of an interior self. Such an imagination requires the formal elaboration of a modern subject in order to be deployed. Thus the framework within which passion was conceived in medieval and pre-medieval era could not have bore any structural similarity to whatever we as modern subjects comprehend as love. The modern affective relationship was distinguished by accruing a certain kind of semantic value to the notion of 'privacy' in order to render it effective for a system of intimate communication. The appreciation of external beauty now led to further development of an orientation towards the inner self of the other in a longing to be recognized mutually and create a conceptual zone that in effect would be un-penetrable by the social network. The reconstruction of the affective

gaze, which can access the self of the partner, is central to the elaboration of this new sentiment.

However it is to be noted that a substantial elaboration of such affective relations and its consequences was yet to be realized thereby making the new sentiments an object of critical attention. Educational tracts often approached the attendant conflict in a different language than that of the novel. Judith Walsh in his discussions on 19th Century tracts and manual notes that the:

The texts illustrate the way in which the entire lives of women, their obligations and relationships, even the household world inhabited, were being re imagined in this period; they also illustrate how these newly imagined identities and worlds combined new and old elements into powerful images, but images also full of contradictions, ambivalences and inner inconsistencies (Walsh 1995, 332).

She draws attention to some of the texts where conflict of women's psyche is located as a contemporary phenomenon requiring a reformist negotiation. A few of the texts Walsh refers, like many others of the period, directly invoke the habit of reading novels in a sarcastic way so as to ridicule the new ideas they were propagating amidst literate members of the inner household. She refers to Girijaprasanna Raychaudhuri's tract on women's education that takes up the issue of basic literacy in a dialogic argument between the husband and wife. The debate ensues around letter writing where the husband insists that literacy would enable to her to keep an intimate contact without the mediation of others. The dialogue meanders on various aspects of conjugal life and

expresses longing of the husband to educate her into a romantic companion in the form of a dreamlike monologue. As Walsh observes:

In the husband's dream he and wife are alone in the world. The focus of all attention is his wife neither the world nor the family comes in between the husband and wife and only his relationship with her has significance. The intense romantic longing imagined in this chapter was, one suspects, equally attractive to the young girls for whom the text was intended... (Walsh 1995, 342).

Such romantic imagination was quite rampant amongst educated subjects as the historical memoirs and letters show. Sambudha Chakrabarty draws our attention to the actual cases of romantic coupling in the colonial period and exchange of letters between couples which reveal such longing for and considerably successful deployment of a deeply romantic affect between interiorized selves. The letters exchanged between Pramatha Chowdhury and Indira Devi and those by Pramatha Basu and Kamala Datta give ample proof of the extent to which romantic passion of a specific kind permeated the educated mind and the actual zeal to elaborate such passions into a system of intimate communication, which is the very crux of such sentiments (Chakrabarty 1995, 314-317). However these were still the exception. There were simultaneous attempts to tame the tendency of modern forms of romantic longing to demarcate a private space within the community and household. The problem was not only about the foreign influence but the objectionable nature of the new romantic passion that seemed to symbolize a notion of privacy still incomprehensible to the community network both in liberal and conservatives sections of society. While such forms of exchange proliferated as individual instances within the more upwardly mobile or intellectually emancipated

section, for the general middle class Bengali it appeared in dreamlike images posterior to its social repression as described by the husband in the tract. The community was rendering the new object as an emotion comprehensible within its own language. Thus Walsh observes that in the earlier section of the same tract the author had demolished the very same notion of intimacy and private exchange that the husband elaborates on the occasion of advising on literacy. As the wife expresses her longing for sharing of innermost thoughts as precursor to building up romantic companionship the husband is scandalized and exclaims “let it be, I can hear no more!”(Walsh 1995, 342). The advice he then proffers to her makes a clear distinction between marriage as a social institution overseen by the community and romantic longing as a disruptive force within the community. Love, he professes, is a general phenomenon that already exists within the traditional setup as the bond, which ties members in a family together. Love therefore is not something that can be learned but realized as an active aspect of community nexus. The refashioning of conjugality into a companionate relationship therefore appears as a process of negotiation in which the colonial subject reconstructs its social mandates in accordance to the socio-economic transformations. The woman’s educated, companionate incarnation here serves to stabilize her social mandate as a wife among many other mandates.

However no matter how the community attempts to reconstruct social relationships within its own mould more creative varieties of literary work had already done its deed and its difference from other discursive interventions is that it can play

around with imagination spatiality and temporality more efficiently than other forms. The progressive movement towards various forms of articulation of intimacy and Tagore's mediation opens up a field of imagination that uses memory, temporality and a specific ordering of romantic longing to stage a break from the confines of sanctioned conjugality. In the next chapter we would elaborately discuss how the substantive elaboration of intimacy produces an imaginative rupture in the fabric of social relations as Tagore intervenes into the literary field. Let us now look at a few examples that would help us to move on to our discussion of Tagore and the romantic predicaments of the colonial subject.

The Trajectories of Romantic Affect

The restrictions imposed on romantic affect would produce two distinct reactions and orientations towards conceptualization of intimacy after the turn of the century. One trajectory that I shall be charting in the rest of my argument posits romantic longing as a marker for imagining identity within the socio-political registers of the colonial and consequently the post-colonial period. The nature of this trajectory is indicated in some of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's early short stories. In *Mouriful* (The Fennelseed Flower, 1923). Bibhutibhushan describes the pathos of unsatisfied romantic longing through the tragic fate of a *mofussil* housewife. The story revolves around an adamant but simple woman, Sushila whose regular conflict with her in-laws over household duties permeates into her conjugal life and wears away the short lived romance that she

experienced with her husband in early phase of her marriage. Her longing to be nurtured, loved and understood as an affectionate human being is apparent in her insistent trivial demands on her husband. As per prevailing notions, overabundance of romance in husband wife relations in traditional setups was deemed objectionable, as it would serve to distract attention from more important social duties. Thus the husband ignored her as a romantic partner and in accordance to traditional customs treated his marriage as one amongst many mundane affairs in his life. Thus the wife was left to fulfill her social duties in the household realm, despite the husband's knowledge that it was the major site of her conflict with in-laws. The indigenous distinction between the notions of the wife embodying virtuous qualities akin to the household deity, *Lakshmi* and the her unruly and quarrelsome incarnation symbolized by negative qualities (*Alakshmi*) detrimental to the well being of the household, are directly invoked by the author to comprehend Sushila's predicament.²⁰ Sushila's encounter with a more economically well-off young bride on a boat journey and her sweet stories of conjugality²¹ intensifies her longing and incomprehension at the ignorant state of affairs in her household, particularly the issue of her husband's progressive insensitivity towards her demands. Paralelly, the familial conflicts intensify due to a series of misunderstandings and finally erupt into violence where the husband in a fit of rage beats her up and the family decides to shun the bride, leaving her to die in her illness. The author reflects on her traumatized state of mind:

²⁰ Bibhutibhushan consciously and ironically uses the name Sushila meaning 'well ordered' to establish the drama of insensitivity and oppression that marked traditional small town and even urban societies in the colonial period. The semantic mobilization of the phrase couplet *Lakshmi* and *Alakashmi* had significant social connotations in the colonial world (Chakrabarty 1994).

²¹ This is the lady whom Sushila lovingly addresses as Mouriphul owing to her ignorant queries regarding *mouri* (fennelseed) flower field on the boat. Mouriphul refers to the flowers of this particular spice plant growing in Bengal and elsewhere.

She lay down deep into the night but sleep would not come. The windows were all open; the moonlight was streaming into the room. Her heart has felt extreme pain yesterday and today. Being simple by nature, she had never before felt the dishonour of being humiliated in such a way, even though she had received beating on numerous occasions in the past...but today, throughout the day, her tears could not be restrained. Her back has been bruised due to the beating yesterday and her hand is covered by wounds as the glass bangles broke while she was defending the blows with her arm. The same husband of hers, who in nights such as this five or six years ago, would not let her sleep the whole night, would coax her into putting betel-leaf into her mouth knowing she did not like chewing them--the same husband did a thing like this? (Bandopadhyay 1999b, 60).

The delirious soliloquy of the dying woman time and again centers on the notion of incomprehension and lack of transparency in intimate relationships while her mind meanders into nature and far off spaces in search of sensitive and affectionate souls.:

Lying down, Sushila thought --no one in the world loves her...only her Mouriphul loves her ...But isn't her husband driving her out? That is nothing; stricken with poverty he is losing his senses. Otherwise, was he ever like this? ...What are those things floating outside the window in the moonlight? She thought about the stories her husband would tell her about fairies who play around in the full-moon night....Are those the fairies? ...how the flute played on her wedding night, how sweet was its tune...many such flutes lie by the side of the river...Well, why didn't the postman deliver a letter from Mouruphul? Red square envelope, embroidered with large golden borders, scented with *atar* or some such thing... (Bandopadhyay 1999b, 61).

The crux of the problem and the cause of insurmountable suffering and oppression leading to the tragic death of Sushila lies in an incomplete network of communication where one subject has the access to a certain configuration of privacy but the other comprehends it through a different system of value. The miscommunication results in attendant misery and violence within the uneven texture of the social network. The subject in the narrative is not a Western educated lady but clearly her longing signifies a partially articulate sense of romantic desire that would still operate as an anomaly within the existing social conditions. The satisfaction of such longing would require an overall transformation of the social sphere.

Bibhtibhsuhan's *Upekhita* (The Neglected Woman, 1921) describes quite a different kind of romantic longing that somehow manages to transcend the social restrictions that impinge upon Sushila in *Mouriphul*. The story, narrated as a recounting of the past, describes the young protagonist's encounter with a married lady in a remote town where he had worked as a schoolteacher. As he muses at the beginning, "I got acquainted with her while moving along the way" (Bandopadhyay 1999a, 6).

His chance meeting with the beautiful lady on his way to the pond affects him deeply.

The protagonist reflects elaborately:

Now I feel embarrassed to admit, but back then I was a fresh graduate from the University, was just about 20, and was unmarried. Those adolescent, lovelorn young women (*abhisarikara*), fragrantly dressed, with perfumed hair—from the pages of Sanskrit poetry - and along with them the Altheas, the Genevieves, the Thesoebias with their blue eyes and snow white tender arms—had created a constant and an utterly sweet

dreamland in my young mind. So on that day I was absolutely overwhelmed by her young, charming appearance, the shapely beauty of her uncovered arms laden with bangles and armlet, and above all the graceful outline of her whole body underlined by her sari. A new kind of feeling, a new rhythm in the blood pumped by the heart, became clear (Bandopadhyay 1999a, 6).

Despite the social restrictions in interaction between the sexes and particularly stringent norms regarding a married woman, the protagonist in a brave move introduces himself to the stranger. However his moral inhibitions seem to deflect his growing romantic longing as he formally transfers the feelings onto a recognized filial plane by addressing her in sisterly terms.²² The relation progressively develops into a deeply affectionate one as they meet and exchange casual facts about his background and experiences. Eventually the woman starts showing concrete signs of care by bringing the hapless bachelor food. Unfortunately the protagonist in order to avail of an opportunity of training abroad has to leave the town without informing her as he is unable to meet the woman during the last few days. The pain of separation relapses into his unconscious as he recounts, “throughout the night in the delirium of sleep the sad and afflicted gaze of *boudidi* floated before my eyes again and again” (Bandopadhyay 1999a, 12). The narrator then moves back to the present where he stands by the sea and describes his longing years later after he has moved on in life and settled in another part of the country. He briefly recounts the sequence of events in his life whereby he had moved across the world to return back into his country with a substantial employment:

²² He initially calls her as his sister and later on deflects it further to use the term ‘*boudidi*’ generally used to refer to one’s sister- in- law.

...in the meanwhile mother had died. I took my two younger brothers to Moradabad. Did not have to stay there for long. Have married in Bombay, my father in-law practiced medicine there. From then onwards I have been a resident of the Bombay region (Bandopadhyay 1999a, 16).

But as he stands alone looking out on to the sea far away from home, the romantic longing comes back to haunt him suddenly, as he expresses it in elaborate images symbolizing memory of one's past self. He reflects:

25 years ago on such an evening in a solitary village in Bengal, a village housewife in wet clothes was walking up the worn-out, stone-built steps of a water tank. Oh, you generous, kind housewife, are you still there? I have recalled you after so many years. Since then I have seen so much, received so much from the world...I am dying to see if you, my sister, are still around. I can see the image of a remote thatched hut, the flickering light of an earthen lamp, a silent evening, your silent tears of pain, tranquil beauty, the borders of your sari laced with affection. There has never been such sad sunset in the waters of the Arabian Sea” (Bandopadhyay 1999a, 17).

In other words romantic longing has now taken up the locus of one's identity amidst the various social identifications that define him as a subject in the network. I will discuss this structure of narration and its implications at length in the next chapter.

The Predicament of Unruly Desires

The early decades of 20th century also witnessed an intense reaction to the alleged residual Victorianism amongst established scholars and writers. From the first decade

onwards a group of young artists influenced by progressive ideas and modernist Literature in Europe flooded the literary world with short stories, novels and poems that sought to encounter the starkness of contemporary reality directly, a narrative tendency that came to be addressed by critics as ‘excessively modern literature’ (*ati adhunik sahitya*).²³ Some of the artistes grouped under the journal *Kallol* established in 1922 and by the time of its demise in 1929 other forums such as *Pragati*, *Kali Kalam* or *Uttara* spouted to house their modernist aspirations. Writers such as Pemendra Mitra, Budhadeb Bosu, Achintyakumar Sen Gupta, Gokul Nag, Mahitlal Majumdar etc. revolutionized mainstream literature in Bengal by unabashedly foregrounding contemporary problems such as urban squalor, poverty, unemployment, and the dark realities of illegitimate marginal existence of goons, thugs or prostitutes within an urban context. A host of these literary works also approached the domain of romance and conjugality but now the earlier representations of social conflicts around bourgeois romance gave way to foregrounding of the baser instincts, anomalies and psychological perversions that were a part of human social reality.²⁴ The major moving force behind was the acute economic crisis after the First World War, which led to unemployment and poverty on a large scale. The desperate experience of the middle class individual condemned to demoralized ways to earn a living, the turmoil and trauma of the urban poor and socially marginalized

²³ The phrase was coined by Amalchandra Home in an article published in the journal *Bharatbarsha*, Magh Issue, 1929, 286-296.

²⁴ See Pemendra Mitra’s short stories from the 20’s, especially ‘Sudhu Kerani’ (Only a Clerck), ‘Srinkhal’ (Bondage) and ‘Stove’ for an alternative approach towards representation of conjugal conflicts. (Mitra 2001). Budhadeb Bosu’s ‘Rajani Hoilo Utola’(1926) in its comical and psychoanalytic treatment of sexuality had raised a major a storm amongst prevailing moralists and led to series of conflicts amongst the established literati of the era (Ghosh 1996; Sengupta.2002;. Sengupta 1998; Bhattachrya 1996).

communities appeared as stark realities. The experience of the city, the idea of progress and social well being had taken a severe blow under such political circumstances where, as the progressive writers claimed, the recounting of trivial psychological conflicts could not do justice to the social responsibilities of literature. They openly admitted the influence of European literature justifying the need and freedom to borrow from global sources in order to reflect on contemporary circumstances. The modern author's encounter with the likes of Freud and Baudelaire opened out new horizons which gave them the freedom to perceptively comment on repressed orders of meaning that over determined the social experience of middle class all over the world.

Quite predictably they created a sensational discord amongst leading writers who waged a moral war upon the undesirable nature of writing that claimed to be works of art. Established writers like Sajjanikanta Das started parading as self appointed moral guardian and urged the literary community to unite themselves against what he described as an assault on morality and literary sensibility. In the debates that ensued Rabindranath Tagore was often called upon by implicated by authors from both camps to clarify his position. In 1926, the publication of stories by Jubanwash or a few poems and short story 'Rajani Hoilo Utala' by Budhadeb Bosu in *Kallol* and Nazrul Islam's poems 'Madhabiprolap' and 'Anamika' in *Kali Kalam* led Sajjanikanta Das to correspond directly with Rabindranath in order to seek his support in favour of the moralist resistance. Tagore's ambiguous reply to the letter indicated his decision to suspend his

judgment on the issue in the public forum within which writers like Das were operating.

He wrote back in the *Magh* issue of the journal *Sabuj Patra*:

As one of my fingers has recently been injured writing is not flowing easily. Therefore the restraint of speech is self-justified.

I don't get to read much modern literature. What I see at times I find to be coming from a pen stripped of the veil of modesty. Do not make the mistake of believing that I consider that pretty. There are literary reasons for why I don't; moral reasons might not be acceptable in this context. If I were to discuss I will have to talk about the fundamental theories of art and literature. Right now my mind is tired, distracted--- the crooked gaze of evil planets are having strong effects--- so currently I have no inclination of spreading the dust of my stormy words in all directions. When favorable times come I will say what I have to. Yours...
(Bhattacharya 1996, 6).

Das, who had evidently failed to comprehend the ironic humour inherent in the response, again sought the poet's moral support again in a stream of letters to all of which he received ambiguous replies.²⁵ By the next year Tagore went on to write two articles ('Sahityer Nabatwa' in *Probashi* and 'Sahitya Dhrama' in *Bichitra*, both 1927) where he referred to the contemporary debate claiming that the resolution if any, had to be on the grounds of aesthetics and economy and not on any general moral grounds. In response to

²⁵ Many writers reflecting back on the period have noted Tagore's ambiguous stance on the issue. Academic Protulchandra Gupta in his personal memoirs mentions a public occasion where the poet Tagore in a meeting with students and intellectuals had commented that he had heard about the young progressive writers and would definitely scold them (*boke debo*) when he had the opportunity. Tagore's humorous articulation consciously uses the popular connotations of the Bengali term, 'boke deoa' as a playful parody of serious anger, often used in intimate circumstances (Gupta 2002, 102).

the repeated letters from editors of journals such as *Sabuj Patra* and *Shanibarar Chithi* to comments on the movement Tagore appealed back to Sajaninkanta Das:

For heaven's sake, do not drag me into your *Shanibarar chithi*. If I were not a writer myself I would have accepted your invitation--- because this is akin to cannibalism for me. The piece I have written for *Probashi* (Sahityer Nabatwa) will perhaps rub some people up the wrong way --- because many have developed tense nerves. After the demise of youthful intensity, my pen has been trying to take the Jain path. I do not want to smear my days with blood as those days are not going to be many; I may not get the chance to wash the stains .I have got a few days left, which I want to keep clean for last use. You belong to the surgical ward, I to the recovery bath. It would have been easier for me to join your project if I had your age.²⁶

Eventually Tagore had to submit to the general consensus and a discussion was organized at his Jorasanko house where writers like Budhadeb Bosu were present. Although Tagore did acknowledge the writing skills of some new artists and also praised a few of the samples he had read, his general comments on the movements could not impress the young group. While he was not worried on moral grounds Tagore admitted that he could not appreciate the aesthetic necessity of the decadent use of language and theme in many cases. What mattered to him was the artistic motivation behind use of certain narrative tropes no matter what their cultural roots were. Tagore's reluctance to

²⁶ Bhattacharya 1996, 13. The comically sarcastic tone in all probabilities stems from Tagore's own experience of animosity from many quarters of established literary field up till the very last decade. The major allegations against Tagore's works were 'obscenity' and 'obscurity' and the critique swayed from vehement dissections and objections the literary qualities to harangue in the forms of farces and personal attacks (Ohdedar 1986).

participate in the debate suggests a refusal to frame the debate on sexuality and modernity in the manner it had been entangled in the public forum. The ensuing debates led the artists and intellectuals engaged in vigorous debates about the use of erotic representations in earlier eras and their aesthetic justification. Within this framework the earlier colonial debates on modernity and passionate affect were likely to be reconstructed thereby leading to a repressive paradigm where resistant outbursts would be a logical outcome. Tagore time and again pointed out that the self-proclaimed moralists of *Sabuj Patra* were solely responsible for the facilitation of erotic excesses in contemporary writing. On the other hand Tagore's own intervention into the older debate around sexuality, intimacy and colonial modernity was giving the romantic trajectory a whole new predicament.

Before elaborating my discussion on Tagore let us look into some instances of transformation in narrativizations of love and affect in the later works of writers associated with the progressive movement. Such instances would also provide us a with a reference point to enter into the discussion of the mediation of Tagore's literary work into the refashioning of ideas about intimate affect. Budhadeb Bosu and others from the movement wrote back seeking further clarification on his comments. It is well known that Bosu's own stand on Tagore transformed in hindsight as in his later writings and interviews he had mentioned that most of the debates of yesteryears had followed from the contemporary generation's misreading of Tagore and vice versa (Sengupta 1998). While the animosity never turned into a synthetic reverence most of the writers revised

their stands leading to fruitful discourses on the evolution of Bengali literature. However some of Bosu's later short stories exhibit an interesting narrative tendency that can be identified as a product of what I shall describe in the next chapter as Tagorean mediation.

While I do not consider Tagore as a singular agency for providing certain directionality in conceptualization of intimacy, some of his works remains a focal point in giving shape to this trajectory. The tendency itself can be identified in other writings within Tagore's era and was worked upon posterior to his significant intervention in providing a substantive core to a romantic imagination that characterizing the post-colonial Bengali citizen. Budhadeb Bosu's short stories "*Ekti Ba Duti Pakhi*' (One or Two *Pakhi*, 1946)²⁷ and '*Tumi Kemon Acho*' (How Are You, 1962). narrate the experiences of two men from the upwardly mobile Bengali society. It is interesting to note that like the protagonist in Bibhutibhusan's *Upekhita* their narration is characterized by a location in the present from where they invoke the past thereby lending the narratives a temporal direction. *Ekti Ba Duti Pakhi* opens at the end of a party at a senior executive's house, as the guests are about to leave. Soon a casual dialogue ensues between the host and a guest who is invited to stay back for the night. The descriptive details and the information given in course of the dialogue establishes the protagonist as a professionally successful bachelor and regular socialite who can afford to arrange social gatherings frequently at his house in order to maintain his status. Apprehending about his friend's ironic attitude towards such a mechanical social life the guest enquires about his

²⁷ The word 'pakhi' meaning 'bird' refers to the name of a young woman in the story.

authentic perceptions about life, in other words about his supposed 'real' identity. The protagonist's sarcastic perceptions about people at large and changing modes in fashion, lifestyle and relationships leads to the crucial enquiry about his love life, as the guest clarifies, " well, have you ever loved any woman? ---meaning obviously you must have loved a lot of women, but do you still remember anybody?" (Bosu 2000a, 149).

The narrator comments:

The shadow of a smile floated and vanished on Mr. Chatterjee's face---
today I feel they are not many but One. All through my life I have loved only one person. They have appeared in many incarnations and names; today when I think of them one merges into another, nothing comes to my memory clearly, yet suddenly I remember something that has no expression... (Bosu 2000a, 149).

Chatterjee's reflections give way to his recounting of a vague affair in the past. He narrates the story of his encounter with a woman named Pakhi, a slightly elder acquaintance from his *mofussil* neighbourhood whom he had admired intensely. On quite a few occasions the woman concerned had implicitly acknowledged her interest in furthering a romantic liaison. He recounts in detail the story of a night when the woman had confessed her attraction leaving the young man amazed and literally frozen at such a turn of events. The fear of social impediment did not let the mutual attraction mature to any full-fledged affair and evidently they both went on their own trajectories in life. The protagonist ends by recounting an episode much later in life where he had met Pakhi at wedding celebration of their relative; by that time she had married and he was about to leave the country for professional reasons. Their short and secret interaction during the night on the pretext of a casual exchange of words ended as the woman left the room

after planting a kiss on his lips. Ending his narration of a vague unfulfilled and rather mundane tale of romance the protagonist asks his guest:

now tell me Mr. Sarkar, will you call this ‘love’?

Gazing a little while at his aged handsome friend Sarkar said ‘ you already know that in actuality we are in love with love itself, these pretexts mean nothing meaning these are only pretexts ...’(Bosu 2000a, 155).

We have arrived at a rather strange definition of love in Bosu’s discourse where it reflects back upon itself. The nature of the narration makes it clear that the discursive articulation is not meant to draw attention to the ‘obsession with romance’, which moralists of the colonial period often complained about. The narrative structure intends to bring into play a certain temporality which gives the subject a certain vantage point to structure its self and simultaneously locate the romantic ideal in accordance to such a structural division of self. In Bosu’s articulation the notion is related to the implicit invocation of the protagonist’s psychological maturity as a key element providing weight to the protagonist’s discourse.²⁸ But on the other hand the temporal structure suggests a displacement in the location of amorous discourse, which has been tied up to one notions of identity as opposed to one’s identification in the social network. The past from this perspective flattens up to produce a conceptual space from where one can enunciate one’s imagination of self. This, I argue is another moment in the literary history of intimacy, a moment which would enable the post-colonial citizen to reconstruct his Symbolic location within the order through an act of creative imagination. The nature and structure

²⁸ The protagonist’s ironical distance from his everyday social engagements is the key element driving his the exchange with the friend Mr. Sarkar, who reflects on his aged beauty and implied maturity in opinion.

of such imagination is more clearly elaborated in Bosu's story *Tumi Kemon Aacho*. The story consists of abstract musings of a man, a successful and married manager working in a region called Pippalgrah where he leads a fashionable but mechanical upper middle class life. From this location the protagonist muses on an unspecified being who seems to be the locus of his identity. The narrative begins by his refrain, " Frequently I wish to know how you are?" (Bosu 2000b, 256). He goes on to reveal his social identity and professional location after which he claims, " this me in reality is a different person" (Bosu 2000b, 256). The narrator ironically comments on his predicament as a successful Indian citizen on whose figure the nation has invested its narrative of progress and economic growth. Immediately he cuts short his discourse with a refrain, " But frequently I remember you" (Bosu 2000b, 257). The phrase in many variations is distributed in the entire story as the object of his memory and lament becomes all the more obscure. He sarcastically reflects a little later, "An influential person, an old baboon, a organic heap of fat, flesh and dirt. But in reality I am a different person" (Bosu 2000b, 258). The object which is indicated as a figure of a woman starts playing games with his own memory as he sometimes seems to locate her in some remote past, sometimes in some distant natural surrounding and sometimes as the rival of his own wife Milu and sometimes even as Milu herself. At one point he muses, " But does Milu know the enemy with whom she has to fight?" (Bosu 2000b, 255). At another point he exclaims, " I looked at Milu. Suddenly a doubt cropped up in my mind. You are not Milu is it? No is this even possible that Milu –Urmila—the famous Mrs. Ghoshal of Pippalgarh –she's you?" (Bosu 2000b, 260). The protagonist recounts his trip to a gathering organized under his socialite wife's

initiation where a distinguished professor from Calcutta had come to speak. The protagonist observes:

he uttered a lot of Sanskrit . ‘love’, ‘beauty’, ‘immortal’, ‘eternal’ –such words were being frequently heard. Suddenly I felt –why is he saying all this? These are words only, only a cover, an envelope—has he ever seen what resides inside these? Has he not heard of you? If he indeed has, then why so much shouting? Those words –if they have any meaning at all—it is you—you –you are everything. But if you are all, how does the question arise whether or not you are there? (Bosu 2000b, 263).

The protagonist then speaks of going away to some unknown, remote, beautiful place where he imagines himself as close to the desired entity. He ends his monologue with the question, “ but if it is the case that you don’t exist?” (Bosu 2000b, 263).

It is quite clear that this interesting structure of narration aims at much more than philosophical musings, which is what the protagonist ridicules in the character of the Professor. Here the obscure object of desire is the desire for a new order or identity that literary work has put into place through its complex negotiations with other social discourses. Here a remembrance of the past or a desire for unspecified object signifies the imagination of one’s being as an object beyond his historical location. However the discursive articulation is far from being a spiritual or escapist one is an order of self structuring that is enabled under the aegis of modernity and the creative work of representation in order to describe the process and implications of which, we would now require to remember Rabindranath.

Chapter 3

Remembering ‘Rabindranath’: The Reinvention of Intimacy and (Post)colonial Predicaments

In this chapter, I wish to investigate some articulations regarding intimacy and identity that have shaped the structures of post-colonial psyche through the cultural ‘work’ enacted by literary mediations¹ There are many critical commentaries from varied ideological perspectives on colonial and post-colonial history that discuss problems related to cultural identity with specific reference to Bengal. There have been substantial writings on nationalism, the woman’s question or notions of public and private life and even on constructions of domesticity in the cultural history of Bengal.² But there remains a significant void in terms of critical discussions on Rabindranath Tagore’s contribution in such fields. This is despite the wide-ranging works of Tagore on these specific issues, which could perhaps shed a different light on some of the problems raised in the ongoing debates in fields of social sciences and cultural history. This in itself would not be much of an academic issue unless ‘Tagore’ as a cultural signifier manifestly dominated the social imaginary of the Bengali community till date. As a noted literary critic and scholar

¹ Here, the term ‘post-colonial’ is used in its most elementary sense referring to the Indian communities in the aftermath of independence.

² For critiques of these issues from feminist or Marxist perspectives, see works of Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Himani Bannerjee (Sarkar S. 2000; Sarkar T. 200; Bannerjee 2001). Their works also engage in an elaborate critique of the discussions of nationalist and womens’ issues within a postcolonial perspective (Chaudhury 1988, Chatterjee 1986,1993b, 1997; Chakrabarty 1994).

observed with reference to Partha Chatterjee's works on nationalism: "the nation gets invented and consequently fragmented without any significant discussion of Rabindranath, save a few passing remarks"³ This chapter builds on the contention developed in the earlier one to argue that the notions of 'intimacy' and 'privacy' in so far as they relate to socio-cultural identity are also mediated through literary representations and significantly through Tagorean constructions, in a certain sense.

By 'Tagorean construction'⁴ I merely wish to delineate certain discursive moves implicit in some of Tagore's work that sought to address the social and political conflicts of the colonial period. Out of the vast spectrum of his literary works I shall concentrate on a few novels, songs and essays that give us interesting insights into the problem of identity in its historical dimension. My intention is not to revalorize Tagore as a notable

³ Personal communication with Sibaji Bandopadhyay. However, Partha Chatterjee has recently broken his silence in a recent collection of essays, a few of which explicitly deal with Tagore's writings on various facets of nationalist and other socio-political debates (Chattopadhyay 2005). Moreover the recent anthologies on Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) or Tapabrata Ghosh's analysis of male bonding in in *Gora*, provide interesting insights into Tagore's fictional work in relation to histories of intimacy and interiority in the colonial period (Datta 2003; Ghosh 2002). The range of insights offered do not fundamentally alter my arguments but does indeed draw attention to other important issues, which can be addressed in a different essay rather than here.

⁴ I deliberately use this term rather than the established Bengali coinage 'Rabindrik' to avoid its obvious connotations to certain stylistic conventions in music and dance dramas composed by Rabindranath. However a strict distinction between conceptual and stylistic connotations might be difficult to maintain at times as Tagore's music has ample conceptual implications inbuilt in them. While discussing issues of representation and mediation, one of the favorite examples used by one of our university teachers was that Bengali's perception of rain is mediated by Tagore's songs on monsoon. In other words, for a Bengali the emotions brought forth by the advent of monsoon showers are constructions that can, in some fashion, be traced back to Tagore's imageries.

contributor in the cultural politics of Bengal, but rather to investigate what is symptomatic about the systematic invocations and (mis)readings and of Tagore in some of the fictional and academic writings that seek to address his discourses from a post colonial location.⁵ I suspect that such tendencies are not products of any ‘anxiety of influence’ of sorts but rather constitute fragmentary attempts to comprehend and redefine substantive aspects of an indigenous ‘modernity’ in relation to social concepts elaborated by Tagore, knowingly or unknowingly.

Amongst the small number of analytical writings in English that have dealt with Tagore’s critical interaction with cultural history, Ashish Nandy’s work on nationalism and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s recent book on the critique of historicism, are significant (Nandy 1994; Chakravarty 2000). Since nationalism does not directly concern me in this particular section, I shall concentrate on Chakrabarty’s commentary on the effect of literary work as a constitutive component in constructions of cultural identity in the realm of colonial modernity. In order to lay out my argument I shall briefly discuss some of Tagore’s novels namely *Chokher Bali* (1902), *Nastaneer* (1901), *Shesher Kabita* (1929), with reference to Chakrabarty’s argument about the birth of the ‘modern subject’ in the Indian context.

⁵ Here, ‘post colonial’ apart from being a temporal marker also refers to the contemporary critical current in history writing that has been actively engaged in understanding the dynamic consequences of colonial encounter as a harbinger of indigenous varieties of ‘modernity’.

***Nahanyate*: Affect as Persistence of Memory**

As a prelude we should confront the issue of ‘mediation’ itself by considering Maitreyi Devi’s controversial novel, *Nahanyate* (The Indestructible, 1974), which gives us an interesting hindsight on Tagore. This is not only a controversial novel in terms of its invocation of extramarital romance but is also a complicated text in terms of its historical location and narrative structure. Apparently the novel elaborates the autobiographical story of a tragic but undying romance between a young Bengali girl and a Rumanian scholar, Mircea Eliade, who once stayed as a guest in her joint family household. On the other hand, the novel is self admittedly a sort of fictional response to this foreigner’s account in an earlier published novel, translated in French as ‘*La Nuit Bengali*’(1950) and consequently translated into both English and Bengali (Eliade 1993; 1988). Now, had *Nahanyate* been a simple story of unsatisfied desire or a war of personal accounts, the narrative would have been mundane.⁶ Rather, the primary point of interest in the novel lies not in the tale but in it’s ‘telling’. Here I am referring to the distinction between ‘plot’ and ‘story’ as the difference between sequences of events in the narrative and their retroactive comprehension by the reader. I would like to argue that the plot of ‘*Nahanyate*’ when read as a story, produces a separate thematic that is manifestly absent from the primary plot structure

⁶ This is precisely what happens to the text when the plot is loosely adapted into a love story in Sanjay Leela Bansali’s ‘*Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam*’(1999).The film text linearizes the narrative and therefore flattens the temporal juxtaposition employed in the novel (Eliade 1993, Devi 1974).

This implicit secondary theme has to do with the ‘enunciation’ of the narrative and the mediation of Rabindranath Tagore as a symbolic figure in that process of enunciation. It is precisely such an investment that Maitreyi Devi attempts to obscure when she historicises the novel in the preface to the first edition. She writes:

A novel needs no introduction; it is its own introduction. But I have to give a bit of an explanation (*kaifiyat*) In this book there are references to a lot of characters apart from Rabindranath who were actually alive one day. There is no real significance in referring to their actual names in order to construct the narrative. But I was trying to paint the picture of an era that shone in the light of these extraordinary men and women. No fictitious names would present that era as real before me.

Let us note a few things about this passage. Firstly, it is autobiographical in the sense that the author clearly indicates her own involvement in much of the historical setting. But it is to be noted that ‘Rabindranath’ is the only one among the luminaries referred in the novel whose name is invoked in the passage. Moreover the word ‘explanation’ as a translation of Bengali ‘*kaifiyat*’ is actually a bit misleading; ‘*kaifiyat*’ is not any sort of explanation but rather an explanation that is forwarded in response to an allegation. This raises questions regarding the nature of the unstated accusation directed at the author. Presumably she is trying to respond to critics who would object to the obsessive invocation of Rabindranath in a novel that deals with her fictional recounting of extramarital romantic musings. If that is the case, then the drive of the passage is quite clear, it attempts to reduce Rabindranath from the status of a signifier, a ‘name’, to that of a historical, flesh and blood being. This desire obscures the latent connections between

the signifier ‘Rabindranath’ and the notion of love (*prem*) as elaborated in the text.⁷ The narrative should rather lead us to reflect: what is so specific about the notion of love as recounted here that cannot be ‘real’ without the mediation of ‘Rabindranath’? In the course of my argument I shall give evidences scattered in the text to elucidate this notion of ‘mediation’ but first let us consider the site of enunciation.

One can perhaps argue that the enunciation of the narrative follows a structure that is symptomatic of a postcolonial perspective where discourses on cultural identity of a nation or a community can proceed from an interpretative grid located posterior in the historical trajectory. In other words, here life history and the problem of identity (of a subject or a community as the case may be) are explicitly posed through a retroactive act of comprehension. It would be interesting to investigate the logic of such a construction and the problem that produced it in the first place. As I shall attempt to show duly, Tagorean interventions into the elaborations of public-ness and privacy in the discourses of the colonial period have implicit bearings upon such a narrative structuring. So let us start by asking the quintessential question: who is telling the story? The narrator, in the voice of Amrita, an elderly woman occupying the characteristic mandates of a citizen of the post-colonial nation state. It is to be further noted that the narrative alternates between Amrita’s past and her own reflective recounting of it from her present location. Objectively the narration starts off with a monologue of an aged lady who on the eve of

⁷ One would surely miss the point if one were to consider the obsessive references to Tagore himself, his works and actual historical events, as irrelevant or exaggerated. In fact the novel is not so much about an

her birthday is suddenly transported to the past after meeting a person from her former lover's country. However, the narrator continually stresses the fundamental fact that she is at present a dutiful member of a typical, modern Bengali household. As she hovers between the shadowy boundaries of past and present beside her sleeping husband, she reflects, "my life is full to its brim in many ways. Whatever I had to and wanted to I have given to the world..."(Devi 1974, 1). She goes on contemplating about her trusting and unsuspecting husband, her children, small grandchildren and so forth. Later on in the novel, the reader becomes aware that she is not only successful as a homemaker but also a fairly eminent socialite who has engaged profusely in the public sphere through her writings or involvement with various social work institutions etc.

It is evident that the emergent romantic longing in her tone is not one that stems from any dissatisfaction or complaint. She has achieved everything that constitutes an ideal social life; there is nothing that she can desire... yet... something seems to be missing! A delirious sense of belonging that seems to insist evocatively through the name: 'Mircea'. She confesses:

the dangerous evening of birthday is past. I am pleased at my achievement.
I have worn a new saree, a garland, recited poetry, listened to music;
nobody could understand that all the while I was trembling within! This is

autobiographical romance as it is about reflections on a generic Tagorean question: "Sakhi, bhalobasha kare koi?"(*sakhi*, what is meant by love?).

not a mere metaphor; if people could actually see the trembling on my body they would think I had Parkinson's disease.⁸

Then she wanders off decades back to her rooftop encounter with Mircea through another narratorial monologue.

The irony lies in the fact that at many junctures in the narrative this signifier 'Mircea' gets continuously merged with another one: 'Rabindranath', to the extent that Mircea himself after a point, seems ambiguous about Amrita's relationship to this contemporary poet.⁹ Had this not been the case the novel would be like any other account of indestructible, undying love as some sort of spiritual ideal unachievable within a material realm. In fact for critics who would tend to read the novel in this way, the text's opening quote from *The Gita* could be cited as evidence : "ajo nitya sasawtohayang purano, nahanyate hanyamane sarire" (This soul is eternal and old since birth, it cannot be slain even on destruction of the body). I propose that this reference should be understood as a metaphor operating in a modern social context and not merely as an invocation of any traditional commentary. The opposition between body (*sarira*) and 'soul' (*atman*) here operates as a conceptual distinction delineating ways of refiguring 'identity' within a social existence operating under modern socio-political apparatus. The

⁸ Devi 1974, 9. Psychoanalytically speaking, one might claim that memory here reveals the affective structure as a hole that constitutes a 'whole'; it is this constitutive 'lack' that keeps obsessively surfacing in the guise of ecstatic memories of 'Mircea'.

⁹ Sibaji Bandopadhyay drew my attention to the possible erotic connotations of Maitreyi Devi's transformation of the title in her self-translated non-fictional account of correspondence with Rabindranath, called *Mangpate Rabindranath* (Devi 2002). The English version was re named as 'Tagore by the Fireside'

quoted dichotomy of spirit /matter can possibly be better comprehended as a conceptual move structurally similar to Jacques Lacan's distinction of 'manque a etre'(want of being) from social existence, the very act of formulation of an 'identity' as a register operating beyond 'identifications' that the subject inhabits in the social order (Lapsley and Westlake 1992). I shall comment on this issue and also its psychoanalytic overtones in greater detail when I start discussing Tagore's critical elaborations on transformations in the intimate realm in relation to *Nastaneer* and *Sesher Kabita*. In fact, the confusion of a seemingly spiritual reference with an assumed universal human core that withstands emerging socio political upheavals, is a tendency that often characterizes various critical attempts to comprehend 'our modernity', often including, as I shall now demonstrate, postcolonial readings as well. For the time being let us deflect and reflect a bit on a very similar confusion in Dipesh Chakarabarty's reading of Tagore in '*Provincialising Europe*', which shall also lead us back with 'insight' into Maitreyi Devi's invocation of Rabindranath.

***Chokher Bali* : Interiority as a Relational Structure**

Chakarabarty's book is essentially a critique of the 'historicist' approach to the study of socio-cultural issues. He attempts to arrive at non-historicist accounts of social histories of 'our modernity' through critical discussions on interiority, nationalism, 'adda' and many other such phenomena. As the title and introduction suggest, the book could perhaps be placed within a broad critique of colonial conceptual categories that have been

elaborated by many contemporary scholars and therefore can be analyzed as symptomatic of a more generalized academic tradition that deals with similar issues.¹⁰ However, my interest lies primarily in a particular strand of theoretical argument, evident in Charabarty's invocation of Rabindranath where he attempts to delineate the substantive aspects of 'our modernity' that cannot be quite grasped through conceptual categories of European Enlightenment.

In the chapter 'Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject', Chakrabarty attempts to analyze the nature of narration that characterizes modern subjectivity in relation to documentation of sufferings of widows during the colonial period. As he himself puts it, he is interested in questions like, "What kind of a subject is produced at the intersection of these two kinds of memories, public and familial? What does this subject have to be in order to be interested in documenting suffering?"(Chakrabarty 2000, 119). He immediately proceeds to answer, "The capacity to notice and document suffering (even if it be one's own suffering) from the position of a generalized and necessarily disembodied observer is what marks the beginning of the modern self"

¹⁰ Such analytical perspectives are evident in Ashish Nandy's work as well as the more recent works by social theorists like Vivek Dhareswar or S.N. Balagangadhara (Nandy 1995; Dhareswar 1998; Balagangadhara 1998). However, it should be noted that there are significant differences in approach and conceptualizations of the critique of colonial mediation that often resist any easy categorization of different scholars under one ideological grid. Chakrabarty for instance would be deeply suspicious and critical of any attempt to theorize about an unmediated access to pre colonial past. Nandy for eg. often shifts in between different positions that speak explicitly about our 'deeply colonized cultural psyche' and about psychical zones of communities that by their very nature resist any attempt at complete colonization (Chakarvarty 2000; Nandy 1995).

(Chakrabarty 2000, 119). He elaborates on this observation by citing evidence from Rammohun Ray, Vidyasagar and others whose writings exhibit such modern aspirations to occupy the empty position from which documentation can objectively proceed. So far the story seems quite compatible with Western accounts of rise of individuation in the modern context, but what is it, that is substantive about ‘our modernity’, that can distinguish itself from the European narrative? What, in other words, are the cultural constituents that mark a break in terms of this logic of narration in the Indian context? To account for this aspect Chakrabarty goes on to discuss another distinctively modern phenomenon, the invention of a “set of observational techniques for studying and describing human psychology”: the rise of the novel (Chakrabarty 2000, 133). Chakrabarty observes:

Bengali modernity thus reflects some fundamental themes of European modernity –for instance, the idea that the modern subject is propertied... that the subject is an autonomous agent... or suffering can be documented from the position of the citizen. Yet, the family romance speaks of a significantly different subject (Chakrabarty 2000, 141).

In order to grasp this notion of ‘significant difference’, Chakrabarty proceeds to discuss the works of modern novelists like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, which deal with the problem of romantic love and the figure of the ‘widow’ as a locus of sexuality. Let us concentrate on his argument with respect to Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* where the narrative develops around a passionate affair of a widow with a married householder.¹¹ The issue here is the description of psychic

¹¹ Chakrabarty describes *Chokher Bali* as the story: “...of a passion of a young man Mahendra who was married to Asha and who fell violently in love with a young widow Binodini, who came to stay with Mahendra, Asha and Mahendra’s mother in Calcutta. It is also the story of Binodini’s own feelings of love,

interiority of the characters that reveals various kinds of social problems regarding the symbolic status of the 'widow'. While on the one hand the 'widow' was publicly perceived as a figure embodying unfulfilled sexual desire (whether in derogatory terms or in need of progressive reform in the form of remarriage), the modern novel sought to treat her as an autonomous agent who 'speaks in her own voice' thereby unleashing emotions that were repressed under prevailing social norms. But, at the same time, such representations of 'experience' also reveal an alternative drive to theorize an emotional terrain that is quite beyond the scope of European notions of modern self. According to Chakrabarty, examples of such a drive can be found in *Chokher Bali*, where, "focused on the problem of a young widow's unrequited love, we see a self-conscious step taken in the depiction of human interiority as an absolute autonomous inside of the subject...." (Chakrabarty 2000, 133).

Chakrabarty argues that Tagore's novel is an exemplary instance of a narrative tendency that distinguishes between the notion of 'lust' (*kam*) and 'love' (*prem*). While the progressive social reformers were operating within the domain of love as sexual passion, the modern novelists sought to elaborate a specific notion of romance that detached itself from purely physical attachments. This concept was described in Bengali through the qualifier '*pabitra*' (pure) that designated the modern, secular notion of heterosexual love.¹² Chakrabarty cites Bankimchandra's commentaries on medieval

her initial attraction to Mahendra, eventually replaced by Mahendra's best friend Bihari" (Chakrabarty 2000,133).

¹² This Bengali qualifier of 'love' (*pabitra*) connotes a conglomeration of concepts such as 'sacred', 'auspicious', 'untainted' etc. that signifies a transcendence of physical passions.

Vaishnava poets Jayadeva and Vidyapati where he distinguishes between two kinds of nature in the context of heterosexual romance. Bankimchandra argues that whereas poems of the kind exemplified by Jayadeva valorize external nature (*bahihprakriti*), poets like Chandidasa or Vidyapati attempt to transcend love of the senses by meditations on internal sense (*antahprakriti*) (Chakrabarty 2000, 137). He then proceeds to argue, that within the formal structure of the autonomous subject and her/his personal experiences writers like Tagore or Saratchandra articulated the notion of ‘pabitra prem’(pure love), which has been derived through a distinctively modern interpretation of such traditional Indian texts. In *Chokher Bali*, the author’s portrayal of Binodini as a subject of passion charts such a conceptual territory rather than residing in the realm of Western categories like ‘sexuality’. To forward an instance of Chakrabarty’s observation on concepts operative in Bengali literature one could cite his problematic assertion: “There is nothing like the Freudian category of ‘sexuality’ mediating between the body and interior space of the subject” (Chakrabarty 2000, 141).

However, for purpose at hand, it is more important to critically examine the evidence that Chakrabarty cites to illustrate his argument rather than immediately engage in a defense of psychoanalysis. Talking about *Chokher Bali* he argues:

It was as if in response to Bankim’s idea that love or attraction could be caused by the fact that human sight, could not help being influenced by physical beauty(*rup*), Tagore would quip(through the voice of Binodini): ‘has God given men only sight and not insight at all?’ By thus subordinating sight to insight, Tagore shifted the drama of sentiments

from the external space of physicality to the space of interiority of the subject (Chakrabarty 2000, 138).

I would like to argue that by quoting the dialogue fragment out of context Chakrabarty not only obscures the narrative logic but more significantly demonstrates a symptomatic failure to grasp the broader conceptual implications involved in the debates on ‘our modernity’.¹³ The line quoted by Chakrabarty appears near the end of Binodini’s long accusation directed at Bihari at one of the most dramatic and erotically charged points in the novel. Driven senseless in lust and love for Binodini, Mahendra has decided to leave his wife and home to move out with Binodini. However, Binodini, on the other hand, has lost her attraction towards Mahendra and has seemingly fallen in love with his best friend Bihari. On the very night Mahendra has planned to elope, Binodini has rushed to Bihari’s house insisting that he accept her as his lover and provide shelter. Binodini’s utterances, throughout the earlier section of her exchange with Bihari, have connotations of an erotic surrender to one’s lover. As she puts it herself: “...but the person whose respect I had and whose love would have made my life meaningful, I have hastened to him tonight disposing all my fear and shame...”.¹⁴ The portion of the dialogue Chakrabarty refers to

¹³ As I shall further explain below, the logic of continuation of tradition does not explain the peculiarities apparent in the text but rather aid certain specific sorts of conceptual misreadings, that might otherwise involve ideologically diverse sources and implications. Rajat Kanta Ray self admittedly coming from a different critical location also ends up by referring to the widow’s love for Bihari as an exemplary instance of spiritual achievement and ideal womanhood that delineates the specificities of the Indian emotional constitution (Ray 2001, 77-78 and 90).

¹⁴ See Tagore 1995, 2 : 462. Throughout this chapter, all citations from Tagore, unless specified otherwise, are from *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 1 -15, Sulabha Sanskaran, 1995. Henceforth, the collected works shall be referred to as ‘RR’ followed by a number specifying the respective volume and respective page numbers separated by a comma.

appears a bit later when instigated by Bihari an enraged Binodini proceeds to accuse him. I quote the entire paragraph as it foregrounds certain distinctive narrative preoccupations operative in the novel:

Binodini: *Thakurpo*,¹⁵ you have not made a mistake, but if you have indeed understood me, if you have indeed respected me then why did you stop there? What was stopping you from loving me? I have now come to you shamelessly and I am now speaking shamelessly --why did you not make love to me. My bad luck! Even you have been intoxicated by Asha. No, you ought not be angry. Take your seat; I will not hide anything tonight. I knew the fact that you loved Asha even when you yourself were not aware. But I fail to understand what you people have seen in Asha. Either good or bad, what does she possess? Has God given men only sight and no insight at all. What is it and how much of it charms you people? You benighted soul! you blind !(RR 2, 461).

The caustic voice laced with erotic intonations cannot be mistaken even by the most insensitive of readers and this precisely raises a question regarding the connotation of pure love (*pabitra prem*) that Chakrabarty so confidently attributes to the dialogue and consequently to the authorial voice. The only way in which one can subscribe to Chakrabarty's interpretation is by imagining a simple correspondence between the terms 'insight' (*antardrishti*) and 'internal nature' (*antahprakriti*), which I propose is an absurd interpretation at least within the concrete textual instance at hand, if not also in purely literary terms. To put it more clearly, Chakrabarty's assumption is that the term 'insight'

¹⁵ I leave the term 'Thakurpo' untranslated here to retain the ironic connotations implied; it is the standard way of addressing one's husband's brother in Bengali. Here Binodini and Bihari are not relations in law but Tagore's use of this mode of address conjures the friendly and erotically charged relation between wife and

refers to an abstract notion of vision, which is somehow related to Bankim's notion of human interiority that transcends the barrier of senses. Then the relevant question should be whether or not such an interpretation can be sustained in the cited exchange between Binodini and Bihari.

Even a surface reading of the paragraph within the context of the novel clearly indicates that implicit within Binodini's accusation is a note of comparison between herself and Asha. It should be also noted that the demand made by Binodini brings forth the central theme of the novel: 'the relation between language and sexuality'. In fact the nearest and clearest evidence of this theme and the novel's self-reflexivity regarding the same is articulated in Bihari's response to Binodini's request that appears a little below on the same page from which Chakrabarty quotes. When Binodini tells Bihari about Mahendra's plan of leaving Asha and eloping with her, the narrator observes:

Bihari's facial expression slowly became extremely hard and he said ---
You have tried to say straightforward things, now let me tell you one thing frankly, the thing (*kandoti*)¹⁶ that you have done today and the words that you are using now are mostly lifted from that literature which you have read. It is three quarter play and novel.

Binodini : Play , novel !!!!

Bihari: Yes, play and novel. That too not of a very high standard. You believe that these are your own (*words*) but that isn't it. These are all

younger brother of the husband in Bengali households. As is well known, such a familial nexus is also the center of a complex drama in *Nastaneer*, where as I will argue, it takes up a different articulation

¹⁶ The Bengali word 'kando' in everyday speech has connotations of a sensational and/or scandalous act.

echoes of the press. If you were imbecile, uneducated, innocent, even then you would not have been deprived of love in the world but a heroine of drama goes well with the stage, one can't do with her in the house (RR 2, 461).

This paragraph ironically foregrounds the reflexivity of the text regarding its foremost concern, the debates around 'colonial modernity' where the status of women and the influence of the emerging new media were a regular topic of vigorous debate among nationalist thinkers from ideologically diverse locations. It is well known that many of Tagore's texts explicitly use subtexts, many of which are Bankimchandra's discourses like the frequent references to *Bishabrikha* (1873) in the case of *Chokher Bali*. But despite Chakrabarty's insistence I would like to maintain the point of overlap is not construction of tradition within overtly modern modes of characterization but rather an interesting counter discourse that Tagore wages in response to Bankim's musings on intimacy and modernity.

It is a historically known fact that popular drama and novel were considered as an adverse influence particularly on the realm of the private, particularly on womenfolk, as is the case of cinema and television in contemporary times. Tagore's texts like *Chokher Bali* or *Chaturanga*(1916) not only weave this issue into their texture but also delineates the obverse of the relation : the necessary relation between construction of the 'new woman' and literary discourse. A careful reading of *Chokher Bali* reveals that the most critical aspect of the plot plays around with the notion that somehow sexuality, in the so

called 'modern' sense of the term, is related in a peculiar way to the notion of language proficiency. It is in this context that the explicit difference between Asha and Binodini should be understood as a driving force of the novel.¹⁷

To understand Mahendra's progressive alienation from the mother and subsequent moral decline we have to take into account a notion of double distancing both of which are related to the notion of education and 'language proficiency' in a perverse way. The first distancing occurs when Mahendra despite his mother's insistence, hinders his wife Asha from performance of regular familial duties and attempts to concentrate on her education. Thereafter, throughout the first part of the novel the couple's room on the rooftop becomes a object of perverse gazes of all the characters and the reader while parallely the narrator goes on commenting on the romantic and sexual dalliance that unfold in the privacy of the room in the guise of 'education'. That the point is not only about the attempt to articulate a private, conjugal space within the pre-modern constitution of the household, is made clear with the entrance of the literate and attractive widow Binodini whom Mahendra's mother brings from the village. Consequently there develops a sexual attraction between Mahendra and Binodini which explodes in due course but the very elaboration of their passionate affair again foregrounds the perverse sense in which 'language' is used in the novel. Here the figure of the widow does not merely symbolize a site of unsatisfied desire and therefore a sexual threat. In Binodini's

¹⁷ Despite Tagore's claim in the preface, added for the Vishwabharati edition (1940), the driving force of the novel are neither only the mother's jealousy nor Binodini's angst, but rather a critical elaboration on intersubjectivity as I shall explain in due course (RR 2 , 373).

case, the obverse is also equally true: the widow is desirable precisely because she is proficient in the 'language of love'. To put it bluntly Binodini as opposed to Asha is not only formally educated but sexually experienced and articulate as well. It is not only the case that she, being a young widow, can still desire but rather the threatening fact is that she knows the intricacies of erotic desire and therefore also proficient in subtle methods to invoke the same.

The point is ironically made in the portion where an illiterate Asha falls prey to Binodini's help to write love letters to her husband; letters which on receiving are transcribed by Mahendra as Binodini's messages. At one point the narrator comments:

Thinking that ill written, trivial letters will not be welcomed by her husband, Asha couldn't move her fingers...no matter how much clearly she wanted to convey words of her heart, her sentences could never be completed. If on receiving a letter, with her sign and just one '*sricharoneshu*'¹⁸, Mahendra, like all knowing God could have understood all she had wanted to say, only then her letter writing would have borne fruit. If God has given so much love, then why not the language to express it (RR 2, 450).

'Language' in the novel is obviously used in a sense much broader than is connoted in written or spoken forms. After Binodini's entrance and consequent intimacy with the married couple, the narrator elaborates the birth of desire in Mahendra's psyche:

¹⁸ Italics mine. The term designates a respectful way of referring to an intimate relation in the course of writing.

“In this way Mahendra started feeling Binodini’s caring touch in his culinary and attire, in labour and leisure---in all spheres. The woolen slippers crafted by Binodini in his feet, the woolen muffler woven by Binodini around his neck as if enveloped him like a soft and intimate phantom touch. These days Asha, beautified by the hands of her girlfriend appears before Mahendra, neat and clean, nicely dressed and sweetly scented, in all this it is as if part of it is Asha’s and part of it somebody else’s ... (RR 2, 403).

Needless to point out that what is elaborated here and in many similar passages, is the ‘art of love’ in which Mahendra attempts to ‘educate’ Asha in the beginning. Human beings as it seems can engage in sexual relations only through the mediation of ‘language’, in the broader sense in which Tagore uses the notion here. Thus sexuality appears to be a socio-culturally mediated concept rather than a lawless, immoral drive as it is often depicted in contemporary narrative traditions such as sarcastic moral tracts or even fictional forms. This is not to claim that there are essentially culture specific notions of sexuality but rather whatever are implied by sexuality at a given historical moment can and do undergo transformations in changing socio political milieu.¹⁹ I have cited some evidence to demonstrate that *Chokher Bali* cannot be read as a discourse on any abstract notion of ‘pure love’ (*pabitra prem*) but rather focuses on the essentially fragile aspects of human sexuality, as shall duly be further clarified. On the other hand the novel engages in

¹⁹ Here one can possibly invoke an often-cited Lacanian dictum bearing similar connotations: ‘there is no such thing as a sexual relation’. The aphorism does not imply a counterfactual absurdity but rather draws attention to the fact that unlike animals, human sexuality is not a pre given or innate biological component but rather a linguistically mediated phenomenon. What requires to be added here to avoid possible misinterpretations is that these ‘languages of love’ being cultural products undergo historical transformations in various ways.

complex constructions of the 'new woman' as an educated and sexually conscious, amorous subject occupying one of the relational categories involved in mapping of emerging social conditions in the colonial subject's imagination. But at the same time it should be noted that this representational dimension is more layered in structure and not intended to function as mere realistic reflections of any externally available sociological reality of 'women'.

Shormishtha Panja's recent essay on *Chokher Bali*, deals with issues similar to those that concern me in this chapter. In fact, her analysis of the social implications of the novel also involves a critique of what she claims to be Chakrabarty's misplaced and one-dimensional reading of Bindodini. Panja claims that, "her [*Bindodini's*] characterization refutes Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of relationships in *Chokher Bali* having nothing to do with 'rup' or physical beauty and attraction"(Panja 2004, 219). However, what interests me more is Panja's broader argument against this unjustified interpretation of Bindodini and its consequence for the narrative logic of the novel. Based on the evident fact that the novel does deal with relevant historical issues and debates of its time, Panja ascribes a new intellectual responsibility to the narrator who supposedly grounds his discursive practice as a critique of modes of story writing that were dominant prior to *Chokher Bali*. She rightly draws attention to Tagore's conscious reference and play around Bankim's subtexts as a means of articulating a new literary consciousness behind portrayal of the contemporary social universe. But strangely, drawing a comparison to Bankim's *Bishabrikha*, Panja argues that, "Tagore practically eschews all outward

sensationalism and focuses instead on what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls ‘interiority’ and birth of the self reflexive subject in the Bengali novel” (Panja 2004, 213). As for example, “Tagore tries to undercut the sensational qualities of many of the events in the novel like the confrontation between Binodini and Bihari... Mahendra’s sudden decision to leave Calcutta with Bindodini too, is not built up as any kind of climax: Tagore’s tone is practically matter of fact”(Panja 2004, 213). The episode Panja refers to is of course the same confrontation between Bindodin and Bihari that I have discussed above in some detail. Panja ascribes an authorial agency to Bihari’s exclamation, claiming that his sarcastic dismissal of Bindoini’s proposal is meant to display a critique of Bankim’s penchant for melodramatic and sensational characterization of heroines in particular and narrative events in general. The idealistic basis of this interpretation becomes all the more evident when Panja claims with reference to Tagore’s letter to PC Mohalonabis, “Tagore was going to take it upon himself to paint Bengali domestic life in truest colours possible: ‘neither Michael nor Nabin Sen or Bankim did that’” (Panja 2004, 214). The above description almost ascribes a corrective agency to Tagore as a representative literary figure, through whose realist interventions into the overtly melodramatic conventions of the period, the history of the novel proceeds towards a more refined and balanced stage in narrative construction. Thus *Chokher Bali* reveals a comparatively nuanced and sociologically valid representation of the category of ‘new woman’ whose actual historical essence was being lost amongst the emerging melodramatic ‘stereotypes’ that dominated literature so far. Panja observes:

Here is a woman who revels in the male gaze. What is surprising here is that Chakrabarty should feel uncomfortable in admitting that the new woman’s interiority can coexist with her sexual appetite and carnal

attraction ...it is an injustice to Tagore's nuanced portrayal to try and reduce Binodini (or elevate her) into something she is not" (Panja 2004, 220).

In fact, according to Panja, autobiographies seem to be a more relevant and authentic narrative form that could be entrusted with overseeing the emerging fictional experimentations. Despite his general sensitivity towards social reality, even Tagore (presumably being a male subject) was not wholly outside the patriarchal grid which systematically ignored the fact of women's oppression in the form of 'domestic labour' or other wise, as is revealed in women's autobiographical documents of the time. Thus, she critically points out that, "It is interesting to note that the sheer drudgery of housework without any labour saving devices vanishes into a feast of senses when the writer is male (Panja 2004, 218).

As I have already pointed out, the implicit sexual intonations in Binodini's passionate involvements are very much foregrounded in the narration itself and can be deciphered by minimally sensitive readings. Moreover, such sexual layers have less to do with realistic characterization than a process of literary intervention into emerging social discourses. I have been trying to argue that the references to the relation between novelistic discourse and the 'new woman' should be understood as a commentary on the dynamics of formation of new social subjectivities through the mediation of literary representations. The 'new woman', as Panja seems to presume, is not any pre-given sociological category available for representational use based on a range of competitively

‘authentic’ narratives. To argue on those lines is to implicitly accept a ‘reflectionist’ account of representations, which focuses on its fidelity to social reality rather than then ‘cultural work’ or ‘mediations’ that such representations seek to put in place. Tagore’s elaboration of the network of social relations within the historical realm of colonial domesticity suggests number of interesting conceptual moves and discursive articulations which go much beyond the issue of mere realistic translation. Even strictly realist conventions do not permeate literary texts in a uniform way and most often perform many symbolic operations in the guise of sociologically ‘nuanced’ characterizations or plot constructions. Binodini’s contrasting psychological traits are not wholly located as qualities of her inner self but more as a recognizable set of social markers that can perform a critical commentary on the prevailing discourses of ‘sexuality’ that oversaw many dominant narrative constructions of its time, including public debates or autobiographical narration. This is precisely why the comparative dimension with respect to Binodini and Asha is introduced as a major structuring element in the narrative. At one particular point Binodini, in a fit of irritation and rage refers to Asha as ‘doll’ (*putul*). In my reading this ascription explicitly foregrounds the contrast of sexual activity and passivity that is operative in the novel. It should be noted that the title ‘*Chokher Bali*’ which literally translates as ‘cause of irritation in the eye’ refers to the intimate name by which Binodini and Asha call each other and thereby brings into play the dimension of inter-subjective sexual dynamics operative in the narrative.²⁰

²⁰ The literal translation should be ‘sand in the eye’, a metaphorical coinage popularly connoting a ‘cause of irritation’. One of the early English translations of the novel surely misses the point when it re names the text as ‘*Binodini*’.

To understand the wider implications of the novel's seemingly erratic plot one has to concentrate on its narrative structure. I would argue that *Chokher Bali*, in some ways, can be understood as performing exactly the opposite function to the one which Chakrabarty ascribes to it. It has to be read as a counter discourse to Bankim's understanding of intimacy and identity rather than as a historically continuous discourse. Coming back to Chakrabarty's concern with which I started off, one can safely assume that for the distinction between external nature (*bahihprakriti*) and internal nature (*antahprakriti*) to be operable, the latter has to signify a relatively stable aspect of human psyche that can resist the wear and tear of everyday social life. However *Chokher Bali* amply demonstrates the contention that human psyche in so far as it is embedded in a socio-cultural matrix might be devoid of any essential core. To put it in more theoretical terms human nature is an inter-subjective construction. It is to be noted that the relatively long novel describes a set of characters that undergo continuous and abrupt shifts of attitude regarding each other. Of course any narrative that deals with human element in a social context would have to elaborate on such practical aspects of social existence but Tagore's narrative disrupts any possibility of ascribing stable and locatable psychological essences to the characters. I wish to draw attention to the fact that the 'emotional merry go round' that permeates the text is not attributable to any simple logic of motivation.

If a character in a novel changes in psychological terms, there are different ways of depicting the shift, depending on the genre. Realist tendencies in narrative construction ascribe these shifts to internal changes occurring in the characters' psyche with reference to events in external, social reality. On the other hand, intervention of overtly melodramatic conditions would permeate the narrative with pre-given meanings that motivate characters to act in certain ways. One could argue that Tagore uses certain melodramatic conventions in order to underscore the intended narrative effect leading to a disruptive interconnectivity that displaces psychological motivation as driving force of the story. Thus Tagore employs a mixture of realist codes along with melodramatic interventions resulting in narrative where shifts in the psychological perspective of characters mostly take place through the mediation of a third term in relation to two others. The text can perhaps be described as a melodrama that does not have any specified set of cultural mappings to operate within since the elaborate Manichean schema that characterizes melodramatic imagination is manifestly absent (Brooks 1987). To put it bluntly, the textual conflicts progressively shift without any recognized moral ideal to guide the set of characters. In his discussion of Hollywood melodrama Thomas Elsaesser points to the narrative mechanism via which melodrama often enacts a displacement or thwarting of desire. He argues that this recurrent feature of melodrama is evident through:

...the mechanisms of displacement and transfer, in an enclosed field of pressure, [which] open a highly dynamic yet discontinuous cycle of non-fulfillment, where discontinuity creates a universe of powerfully emotional but obliquely related fixations (Elsaesser 1987, 183).

Similarly in the context of *Chokher Bali*, we could argue that the logic overseeing changing contours of the psyche is determined by the mediation of (an)other term producing a cyclical game of non-fulfillment and crises. Consider Binodini's sudden interest in Bihari; it is not elicited by the way Bihari is perceived by Binodini. Rather the desire develops only when she starts perceiving a relation between Bihari and Asha. Thus this seemingly passionate desire is not some pure feeling of love that she intuitively realizes but rather a desire to occupy the position that she thinks Asha inhabits in Bihari's imagination. On realization of the extramarital relation between Binodini and Mahendra, Bihari tries to emotionally influence Binodini, reminding her of Asha's innocence and trust in the matter. The narrator describes Binodini's feelings, "Upon seeing Bihari today she understood that his heart is pained in sympathy for Asha. Binodini, herself is no one..." (RR 2, 415). This realization consequently and rather rapidly develops into unbound love for Bihari. Prior to this, when Binodini was deeply engaged in the game of love with Mahendra, the same Bihari was perceived as an undesirable intrusion in the erotic triangle.²¹ Similarly Asha's hatred for Bihari, develops into respect only when she watches his symbolic mandate vis-à-vis the husband's family through the mediation of her mother in law. The mother's perception of Binodini similarly undergoes a severe transformation only when she sees that she bears a symbolic function in relation to her son. There is nothing essentially in Binodini, Asha or Rajlaxmi that determines their nature, but rather their psychic states and consequent actions are determined by the social

²¹ This logic of narration is driven to its logical extreme in *Chaturanga* where the notion of 'motivation' is almost depleted leading to the disruption of a linear narrative into a spiral form. In *Chaturanga* the relation between Sachish, Sribilash and Damini often reminds one of the erotic triangle in *Chokher Bali*.

matrix that they inhabit. In this inter-subjective matrix there is no substantive core of individual agents but only empty Symbolic positions that they are called to occupy.

***Nastaneer* : Intimacy as a Remapping of Privacy**

In the above section, I have been arguing that Tagore attempts to enunciate the terrain of the ‘interior’ as a realm completely immersed in the social matrix related to the period concerned. Such reflections can however, be interpreted as a preparatory ground for elaboration of new notions of privacy and intimacy that would rework various contemporary debates to produce a distinctive social Imaginary. One can perhaps locate some of Tagore’s further elaborations on the matter as a counter argument to the trend of nationalist thinking that attempted to locate the ‘private’ as a relatively stable cultural sphere from where the construction of national imaginary could proceed. I will now briefly trace the development of such a discourse in Tagore, which makes possible the figuration of desire in the specific way that we have already observed in *Nahanyate*. The construction of public/private dichotomy in the colonial period has been elaborately debated by historians in relation to nationalism and the women’s question (Chatterjee 1993a, 1993b; Sarkar T. 2001). But such discussions often ignore Tagore’s articulations and contribution to the debate which are evident in several essays such as ‘*Samasya*’ (Problem, 1881), ‘*Ekchokho Sanaskar*’ (One-Eyed Reform, 1884) or ‘*Shoksabha*’ (Condolence Meeting, 1894), to name a few.

In *Shoksabha*, , Tagore replies back to the eminent poet Nabinchandra Sen on the occasion of Bankim's death regarding the issue of 'public condolence' as an alien convention. While it is true that Tagore explicitly speaks in support of a public condolence meeting, it has to be noted that he also draws attention to the emergence of the 'public' as a social phenomena that has to be negotiated in some fashion. Tagore writes:

Our society is primarily centered around domestic life ... Recently there have been some transformations in this society of households (*garashthyapradhan samaj*). A new flood has swept into its domain. Its name is 'public'.

The concept is new and so is the name. It is impossible to translate in the Bengali language. Therefore the word 'public' and its opposite 'private' are being used in Bengali but they have not yet been authorized for usage in literary circles (*sahitya sabha*), but this causes no harm to the words in fact it's a problem for literature...but when this foreign word has been understood by the ordinary people then I do not see any reason for any complex exercise (RR 5, 615).

The rest of the article argues in similar lines for an addition of concepts that are inevitably becoming a part of popular consciousness given the emerging socio-political conditions.²² But the implicit point has been made; there is a distinction between what was previously understood as domesticity and the new notion of 'private' that the term 'public' calls to being. The 'domestic' as a social register had never before been opposed

²² In one of his essays, Partha Chatterjee uses this debate to illustrate the distinction between civil society and political society. But to locate Tagore's discourse in favor of public meetings as merely an opinion in favour of a strong civil society is to actually bypass another problem implicitly articulated in the narratorial voice. The above translation is quoted from the same essay (Chatterjee 2000, 36).

to any notion of formal sphere such as the 'public'. Now Tagore's preference of inclusion of previously foreign concepts as opposed to a conservative impulse to resist them underscores the important point that concepts of 'domesticity', which operated as a familiar sphere of activity, shall soon be under water. Now does this mean that since the flood is inevitable we shall simply welcome European constructs as determining registers of our social life? What would 'our modernity' mean then? Tagore's answers and negotiation of these problems were evidently different from the mainstream nationalist thinkers and thus structures his critique of the way nationalisms would mould itself in the following period.

The invention of the 'private' as opposed to but interrelated to the 'public' would transform the domestic sphere in diverse ways. Firstly, the public sphere would include those aspects of the outside world, which shall be strictly related to the domain of work and economy. Therefore it becomes a necessity that a certain distinctive grooming shall have to be made accessible in order to enable the colonial subject to operate properly in this arena. This would not be possible unless the ideal and pragmatic conventions of modern public sphere are available as knowledge to the realm of the domestic. Therefore, in so far as the domestic sphere operates a space for education, the private shall now orient itself towards the public life in some sense.²³ Secondly, as argued elaborately by Chatterjee, the latter phase of the nationalist movement, in a peculiar political move draws an equation between national culture and the realm of domestic/private life. Within

²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty elaborately discusses this dimension in a different chapter of his same book I have been referring to (Chakrabarty 2000, 214-236).

the parameters of such a nationalist argument the public sphere can very well be space where colonial power can dominate but the realm of the cultural, private or the domestic emerges as an autonomous and authentically indigenous sphere, thereby securing indigenous identity and enabling the differential locus from which nationalist resistance could be projected (Chatterjee 1993a). Contrary to the popular perception that this move actually detaches the two realms of public and the private, this argument actually serves to appropriate the private into the public terrain in a deeper sense. The realm of the domestic now becomes a battleground for the construction of national imaginary and a new patriarchy that will regulate the women's activities and domesticity in different ways. Issues like women's education, marriage or intimacy etc. now become matters of debate in a public sphere where, of course, dominant participants are male subjects.²⁴

Tagore elaborately discusses these problems in '*Samasya*' where he exposes the dual and conflicted nature of liberal nationalist politics that was often forced to distance itself from the very modern values that animate its arguments. The problem is clear even without the political jargon that we now associate with it. The values that drive social reform movements are oriented towards citizens of a modern nation state but are being applied in colonies where ties with pre modern social systems are still intact, particularly in those spheres where liberal education has not elaborately penetrated. Tagore shows a

²⁴ The very elements of modernity like the printing press, liberal education or social reform movements now become a problematic within the domestic sphere as *Chokher Bali* amply demonstrates. Thus, the issue of modern or Western education is not simply a problem of introduction of alien norms as appendages but it also transforms the notion of domestic life to a great extent.

critical awareness of the political turmoil regarding the fate of colonial rule and its effects. He writes:

Some English educated people are of the opinion that women must not be brought outside the inner domain (*antahpur*) because it could destroy their domestic sensitivities and other such qualities. I have not sat here to discuss the truth or falsity, the right or wrongness of the argument. I have implied earlier that in state of contemporary revolution it is impossible to determine without doubt which actions are wholly beneficial for the society and which are not (RR 15, 111)

One can presumably argue that the ‘indecision’ is regarding the course of nationalist politics and its consequent fate. Which cultural norms shall predominate over the social life of the community shall of course depend upon what kind of political order emerges and out of what sort of revolution.²⁵ In fact Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* (1916) is an interesting dramatization of this problem. Contrary to popular perceptions, the novel does not merely dramatize two contrasting human traits in Nikhilesh and Sandip but rather dramatizes the very phenomenon of appropriation of the private by the public at a fateful historical juncture, leading to consequent spillover and mediation of the ‘public sphere’ into the domain of affect. Replying to criticisms regarding the moral grey zones in the narrative Tagore had commented in the journal *Sabuj Patra*:

...the times in which the author has been born is expressing its own concerns through the author. I can call it intention or not but one can say that the writer’s epoch is knowingly or unknowingly influencing the writer’s heart... I am arguing that this is a work of art and not a pedagogic

²⁵ Taking into account Tagore’s resistance to the notion of modern state machinery that seeks to homogenize communities into subjects of the Law, one can perhaps read into his argument an articulation of a problem that is described as consequences of a ‘passive revolution’ in political theory. (Tagore 1991).

text. Time is weaving threads of various colours in our psyche ...*Ghare Baire* bears the impressions that have been secretly introduced into the author's mind by the modern period in our history...(RR 4, 752).

There are numerous evidences of similar sort, which suggest that mere psychological or aesthetic considerations cannot do justice to the writings of Tagore where often the narrative structuring itself implicitly deals with political questions of its time.

If it is indeed the case that emergence of the public sphere and the construction of the private transforms the indigenous 'domestic sphere' in significant ways thereby creating ample dilemmas among liberals and conservatives alike, then what happens to the 'authentic' and intimate ties that sustain any community? What could be the implications of such a situation for questions of affect and intimate relationships? We have already seen that recourse to traditional discourses on non-material desires would not suffice as a relevant solution to Tagore. I would argue that the condition demanded a re articulation of privacy in such a way, that it could be articulated within the colonial context but at the same time transcend the constraints of impending civic life. To illustrate my argument I shall briefly discuss *Nastaneer* and *Sesher Kabita* where notions of love and privacy are treated in a significantly specific manner.

To get an insight into the problem in *Nastaneer* (The Broken Nest), let us take a brief detour through Satyajit Ray's celebrated and controversial film adaptation of the

novella, as it underscores an often ignored but important thematic strand in the literary text.²⁶ The most interesting aspect of *Charulata* (1964) is the fact that the film text incorporates the grid of intelligibility of the narrative within itself. In other words, Ray's narrative goes much beyond the apparent psychological drama to arrive at the historical determinations of the story itself. The film foregrounds the socio political aspects of the problem depicted by making the subtext of 'Bankimchandra' and the notion of literary mediation in the story to a hermeneutic component of the narrative. In the process of such a dynamic translation across media ray's text manages to elaborate the very conditions of colonial encounter that a new dichotomous interrelation between public and private life of a community. It is possible to argue that in a way Ray prefigures the historical description of the structures of colonial modernity offered by a range of critical insights in social historiography more than two decades later.²⁷ However, for my present purposes I am more concerned with the way in which substantive elaboration of psychic space in both the texts introduces a further complexity within the recognized set of oppositions at work. In this connection, it would be interesting to note how the narrative of romance figures in the whole elaboration of modernity, womanhood and public/private dichotomy that is so distinctly woven into the film. Scholars have commented at length on the relationship between cinema and literature and the focus on 'writing' as a determinant aspect of historical modernity in portrayed in *Charulata*. However, quite often a specific

²⁶ For Ray's own elaborate reflections on the literary text's complexity and the problem of adaptation see his "Charulata Prasange" (Ray 1982).

²⁷ In this sense Ray's spatio-temporal elaboration of domestic life in *Charulata* can serve as fruitful illustration Chatterjee's commentaries on the formulation and resolution of women's question in certain strands of nationalist imagination, rather than the other way round (Chatterjee 1993a, 1993b).

inter relation between language and affect in the literary as well as the film text is thoroughly overlooked (Sen 1996 ; Robinson 1989; Ganguly 1996).

Whereas *Chokher Bali* demonstrated a particular aspect of this inter relation, *Nastaneer* displaces the problem to a slightly different terrain. In the novella, language provides a symbolic support to the construction of a 'private' that would serve as ground element in the elaboration of romance in the modern sense of the term. This requires some explanation but let me start by citing what might seem to be the most trivial evidence in the eyes of conservative critics. I am referring to the reflexive inclusion of Tagore's song '*Phule Phule Dhole Dhole*' that appears twice in the film. Critics have commented on the Scottish origin of the tune and its invocation of Western modernity as a contrapuntal component of the elaboration of indigenous dilemmas in the film text (Ganguly 1996, 165). But I would like to focus on more substantive aspects of 'modernity' in relation to the location of the song in the film. The song is first sung playfully by Amal in the room where Charu is stitching a torn vest for him. This rendering is wholly located in the realm of quotation where the enunciator is in a position of exteriority with respect to his utterance. The second delivery appears in the celebrated swing sequence where Charu sings the tune in an extremely reflective manner while the camera closes in to foreground Charu's thoughtful engagement. The significance of these contrasting deliveries becomes more intelligible if we concentrate on the content rather than formal aspects of the tune.

Phule phule dhole dhole bahe ki ba mridu bae,
Tatini hillolo tule kallole bahiya jai
Pika kiba kunje kunje kuhuhu,kuhuhu,kuhuhu gai,
Ki jaani kisero laagi prano kore hai hai!(Tagore 1964, 619).

What gentle breeze blows over these flowers,
The ripples of the murmuring stream yearn,
The groves echo with the cuckoo's song,
I do not know for what my whole being laments²⁸

If we attempt to translate the sense of the song we could synopsise the content as a mournful lament of a person whose soul is inflicted by pathos amidst joyful elements of natural beauty. The rhetorical exclamation 'prana kare hai hai' definitely invokes a conglomeration of affects such as longing, pain, desire while at the same time any Bengali would also identify a sense of rapture that such an affect simultaneously produces. The more interesting aspect here is that the object or origin of such pathos is unspecified and therefore the last line connotes a sense of incomprehension or unintelligibility, which I argue is a significant trope referring back to Tagore's text itself. For a contemporary spectator the object of lament is presumably commonsensical and clear, 'Charu has fallen in love', but the ironical aspect is that the literary narrative itself tries to dramatize the process of this very construction of 'love'.

What the film tries to locate through a song delivery, the novella does through the narrator's comments on Charu's emotional states.²⁹ One of the salient aspects of Charulata's characterization is that nowhere in the text does she reflect on her involvement with Amal in terms of a moral scheme that would induce a sense of guilt. In fact, the narrative deals with dual notions of 'love', one that operates within parameters of colonial modernity, permeating the conjugal relation and another that is on the brink of historical emergence thereby mesmerizing both Charu and Amal, albeit in very different ways. There are evidences in the text that hints at emergence of psychological categories where none existed in the first place and this is particularly related to language or literature as a mode of symbolic exchange. On the one hand 'literature', here, signifies the onset of modern modes of textual production that shall bring forth transformations in the social sphere. On the other hand, writing seems to take on a symbolic dimension that mediates a new articulation of romance. This articulation has to do with the production of 'privacy' that cannot any more be merely relegated to a social space (*andarmahal*) as opposed to public sphere. The latter division is already inherent in the colonial social structure while the reinvention of 'privacy' has more to do with a substantive psychic space. In a recent article, Moinak Biswas has drawn attention to Tagore's suggestion in

²⁸Translation has been modified by the author from Andrew Robinson's translation in *Satyajit Ray :The Inner Eye* (Robinson 1989, 166).

²⁹ Sibaji Bandopadhyay had pointed out that critics have identified this articulation style as a common rhetoric in Tagore's works, often described as a 'willful suspension of meaning'. A random example would be his song lyrics such as: "aamar mon kemon kore-- ke jaane , ke jaane , ke jaane kahar tare, aamar mon kemon kare" (My soul hurts, who knows, who knows, who knows for whom my soul hurts) (Tagore 1964, 356). While I do not disagree with such an interpretation, I would also like to maintain that the location of the song '*phule phule*' in context of *Charulata* does inflect a production of meaning, which refers back to Tagore's own text.

the novella that in order to deal with the situation Charu had to create a ‘private sphere’ within her own mind (*moner antahpur*) (Biswas 1999,12). However, what is at stake here is not merely a production of a secret mental compartment to hide away socially unsanctioned emotions but rather rearticulation of ‘privacy’ as a new mode of experience. I shall elaborate on Biswas’s observation through examples from Tagore’s text as it is important to register the radical implications of this conceptual division for the contemporary connotations that romance has come to acquire. This double articulation of privacy can give us much insight to the reinvention of intimacy as a distinctively modern phenomenon.³⁰

It is precisely in this context that one could reread Charu and Amal’s relation and the fact of Amal’s incomprehension of Charu’s desires. What Amal fails to comprehend is that ‘writing’ within the couple’s symbolic circuit is not a mere literary exchange that is oriented towards the public sphere of production and readership. Rather it operated as a means of sealing off the relation from the public sphere and the private sphere that complements it. This is not to suggest that there was no sense of secrecy in pre-modern eras but rather to claim that privacy did not operate as a value to be exchanged in production of romantic variety of intimacy. No wonder Charu’s humming of the tune reflects on her sense of incomprehension while Amal’s delivery fails to engage

³⁰ Biswas has invoked this division to comment on the trope of visibility, for eg. the use of opera glasses, in the film text as a politically enabling metaphorical device to represent a new found feminine sensibility within the parameters of patriarchal frameworks. As he puts it, “To frame Charu is the conventional task of the filmmaker as a visual artist, to hand over the frame to her is a political task” (Biswas 1999,12).

subjectively with the meaning of the song. Commenting on Charu's condition, the narrator observes:

It is difficult to say what has happened. Whatever has happened! Nothing significant has happened. Amal has read his new piece to Manda instead of her, can she possibly complain to Bhupati for such a trivial reason. Will not Bhupati laugh at her? But it is impossible for Charu to locate where lies the reason for serious complaint in this trivial event. Not being able to fathom why she's suffering such pain without any reason, her feeling of pain was increasing (RR 11, 398).

But what exactly is incomprehensible about the situation? It cannot be the case that Charu is unaware of her jealousy of Manda for that is exactly why she calls the matter trivial. The narratorial device foregrounding the different levels of awareness has been identified by Thomas Elsaesser as a familiar trope in melodramatic narratives eliciting the effect of irony or pathos (Elsaesser 1987). The relevant irony in *Nastaneer* perhaps lies in the fact that Amal is unknowingly disrupting the symbolic circuit, which had been constructed through the mediation of writing. That exchange sought to construct an intimate sphere that could be sealed off from the world, while Amal's actions were resulting in an exposure of that space. That was the implicit reason for Charu's insistence not to publish their respective works, one amongst many sensitive demands that Amal repeatedly fails to respond to. This is precisely why something that is so obvious to the contemporary reader seems translucent to Charu herself.³¹ Sensitivity as a component of intimate

³¹ Elsaesser points out that, "irony privileges the spectator [reader] vis-à-vis the protagonists, for he registers the difference from a superior position. Pathos results from non-communication or silence made eloquent" (Elsaesser 1987, 186). From the point of view of a subject who is already ingrained in such a

relations, in this specific sense, might in fact be a modern invention. This involves a mechanism of production and exchange of a private register that in principle bears an oblique relation to the broader public and familial order.

It should be clear that the 'private' as a subjective sphere has to be a necessary construct for such a tradition of love to sustain itself. Towards the end of the novella after Amal has left his brother's place, the narrator observes:

She was amazed at her unbearable pain and restlessness. The ceaseless pressure of mental pain frightened her...she constantly questions herself and is amazed, but there is no cure for her sorrow. Her outside and inside is so permeated by Amal's memories that she has no place to escape... At last, Charu abandoned all attempts to fight her emotions. Surrendering, she accepted her condition unresistingly. She placed Amal's memories with love and care, in her heart...in this way Charu beneath all her household chores and other duties, dug a tunnel and in that dark, silent depth she constructed a hidden temple of sorrow decked with a garland of her tears. There was no right there for her husband or anyone else in the world. That place was most secret, most deep and most dear. At that door she shed off all her social disguises and entered in her bare selfhood (*atmaswarup*) and then again as she comes out she puts on her mask to enter into the everyday communication (*prithibir hansyalaap*) and workings of the social stage (RR 11, 410-11).

This fascinating description sums up the notions of 'privacy' and 'intimacy' in a manner similar to the dichotomy of 'being' and 'social existence' that I have been

tradition of romance, the complaint can be articulated in a commonplace touchy accusation: 'Amal is not

referring to earlier. Here the subject locates her 'identity' in such an imagined affective field. The term '*atmaswarup*', does connote the idea of an authentic space that is clearly placed in an obverse relation to the notion of a human subject as right bearing agent or as part of an sovereign social unit represented by the exemplary couple. Here, Tagore certainly seems to place civic or social life in the latter location from where such a retroactive construction of 'identity' is rendered possible.

However, my ongoing analysis of Tagore's work is not to be read as any strictly Lacanian reading of Tagore. Lacan has elaborated the thesis of a necessary loss of 'being' as a condition of entry into the Symbolic Order and the retroactive construction of an Imaginary register where identities can be validated under the gaze of the Other. It has to be noted that in the Lacanian schema, this narrative acquires a universal dimension through which 'subjectification' of the infant occurs across specific stages (Language as representing the social network of meanings under which genesis and enunciation of the Subject is made possible) (Dor 1997; Fink 1995). On the other hand, my invocations of the Lacanian system are more of an analogical order where I seek to draw attention to the fact that certain Tagorean articulations reveal structurally similar moves vis-à-vis which the historical subject gains a perspective on its social habitation. At a historical level one's Symbolic location and Imaginary constitution of 'identifications' that transcends various manifestations of 'lack', has to be repeatedly performed under changing socio political registers. Thus one has to make a further crucial and critical distinction between

sensitive to my demands, he does not understand me.'

the notion of ‘identifications’ as a series of psychical and performative acts undertaken by the subject to locate itself under the set of available social discourses and the notion of ‘identity’ as an equally Imaginary (in both Lacanian and literal senses of the term) but necessary construction that enables the subject to retroactively anchor itself and assume self reflexivity. In the particular period in Indian history that I have been concerned with, Tagore does make a series of reflexive constructions whereby the realm of ‘intimacy’ gets relegated beyond the registers of the Symbolic, to act as a locus for formulating such a notion of ‘identity’.

***Sesher Kabita* : Love as Prophecy and Post-colonial Predicaments**

Tagore’s further imaginative elaboration on this aspect of intimacy appears in what is considered to be his quintessentially romantic novel, *Sesher Kabita* (Poem of the End). In this paradigmatic and somewhat sarcastic commentary on ‘love and modernity’, Tagore seems to self consciously intrude into the negotiation of passionate conflicts between the protagonists, thereby adding further layers to his conceptual articulations on intimacy. As is well known, Tagore himself figures in the narrative as an established poet and drives much of the literary exchange between the central couple Amito and Labanya. There is an explicit theme running through the novel that deals with criticism of ‘Tagore’ as an old-fashioned poet to be swept aside by dynamic currents in contemporary literary traditions. However, the apparent megalomania is not to be read as an effect of any simple existential anxiety on part of the author because this intrusion actually figures as a

crucial component in the construction of intimacy in the narrative. The narrator frequently foregrounds the point that Rabi Thakur is despised as a writer primarily because he celebrates separation and estrangement in love. After reciting a poem by his imaginary contemporary poet Nibaran Chakrabarty, Amito comments; "... in this, there is a force of hope, there is a shining glory of a future morning. Not like that soggy, hopeless, lament of your Rabi Thakur"(RR 5, 504).

But at a later point Amito anxiously confronts Labanya; "Rabi Thakur only talks about going away; he does not know the song of staying back. Banya, does the poet say that even when we will knock at that door it will not open?"(RR 5, 508).

Here it becomes quite apparent that Rabi Thakur and his notion of romantic estrangement will figure symbolically in the fateful trajectory of the couple's own romantic encounter. Thus at one point Labanya rightly reminds him that even readers who love Rabi Thakur do not quote his name so much as Amito as a conscious critic does. Inherent in Amito's caustic dismissal of Rabindranath is a sense of anxiety regarding the poet's prophetic pronouncements on the fate of romance as a modern discourse. The reflexive megalomania seems to be symptomatic of a futuristic apprehension that aspects of Rabi Thakur's seemingly outdated, tragic discourse might in fact prove to be a conceptual reference point for negotiation of intimacy in the emerging conditions of modernity.

A more explicit articulation of the romantic problem at stake in the novel often comes through Labanya's dialogue, particularly towards the end when she indicates that a conventional transition from a mutually shared intimacy to the realm of 'family' would

destroy the very symbolic exchange that constituted their love. In other words to be comprehensible as ‘love’ the phenomena must retain its distinction from other social discourses. There is a peculiarity in this particular articulation, which, as I have been trying to argue, derives from the social transformations brought in by ‘public sphere’ and its negotiation in the political field of the colonial period. Such subtle analytic inflections often get completely lost under the interpretative grid, which seeks to locate Tagore and *Sesher Kabita* within the conventional academic history of literary concepts. Thus a brief account of such a reading will also explain the specificities of my own interpretation in contrast. For want of a relevant example of such critical interpretation, I turn to eminent Tagore scholar and writer, Promothonath Bishi’s essay that extensively comments on the romantic discourse in the novel. Bishi seeks to read the novel as expressive of deeper conceptual issues that predominate various phases of Tagore’s poetry and prose. He argues that a dynamic struggle between the philosophical concepts of the Ideal and Real informs much of the romantic speculations in Tagore’s poetry and eventually spills into the theme of the *Sesher Kabita*. Tagore’s expression of the dilemma had often taken recourse to metaphorical uses of two feminine goddesses Lakshmi and Urvashi as harboring the two contrasting facets of human desire. While one exhibits a ‘centripetal’ force by signifying protective care and stability, the other claims its attraction through more intense but transcendent modes of human desire, thereby illustrating a ‘centrifugal’ movement (Bishi 1954, 54). Although a balance between such forces often preoccupy Tagore’s poetic endeavor as a whole, *Sesher Kabita* as a culmination of some of his distinctive writings, illustrates the poet’s admission of the decisive power of the

transcendent mode of romantic desire over the more socially oriented articulation of love.

Bishi argues:

... (the poet) knows that the attraction-repulsion of Ideal and Real is what sustains the shining world of his poetry. But, it is his belief that the poetic world has achieved balance through equilibrium of these two opposing forces. Our belief is different...one cannot fool the attentive reader into believing that both of these are equally powerful; the force which pulls the poet towards human reality and the force which pulls the poet towards a traceless sphere of beauty, amongst these two, the latter is perhaps a bit more powerful... (Bishi 1954, 53).

Under such considerations, the novel becomes a philosophical expression of concepts that informed Tagore's earlier poetic and musical pronouncements on love. Quite interestingly, in the same essay, Bishi also cites the logical basis for the projection of such an interpretative field by tracing various indigenous and Western conceptual precursors, which might have influenced Tagore to abide by the paradigm of Reality and Ideality in his articulation of romantic desire. The Greeks, Dante or even the Vaishnavite poets were well aware of the problem associated with restricting the infinite mode of pure romance within the grid of social reality, but the Western Romantic poets often succumbed to the temptation to conceptually unite the two domains. While some like Shelley would perpetually seek to achieve the impossible union and face continual despair, others like Keats would accept the substantive reality of both without any necessary zeal for unification. The colonial context would open up the Indian mind to such an archaic dilemma thereby initiating its own version of philosophical endeavor for

grasping the 'truth' regarding nature of romantic passion. Thus, Tagore's inherently cultural and poetic sensibility could hardly refrain from attempts to rearticulate this universal human dilemma in his own language using the available philosophical frameworks at hand. As Bishi puts it clearly:

There exists Two, and Many but there is no way of unification between them--- this contemplation pains the Indian mind. Tagore's Indian mind is from the very beginning devoted to achieving synthesis within this Multiple (Bishi 1954, 61).

Bishi goes on to claim that there is an attempt to impose this theory in the field of romance in the narrative of *Sesher Kabita*. As he observes, "love has these two sides, in the heart it is limitless, in the world it is bound; she who is limitless as a lover in the temple of the heart, becomes constricted as a housewife in the homely abode." Thus Tagore's philosophical quest seeks to unravel whether, "...there is any bridge of synthesis between these two faces? In other words is it possible to assemble the lover and the housewife into one entity?"(Bishi 1954, 58).

Although a concrete answer might be untenable, this conceptual dilemma, it seems, can be approached from various perspectives. It can be dealt by pragmatism inherently stronger in the feminine sensibility, which refrains from any attempt at unification, and thus sacrifices unbound love for the greater good of social existence, as Bishi claims is evident from Labanya's decision to shun Amito's proposal in favour of a more mundane marital candidate. On the other end of the spectrum, a thoroughly romantically oriented sensibility, more common in male characters such as Amito, can

construct its own Utopia where one can conveniently reside in both worlds, if not in practice then through the faculty of imagination. Such a tendency is more in line with the Romantic lineage and symbolizes a contemporary generation whose cultural languages retain the attendant complexities of India's historical encounter with the West in theory and practice. Tagore's general indecision regarding a final verdict on the matter is therefore indicative of this unavoidable psychological conflict that is expressed repeatedly through characters processing contrasting qualities in many of his fictional works.

Bishi's attribution of this Idealist tendency to Tagore gets evidential support from the poet's critical position in the debate around anatomy of desire and realism with progressive literary artists of the early 20th century. From Bishi's reading, it seems as if Tagore's oppositional stand vis-à-vis the 'crude' realist and sensuous modes in literary representations of social reality logically validates his celebration of such abstract notions of romance. However, there is enough evidence in Tagore's wide range of short stories and fictional writings that suggest his active concern with rather material and violent aspects of everyday social interrelations. As I have pointed out in the last chapter Tagore's oppositional stance in debates around sexuality in literature cannot be interpreted as a conservative backlash. Rather as we observe now his attempt was to deflect the debate to a different arena where sexuality can be discussed as a representational problem rather than one of realistic reference.

I have already shown how Tagore's conceptual articulations regarding questions of subjectivity and intimacy can be read as his intervention into the ongoing discursive negotiations of the period concerned. I would further argue that Tagore's insistence on the tragic element implicated in heterosexual romance could sometimes be read as groundwork for his construction of intimacy as an extra Symbolic component that puts into place the social matrix. Such a notion of 'love' often articulates itself as a mode of 'being' to be remembered necessarily from one's location within the structural parameters that oversee social contracts in everyday life of a citizen. In conventional narratives of tragic love, restrictive parameters in the form of social or psychological obstacles often feature as a hindrance, which produces the romance and drives it towards its morbid fate. Such contingent impediments seek to narrativize the conflicts inherent in the customary trajectory of the romance from the register of adolescence or the traditional family to the register of the nuclear family. However, in essence all such narratives are still oriented towards this very logic of this historically incomplete transformation and signify a desire for a properly modern familial order. But Tagorean constructions destroy this very orientation by severing the link between the two registers; it is not that the couple could not be 'one' but rather, in so far it is a narrative of love, the couple cannot be 'one' without destroying the very narrative logic that drives the romance. This problem is not about some discontinuity in social discourses that can be overcome in some different or presumably 'higher' psychical realm, which is in fact the staple structure of Romantic escapism Bishi refers to. The complexity of the kind of narrative construction I have been specifying, involves the creation of a fundamental mismatch

between two social registers. This move is not to be understood as an illustration of any universal psychoanalytic logic of 'Desire' as being insatiable. The conceptual distinction is a conscious, representational move to locate the historically emerging social subject and its predicaments within and beyond the context of colonialism. However, I do not claim that such a discourse of love negates the space for pre-marital or marital romance; it merely understands the latter realms as radically different conceptual spheres. The problem is that 'love' here structurally detaches itself from discourses that seek to comprehend it within the social field of colonial modernity and perhaps, as I shall go on to speculate, even post-colonial reconstructions of patriarchy.

Amito explains this complex phenomenon to a puzzled Jatishankar on being questioned regarding his decision to marry an older acquaintance Ketaki alias KT in spite of his professed love for Labanya. Amito argues back:

the love which expanding is free in the void, keeps company inside; the love which specifically remains associated with everything in everyday, brings social intercourse in the world. Both, I want... spreading the whole of my wings one day, I found my own sky to fly into; today I have got my tiny, little home, I'm sitting there with my wings closed in. But my sky remains too (RR 5, 522).

The evidence to clarify that this seemingly mystical distinction is not a mere reference to influences of older Romantic traditions comes through Amito's further assertive clarifications to a perplexed Jatishankar. He explicates:

Should romance have to be supplied as a rigid allotment by casting in a mould of story books. That cannot be. I shall create my own romance. Romance has remained in my heaven, I will originate romance in my mortal world too. Those who bankrupt one by trying to save the other, they are ones you call romantic...Now, then let me tell you my opinion clearly. I have to use metaphors otherwise the beauty of these words will be lost, they will become ashamed. My relation with Ketaki is one of love only, but that is like water fetched in a vessel—I will fetch and use everyday. And my intimacy with Labanya is like a pond, it cannot be brought home, my soul will swim in it (RR 5, 522-23).

Here one must note that descriptive elaboration of a representational structure and its public comprehension are not simultaneous events when the issue involved is a conceptual innovation within any given social semantic field. Social miscommunication and attendant violence occurs specifically when one discourse seeks comprehension within the parameters of a seemingly similar but conceptually different one. Thus Amito points out, ‘all discourses are not meant for everyone’, at least not within the specified historical context where this new discourse has been elaborated (RR 5, 522-23). Narrative comprehension of such a historical intervention would only be possible through a temporal erasure that would render the given distinction psychologically relevant in concrete social circumstances. In other words, an enunciative act has to be transformed into an objective representational event through literary mediation, for it to assume proper semantic effect. I insist that these moves exhibit an implicit sense of temporal directionality, which is concerned, with the construction of new paradigms of romantic encounter rather than a contemplation of timeless philosophical problems pertaining to the field of romance. Recent researches on Tagore’s textual production have indeed

shown that he was consciously interested in giving a direction to his own thoughts as is evident in many of the editing techniques of his own texts. Thus Tagore's logic of editing a series of his essays on literature in a book form, titled *Sahityer Pathe* (Towards Literature) would not merely involve a collection of all his essays on the subject in historical order but rather a selection based on conceptual directionality that suggests a certain observed trajectory that Literature seems to be taking up within a certain period.³² This notion of temporality often circulated around an idea of temporal shifts in concepts that are more complex than an evolution in merely biographical sense.

In a recent work, celebrated poet and literary critic Sankha Ghosh has discussed the conceptual implications of some of Tagore's songs by placing them alongside other discursive articulations in Tagore's novels or non-fictional prose. In a few essays, written in the form intellectual dialogues on Tagore, he comments on the poem '1400 shaal'(Bengali Year 1400), where Tagore anxiously fantasizes about reception of his poetic discourse a century down in history. As Ghosh observes, the poem subtly mingles a sense of the 'contemporary' with a seemingly alien temporal register thereby conjuring up an arrogant but ambivalent creative vision (Ghosh,S. 2002, 95-112). However I'm more concerned here with the cultural logic of these attempts to invoke an impending temporality. Ghosh's analysis locates Tagore's poetic genius in the very performative act of articulating such a daring question about transformation and future reception of

³² I am indebted to Tapabrata Ghosh's elaborate comments on this issue in the panel discussion with Sukanata Chowdury and Swapan Chakrabarty at the conference on 'Print and Palimpsest : Bibliography , Textual Studies and History of the Book' at Jadavpur University, on Feb 3,2006.

language that seemingly puts the poet's own work at stake. At a certain level, such an interpretation merely reiterates a creative anxiety that often leads established artists to contemplate on the historical contingency of their works. This commonplace logic deals with our inability to predict the course of history and therefore the social or aesthetic relevance of art objects over time. To comprehend Tagore's speculation only as an act of daring poetic fancy is to miss the point. Rather one should perhaps try to understand what is substantively political about such a poetic contemplation.

I would argue that it is in relation to such a temporal move that one can perhaps make sense of Amito's contradictory prophetic assertion that "Till people do not completely forget writings of Rabi Thakur, his good pieces would not emerge truly"(RR 5, 502). As should be evident from the ongoing discussion of *Sesher Kabita*, such a play of memory and temporality that uses authorial agency as a textual trope is not merely a sign of arrogant or anxious speculation. Rather this trope is central to Tagore's conscious attempt at mediating the future through the present, to produce certain intended socio-political effects. The point here is not the anxiety whether anyone would appreciate or remember a certain kind of literature but rather when and how certain enunciated concepts would produce their representational effects as speculated by the author. To put in more theoretical terms one could rephrase the move as an intellectual speculation on how a writer's 'discours' would transform into 'histoire' and thereby achieve its effect as floating concepts in public literary culture.³³ Time and again Amito and Labanya

³³ Emile Benvensite distinguishes between enunciative acts which specify their historical source (*discours*) and those that seek to erase their source so as to appear as objective cultural knowledge(*histoire*) (Nowell

acknowledge and foreground the fact that their developing romantic dalliance is related under processes of construction through literary mediation. Romance therefore is not understood by them as deeply psychological emotions emanating from inside but rather as an equally intense process of mutual construction that puts into being new orders of subjectivity and privacy. It is the anxiety regarding dissolution of this dimension of affect that leads each to negotiate other societal demands in their respective ways. The more interesting aspect of the narrative as I specified is the suggested ways of retaining the conceptual innovation as a structural sphere complementing but problematizing existing notions of social habitation.

The problem that concerns Tagore in *Sesher Kabita* is not so much about age-old wisdom that romance has no independent status within the habitus of social life. A surface reading of Labanya's monologues might imply a popular anxiety that romance would lose its charm under the grind of family life, but if one takes into account the kind of historically oriented representational moves I have discussed in relation to *Nastaneer*, the discursive articulations might also be interpreted otherwise. Rather than read them as indicating a movement from one realm to another, they might also be read as a reference to a dual structure. Thus the conceptual schema that harbours love in case of the couple here would fundamentally alter and dissolve under the existing social circumstances that facilitate marriage as the logical conclusion of all romantic encounters. To put it bluntly

Smith 1969, 551). However it should be noted that 'histoire' need not be necessarily read a politically regressive term. Many progressive discourses could also seek to intervene effectively as 'histoire' in order to problematize established social concepts.

one could express the problem with the statement: it is not that love will become mundane after its social legitimation, but rather the social order has no available language to comprehend and therefore legitimize the conception of 'love' invoked here. One of Tagore's early poems which was later edited and rendered into a song aptly describes such an affective structure as the condition of possibility of intimate utterance. Let me quote the song in order to point out such specificities:

emono dine tare bola jai,

emono ghanaghoru barisai!

(emono dine mono khola jai ---)³⁴

emono meghasware badalo-jharajhare

tapanahina ghana tamasai.

sekatha shunibe na keha ar,

nivrita nirjana chaaridhar.

dujone mukhomukhi gabhiro dukhe dukhi

akashe jolo jhare anibaar.

jagate keha jeno nahi aar.

samaja samsara miche sab,

miche e jiboner kalarab.

kebala ankhi diye ankhiro sudha piye

³⁴ The line within brackets is absent in the poem but appears in the song. For the song version see Tagore's *Gitabitan* (Tagore 1964, 370-371).

hridaye diye hridi anubhab.
andhare mishe geche aar sab.

tahate e jagate khati kar
namate paari jadi monobhaar?

srabanabarisane ekada grihakone
du katha boli jadi kaache tar
tahate eshe jabe kiba kaar?(RR 1, 328).

The following is a rough translation:

This seems to be the day one could tell her,
When the rain is pouring so hard
With such resounding clouds such gushing torrent
And a dense, sunless, gloom.

No one else should hear those words
It would be silent and desolate all around.

We will be face to face filled with sadness,
The sky will never stop the stream
The world will go on as if there is not another soul.

The worldly life is all a lie,
The murmur of living all senseless.
We will drink the nectar of our gaze with our eyes
Feel heart with heart
Everything else will sink into the dark.

Who will it harm in the world
If I relieved my heart of this burden?

In the monsoon rain, once within walls of the home
If I said to her a couple of words?
How will it matter to anyone?

It is to be noted that the song does not specify the content of the utterance but rather reflects on the conditions that can enable such a discourse. Despite its setting off as a mundane description of a romantic spatio-temporal locale in the first stanza, the song immediately meanders off into elaborating abstract conditions that would render a specific sort of discourse possible. The explored conditions include concrete notions such as privacy, darkness or silence as enabling factors but the more interesting point is that it also articulates the concept of this abstract zone as a suspended space within the social realm. It is a sort of private encounter that can be articulated within the social space (*ekoda grihakone*) but does not seem to be ordinarily available within the domain of the conventional 'private' (as opposed to the 'public') without specific and necessary conditions. It is therefore more of a suggestive space or a conceptual register rather than a

physical domain. The phrase ‘samaja sansara miche sab’ (worldly life consisting of the society and domestic sphere are all lies), here does not connote a sense of renunciation but brackets out the realm of public and private that have come to constitute the Indian social matrix. What remains is an intensely intimate mode of exchange that is operable in complete detachment and silence somewhere within the social register but conceptually outside it. As we had been discussing, Tagore’s drive is to produce a conceptual space that could work as a framework to locate one’s ‘identity’, rather than being remembered merely as ‘past’. This aspect of Tagore’s work seeks to locate intimacy as a register that will mediate the post-colonial citizen’s aspirations to imagine ‘it(’s)self’ beyond the social mandates that they occupy as subjects. It is this affective space where the subject imagines it to be authentically located. It constitutes that aspect of the subject which cannot be wholly absorbed or subsumed by the Symbolic Order whatever be its historical manifestation.

Remembering ‘Rabindranath’...

Thus in an unspecified imaginary afterword to *Sesher Kabita* , the elaborated concepts would take up the status of a filter transforming a certain romantic longing into aspects of one’s ‘identity’. The subject’s affective history would appear as an abode of its ‘being’ rather than being remembered merely as a concrete past. ‘Tagore’, has to acquire the status of a signifier in public memory in order to return as a symptom in a text like ‘*Nahanyate*’. The narrator as Amrita speaks from a location where such a necessary

distance has been achieved, Rabindranath as a flesh and blood figure has died to emerge as a signifier for a set of circulating concepts that has intervened into social discourses. In a letter Sumita comments on her friend Amrita's emotional condition:

... if you forgive my interference then I would like to say one thing – you have written that this feeling [*of love for Mircea*] is so intense that even your Rabindranath Thakur is flowing away, but he who is residing in your interior instructing you to accept the truth, is he not Rabindranath Thakur himself? (Devi 1974, 151-2).

Amrita consequently confesses:

it is true that the body has no permanence, the soul is eternal ---- '*na hanyate hanyamane sarire*'. But where is my body? That youth has withered away... there is ice now on this old head, the face is scattered with marks...but I am still realizing this intense feeling as eternal. Nobody has been able to destroy it ...not my father, not Mircea himself, nor time, nor my pride, neither the collective experiences of my entire life... The words that I have been so long reading in the '*shashtras*' without understanding are now becoming clear to me ---- it does not die, love (*prem*) does not die...(Devi 1974, 151).

It should be clear by now as to what I meant by a possibly modern inflection of the dichotomy between spirit and matter often elaborated in Indian philosophical and literary texts. The matter/soul dichotomy is not merely used as a metaphor to signify some spiritual incarnation of love but rather clearly delineates a distinction between one's given social register and a realm imagined as operable beyond its aegis. As is evident in Amrita's hysterical monologue, love no longer signifies a material experience with the

lover, it transforms into a memory that now signifies itself as constitutive of substantive intimate aspect of the subject. However, the subject has to be located within concrete historical register to enact this retroactive move. The mundane rhetorical phrase here would be: ‘my authentic self resides elsewhere’, but paradoxically in order to conceptualize that realm of ‘identity’ one has to always speak from a ‘here’ and ‘now’. Here, I would like to reemphasize my earlier explained distinction between ‘identifications’ that the subject necessarily adopts to inhabit in the Symbolic order and ‘identity’ as conceptual process of structuration to anchor and create an alternative sense of subjectivity. It is important to realize that for Amrita all ‘identifications’ such as ‘mother’, ‘wife’, ‘daughter’, ‘socialite’ etc. have been posed against an ‘identity’ that uses a memory of affective past and locates ‘love’ as an analytically distinctive phenomenon. This narrative structure, in a sense exemplifies the encounter of temporality and vision of future that Tagore often speculates about in his prose and poems.³⁵

I have been arguing that in pre-colonial Indian society which Tagore describes as a ‘society of households’, such a conceptual division would not have been operable. In order to symbolize one's world in this fashion, privacy has to emerge as a value-laden entity. In the context of intimate relations, one of the necessary conditions would involve the discovery of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as experiential categories outside the given social

³⁵ It should also be noted that such a structure of narrative is not unique to ‘*Nahanyate*’ alone but can be traced in its varied forms in many 20th century Bengali literary works as well. See my discussion of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and Budhadeb Bosu’s stories in the earlier chapter.

parameters of the colonial context.³⁶ Such a cultural experience consequently gets worked on by a series of reflexive moves to put in place new registers of subjectivity and privacy that can begin to conceptualize love in terms that are not restricted to colonial negotiations of social life and simultaneously the possible restrictive parameters imposed by a emerging ideas of modernity. Love would now strive to symbolize a domain that constitutes an aspect of the subject not fully transparent to the normative gaze of either tradition or emerging modernity. It acquires a conceptual autonomy and ironically symbolizes a part of the subject that sticks out of the system with a probing sensibility towards continual attempts at socialization of its intimate core. Surely ‘love cannot die’ in so far as it is conceptually conceived as a discourse operating outside the social matrix , love has now taken up the locus of one’s ‘being’, it can only be remembered as a shadow beyond the Symbolic. Tagore’s complex arguments pertaining to the process can possibly be understood as an attempt to develop a language to elaborate this obverse domain. Quite evidently some his uses of conventional concepts such as ‘insight’, ‘eternity’ or ‘estrangement’ acquires new semantic dimensions that would seek to problematize their associations with spiritualist versions of romantic passions.³⁷ Perhaps now we can tease out more nuances in Tagore’s celebrated question: “sakhi bhalobasha kare koi! Se ki kebaali jatanamai? Se ki kebaali chokher jol ? Se ki kebaali dukhero shaash? Loke tabe kore ki sukheri tare emono dukhero aash ?” (sakhi, what is meant by love! Is it only laced

³⁶ Tapabrata Ghosh’s discussion of Tagore’s *Gora* and the context of Brahmo liberalism offer much analytic insights on these issues (Ghosh T. 2002).

³⁷ It is to be noted that Tagore’s discussions on romantic narratives Vaishnava poetry in “Chandidas o Vidyapati”, primarily deals with the contrast of celebratory and estranging aspects of love in Chandidas and Vidyapati and not on the distinction between external and internal nature as in Bankimchandra’s reading. (RR 15, 90).

with sorrow? Is it only about tears? Is it only a sigh of pain? For what pleasure then do people desire such a painful state?) (Tagore 1964, 771). On hindsight, the questions appear to be reflexive ones and his celebratory account of love as an extension of natural beauty in the second half of the song indeed becomes an ironical and cynical articulation.

I will conclude now with the passing observation that the systematic misreadings of Tagore in contemporary scholarship are symptomatic of the ignorance towards substantive transformations in the intimate domain under the emerging conditions of ‘modernity’. Thus such readings often infuse representational work with pre given meanings that try to validate cultural reactions as invocations of ‘tradition’ in one way or another. As this attempt to remember ‘Rabindranath’ literally demonstrates, seemingly abstract concepts pertaining to notions of intimacy are distinctively creative constructs articulated to negotiate specific socio political problems. I conclude with a relevant quote from Rabindranath:

a group of people will always lament. I feel there was never a time when a group of people had not sighed about an illusory past ridden with memory and forgetfulness and had not seen seeds of danger or destruction in contemporary times. *Satya yuga* was never present, it was forever a past (RR 15, 114).

Even when people remember pasts without a sigh or claim to encounter timeless wisdom within historically defined narrative acts, it remains analytically important to speculate what functions such recollective practices serve and what assumptions they make about our historical tours and detours within the realm of ‘modernity’. Let us now turn to

another celebrated formulation of romance in the medium of cinema to see how discursive articulations regarding intimacy transcend temporal boundaries to enact its 'cultural work'.

Chapter 4

The Scandalous Embrace: Melodrama as a Matter of Debate

bikeler chai hobe, muchmuche nimki chibono
purono diner katha bolbena dekho ekjono,
borojor Uttam Kumar er prosongo tule
Paromita debe hath, nijer lutie pora chule
tarpore alochona , kar chele Physics e bhalo...

crispy snacks will be chewed along with evening tea
but see, no one will talk about days by gone ,
at best talking of Uttam Kumar
Paromita will touch her cascading hair.
and then the discussion, whose son is good in Physics...

Kabir Suman

From '*Ekla Hole*' in the album *Jaabo Achenai*

Popular songwriter and singer Kabir Suman's sarcastic portrayal of Bengali urban middle class social life invokes a certain mode of nostalgic association of cinema with everyday life. The quoted lines do not simply make a passing reference to an era in Bengali film history dominated by the popular hero Uttam Kumar but also posits the realm of cinematic representations as intimately tied up with notions of sexuality and identity. The

only imaginative fragment from the past that rekindles an erotic response in this otherwise mundane life of a middle class woman named Paromita, is the nostalgia of identifying with a certain kind of ‘romantic encounter’. Such trajectories of associations in relation to socio-cultural history of Bengal have scarcely been investigated in contemporary academic writings. It is with some specific aspects and significances of this ‘romantic moment’ that I shall be primarily concerned, in this and the following chapter. The present chapter will deal with issues centering on the role of public media in the context of the sensational popularity of the romantic screen duo Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen during the 50’s. I will argue that a critical understanding of various public investments in this historical moment is necessary for grasping the larger histories of intimacy and the particular trajectory it has taken in the Bengali imaginary. However in order to lay out my argument I would like to place the problem within the framework of contemporary interdisciplinary studies of culture and indicate my own dissatisfactions with some of the available descriptions of this particular moment in critical writings on film and social history. I shall be specifically concerned with the contrast between contemporary readings of the era and the historical reception context of a series of films from the 50’s that came to be labeled by critics as ‘*pronoydhormi chobi*’ (romantic films) mostly having Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen as the lead pair. I intend to gain a critical understanding of the specific ways in which cinematic representations played a role in reconstruction of intimacy as a domain of social identification in a specific phase of Bengali romantic imagination.

The Problem of Reception and Critique of Spectatorship

At the outset one should ascertain what, if any, specific functions the phrase ‘romantic films’ set out to achieve over and above a simple referential one.¹ In a recent article, film critic Rajat Ray attempts to analyze the status of Bengali cinema during the politically turbulent 1940’s up to early 50’s, through a tabulation and elementary statistical survey of narratives prevalent during the era. According to his account approximately 368 films were produced during the period which covered more or less all the leading genres including *devotionals*, *historicals*, *mythologicals*, *socials*; including original scripts as well as adaptations of established literary works. He offers brief synopses of more than 90 randomly selected films from the period, to give a general idea about the aesthetic and ideological orientations of their narrative content (Ray 2001, 75-91). A cursory scan of the list reveals that around 55 of the films mentioned could be broadly categorized as *socials* ie. films dealing with themes centered around family, social relationships or emotional discords in a modern context. Evidently most of these films would also involve a romantic sub plot as a narrative element and approximately 12-14 of the films involves such themes in significant ways. But neither Ray himself, nor the contemporary critics from the 40’s seemed to require a separate generic term to refer to these social

¹ Throughout the 50’s, news paper reviews in Bengali and English as well as popular and self admittedly reformist film journals such as *Chitrabaani*, *Roomancha* etc. often used such descriptive terms. The term ‘*pronoydhormi*’ roughly translates as ‘romance oriented’, which suggests a stress on a specific narrative element within conventional generic practices. It is to be noted that ‘romance’ as a generic category was never used to describe film narratives even when the narrative itself involved one or more romantic subplots.

melodramas before the arrival of Uttam-Suchitra duo in the next decade. However after the advent and consequent popularity of the pair between early to mid 50's, '*pronoydhormi chobi*' (romantic films) came to be a standard coinage used for referring to these films throughout the decade in newspapers, popular journals and everyday discussions. There are two different aspects to this phenomenon; one of which concerns the concrete manifestation and critical significance of the specific romantic aura, which shall be taken up separately in the next chapter. In this chapter, I shall restrict myself to the discussion of ways in which a public concern with 'romance' itself as modern social phenomenon circulated around the domain of cinematic representations that came to be designated as 'romantic films'. In other words I will try to argue that the phrase alludes to a certain configuration of intimacy, which became a focal point for a number of cultural reconstructions taking shape across the social fabric of Bengali modernity in the decade following Independence.

But before coming to my own perspective on the reception context and specificities of these popular narratives, let me place the investigation within a broader terrain of academic arguments regarding cinematic representations in general and Indian popular cinema in particular. Scholars have pointed out that critical concerns regarding cinematic form, its specificities and impact has been quite widespread in Bengal much before the self consciously reformist Calcutta Film Society came into being in 1947. While there are several significant differences in the articulated forms of 'critique' across decades, there is a consensus that the nature of inquiries that proposed themselves as

‘scholarly’ before the advent of organized Cinema Studies were also marked by an active concern with popular film forms and the broader public culture they circulated in.² However it is contended that such reflections, however relevant in their own context, often posit and define a theoretical vantage point that can be described as a ‘culturalist’ understanding of mass media. Here, the term ‘culturalist’ broadly refers to any critical account that conceives popular cinema as a linearly evolving phenomenon within a homogenous cultural framework whether essentialist in nature or in historically specific configurations. The relative indifference of Indian popular cinema to the hegemonic Classical Hollywood Model is widely accepted now, due to the obvious features in their narrative structuring which split the film text from within, thereby denying narratorial authority any overall control and correspondingly denying the spectator any comfortable sense of invitation akin to its Western counterpart (Burch 1990; Mayne 1993; Prasad 1998). But the cultural significance of such heterogeneous modes of narration, which survive till date to celebrate its song-dances, typological characterizations, comedy tracks and overtly frontal addresses, is a point of vigorous debate among a range of scholars. For example, Ashish Nandy and Chidananda Dasgupta, two key representatives of certain kinds of ‘culturalist’ approaches often come up with very similar descriptions of popular film narratives and their reception context but radically differ in the conclusions they draw from it.

² See Biswas 1999. For a range of early writings on popular cinema, see the articles collected in *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perception from the 30's* (Bandopadhyay 1993). However Biswas’s essay specifically demonstrates wide interconnections between literary and popular film representations and discusses the nature of concerns displayed in Bengali language film criticism during the colonial period.

Ashish Nandy would attribute the peculiar narrative specificities to the resistant strand in Indian psyche which technological modernity was unable to civilize or appropriate in its entirety. The 'secret, indigenous modes of belonging to which a section of Indian population still has access, enables them to deal with and make sense of their social conditions through its own alternative and pre-modern logical paradigms. Nandy's popular cinema becomes a zone of primal collective fantasies that somehow unabashedly defies the hegemonic technocratic sensibility of the bourgeoisie (Nandy 1995a; 1998). Chidananda Dasgupta, on the other hand, would read similar formal characteristics as signs of fundamental failure of the democratic, socialist project to penetrate into the masses. The vigorous reformist zeal inherent in some of his writings stems from the belief that Indian cinema's pre-modern imagination signifies a hindrance in realization of the democratic project often symbolically representing the actual anarchy in the real political system (Dasgupta 1991; 1981). Nandy's position develops out of a tradition of writing by social psychologists, linguists or historians who have articulated various forms arguments around the notion of 'cultural difference' and have invoked indigenous psychic structures or narrative forms as an explanation of the seemingly irresolvable difference.³ Reformist film critics or historians who conceptualize the mainstream Indian film form as lacking in sophistication and properly progressive aesthetic orientation on the other hand, have furthered Dasgupta's position. This tendency has left us with array of critical writings on Indian cinema, which tend to work within a comparative framework taking the best national and International 'art house cinema' as a norm to

³ Kakar 1983; 1990 and also see the collection of essays in *Vishnu on Freud's Desk* for a representative selection of writings on specificities of the Indian psyche (Vaidyanathan and Kripal 1999).

launch a severe critique of indigenous mainstream output.⁴ Several critics working in the film society tradition of Bengal such as Rajat Ray, have been known to hold such reductive positions (Chakrabarty S. 1998; Sen 1998; Ghosh 1997; Majumdar 1996). At the end of his meticulous documentation and description of 40's Bengali cinema Ray arrives at an almost a priori conclusion that apart from a few films which attempt to deal with social problems of the era and some others which show minimal signs of technical excellence, all of them fail to achieve any significant status as progressive art and are thereby condemnable as reactionary fare guilty of propagating feudal or at best conformist middle class values.⁵ Similarly in his book *Bengali Cinema*, film critic Kiranmay Raha observes that despite the improvement in infrastructure and increased production during the 40's and 50's Bengali popular films remained stuck within the same flawed style of the previous decades.⁶ He argues, "The literary crutch, the sentimentalism, the manufactured romance...the contrived situations, the stagy dramatic conflicts--- they all remained. These are doubtless indicators of Bengali cinema's

⁴ For eg. T.G. Vaidyanathan's account of problems evident in narratives during in the post-Independence period abstains from any discussion of popular cinema. Instead he chooses to focus on Satyajit Ray and a range of filmmakers associated with parallel cinema and systematically works with a comparative framework citing examples from established European classics. See 'The Problem of Post-Colonial Cinema'(Vaidyanathan 1996, 79-90).

⁵ Ray 2001, 95. For the detailed argument refer to the essay, 'Uttal Chollisher Dashak Ebong Nistranaga Bangla Cinema' (Ray 2001, 64-96). A number of books and articles on cinema in Bengali language fall within this tradition. (Chakrabarty. S 1998; Sen 1998) Kiranmay Raha also echoes such an attitude towards mainstream *socials* and other genres at various sections of his book *Bengali Cinema* (Raha 1999, 32-34).

⁶ Raha coming from a film society background evidently considers the release of *Pather Panchali* as the marking point of Bengali film history and accesses the history with the realist frame of reference at hand. In fact at many points in his book, he elaborately refers to the inappropriate uses of music, dependence on literary scripts and overabundance of drama as three major impediments hindering the development of 'realism', which is the true calling for the film-art (Raha 1999, 21-25).

inadequate understanding of the language of cinema” (Raha 1999, 37). However, underscoring all these strands of conflicting arguments runs a certain sort of assumption regarding the relationship of the cinematic field with spectatorial desires in general and cultural beliefs in particular. Discussing the conventions regarding representations of romantic intimacy in Indian cinema film critic Kishore Valicha argues, “Indian audiences accept such absurdities because of a deep conviction that love is comparable to music, and that true love is as pure as a song” (Valicha 1999, 46). At a more general level his argument indicates:

The Hindi film deserves serious attention and needs to be explored in terms of the deeper meanings of its images. To do this naturally involves interpretation. Such interpretations...have to be done with reference to value structures that define the Indian experience, and involves recourse to religious, psychological and metaphysical ideas (Valicha 1999, 52).

The tendency of attributing the complexities in representation to an order of cultural beliefs, apart from being a difficult argument to substantiate also ignores other social functions that representations are capable of working out within a modern social domain.

Contemporary film scholarship at the very outset attempts to problematize such simplistic readings of Indian popular cinema. On the one hand they draw attention to the complex network of meanings embodied by the popular media representations, which have to be decoded through an analysis of a range of historical determinants. Moreover such arguments demonstrate how signifiers of ‘tradition’ themselves are made to work under the very aegis of modernity which reshapes and reconstructs complicated orders of

meaning that in turn oversee representations of both traditional and modern ethos. It is this 'cultural work' that becomes a symptomatic register for the analysis of the symbolic mechanisms of the post-colonial nation-state and its cultural ramifications.⁷ Acknowledging the immense contribution of such works in research on contemporary narrative forms, I would like to address some related areas where conclusions have been too hastily drawn thereby rendering opaque certain important meanings that popular representations are endowed with in concrete historical circumstances. I would like to draw attention to the fact that despite its critical relevance, the overall discourse of academic cinema studies has given relatively less attention to the histories and popular writings on regional cinema in India thereby ignoring the significance of such critical endeavors. The issue here is not about the quantity or quality of research undertaken but rather the ignorance of the complexity of perspectives that writings on regional cinematic forms can bring to bear on the general and established debates on Indian popular cinema.⁸

Let us begin with a simple yet often ignored point. It is noticeable that critical discussions of Indian culture and popular cinema fail to address the specificities of regional cinemas often citing them as exception to the general rule or as historical condensations requiring separate forms of investigation. On the other extreme when

⁷ I am particularly referring to the works of a range of scholars such as Ravi S Vasudevan and M. Madhava Prasad (Vasudevan 1995, 2000; Prasad 1998).

⁸ There has in fact been a number of interesting works on many dimensions of regional cinema by recent scholars. Some of these while giving valuable insights often fail to place the material in relation to larger debates on Indian popular cinema (Srinivas 2000). Works on Bengali popular cinema have been very few and far between while a vast amount of energy has been spent on work of self conscious artists like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen et al.

critics like Dasgupta do take up the issue elaborately, the instance is meant to shed light on the general condition of Indian audience's relationship to the screen image. I am not claiming a complete ignorance of the relevance of regional cinema in critical writings and clearly there are a number of marked references in both Nandy and Dasgupta and many others who discuss popular forms. But the relevant question is why despite the acknowledgement of differences and specificity of regional cinemas in various historical periods, the critics concerned fail to address the issue in detail and relate it to their broad conclusions regarding the state of Indian cinema and its general audience? Both popular and critical writings on cinema often pay lip service to the exceptional nature of Bengali popular narratives in contrast to foreign populist fare within and outside the country and yet most often critics refrain from analyzing the contrast and its cultural significance. The problem could reside in the assumption of an a priori link between realm of representations and cultural psyche which short circuits the actual 'cultural work' that the representational realms does on social reality. The hasty establishment of the link often obliterates a more pertinent question: what function does a specific field of cinematic representation perform in face of the social and historical reality that it circulates within? In other words does a set of representation always reflect and influence a state of affairs out there in the social realm or do they perform more nuanced acts of mediation within the social field? If the latter is a possibility we need to enquire whether in the case of a specific period of Bengali cinema which is the issue at hand, such an approach could give us a more historically relevant account than is afforded by the more 'psychologistic' claims of the former. One of the most prominent arenas where cinematic representations have their cultural reverberations are the attendant critical discourses in the form of

journalistic, critical or popular writings published in print media like film journals, magazines, newspapers etc. But very little work has been done to analyze how cinema as a cultural entity functions within such reception fields and how such discourses might problematize more general assumptions regarding spectatorship afforded by critical analysis of cinematic narratives with respect to existing social conditions. While there have been reflections on popular writings on cinema, mainly centering on the critical futility of such popular discourses, much less energy has been devoted to analyze the ways in which these body of writings might have been instrumental in re-figuration of the cinematic institution as a specific cultural entity in a regional context. Such a critical enterprise might help in formulating alternative approaches for analyzing other regional cinemas and its various historical reception contexts in relation to pan-Indian cultural scenario. However that would be a much broader research project beyond the scope of my concrete concerns. As of now, I shall attempt to forward an argument regarding reception that takes into account the undertones in various critical writings on a supposedly romantic era in Bengali cinema to make evident the sort of perspectives that such writings bring to bear on romantic imagination of a community. But first let us make a brief note of more conventional ways of approaching romantic *socials* of the 50's before I can begin to demonstrate how attention to the reception context might problematise such conclusions.

The Romantic Road to Escape: Critical Celebration of a Screen Romance

The image of Suchitra-Uttam romancing away to oblivion on a bike singing the memorable tune, “ei path jodi na sesh hoi, tabe kemon hoto tumi boloto?”(‘how would it be my beloved, if this path would not end?’) in *Saptapadi* (Ajay Kar, 1961), remains the most celebrated and emblematic moment of this golden era in Bengali cinema. It is quite an incredible fact that very meager academic attention has been paid to the Bengali popular melodrama of the 50’s, particularly the Uttam-Suchitra romances, which swept an entire generation off its feet and simultaneously invited the most vehement criticism from the public and press alike. The retrospective celebratory zeal however has managed to delete traces of the sensational discomfort the screen romance had produced at its peak. In one of the few books on the history of Bengali Cinema, Kiranmay Raha comments on the rise of the star pair, “Most of the films they acted in were popular hits. Bengali cinema has not seen a star pair with their pull before or since” (Raha.1999, 36). This has become more of an issue due to the well-known fact that this particular configuration of screen romance has survived many decades to emerge as the most celebrated image of romance that enjoy enthusiastic reruns and repeated circulation through television screenings in numerous Bengali channels and more recently through home entertainment modes. Not to mention accessory elements like songs, fashions, hairstyles, poses that circulation of film stills and sequences re-circulate, thereby facilitating the shaping of a vivid nostalgia for the period amongst the educated Bengali middle class⁹. However, as I shall point out, the very few academic attempts to analyze the popular phenomena end up by overvaluing and explaining away the popularity aspect with recourse to spectatorial desires and escapist aspirations in the wake of certain broad

⁹ One of the few serious attempts to make sense of the retro-phenomena has come from Moinak Biswas’s critical essay entitled *The Couple and their Spaces: Harano Sur as Melodrama Now* (Biswas 2000).

social conditions. It is often forgotten or simply overlooked that the release and success of the films concerned were steeped in an extreme and vigorous critical climate, a consideration of which might shed somewhat different light on the nature and function of such romantic representations. Since I am primarily concerned with histories of representation of intimacy, I shall explore the era to revisit the set of films that emanated strange charms and hostilities alike and attempt to make sense of the cultural significance of such images and narratives within that context. One might argue that the relative poverty of academic debates around this area can be traced to the production and use of some readymade concepts within social sciences, which have been borrowed to explain away the complex logic of these seemingly mundane social narratives with respect to their own historical parameters. However, most often such explanations fail to satisfactorily answer some of the most raging questions regarding the symbolic work and representational specificity of these romances. Such arguments while ignoring the critical context of reception often focus on the attempt to explain the celebration of screen romance as a specific historical phenomenon rooted in its immediate context. Thus the arguments also falter in the face of the continuing popularity of the now dated romantic articulation and retrospective celebration of the genre as the ‘golden era’ of Bengali cinema. It can be argued that there is much more to these narrative phenomena than the habitual ‘Bengaliness’ assigned to similar objects and popular icons that circulate in everyday life. These representations, as I shall try to show, are more complex cultural imaginations that seek to problematise or rearticulate the very notions of ‘modernity’ or ‘regional tradition’, which attempt to delineate their limits.

The varied range of critical commentaries on stardom and popularity of the screen duo seem to repeatedly refer back to the concrete historical situation in post-independence Bengal as a causal context for marking off a new sensibility and era in Bengali cinema. Interestingly such an approach has survived till date as the most conventional way of addressing the popularity of the screen romance. To give the most recent example the widely selling popular Bengali daily *Ananada Bazaar Patrika* sums up the duo's contribution in words that echo across the media in both populist and serious writings on popular Cinema. Acknowledging the release of Uttam Suchitra's *Saptapadi* as one amongst the most significant moments in history of Bengal the journal reflects on the era itself :

But, much before *Saptapadi* in 1961 Suchitra-Uttam had become irresistible in their romance, from the silver screen to Bengali everyday life. Their romance, which started with *Sare Chuattar* in 1953 amplified by *Agni Pariksha* in 1954. After the dissolution of the dream in experience of Independence in 1947, the Bengalis devastated by Partition, riots Famine and Second World War searched for abatement of their incompleteness and non-realizations in the glowing romance of Suchitra-Uttam. The dreamy path has not ended even now.¹⁰

Many critical discourses with a similar tone in the recent past similar in above often rightly point towards the various sophisticated developments in film narration during the 50's made possible by exposure to International cinema and proliferation of

¹⁰ See the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* supplementary edition in April, 2007, which charts 60 landmark events in the 60 year history of post-Independence West Bengal among which the rise of Uttam-Suchitra romance is included.

film culture through efforts made by film society movements all over Bengal and beyond. By way of comparison the romantic imagination evident in the new *socials*, being another direction in such a process of refashioning, becomes the paradigmatic way in which a regional popular culture evades immediate political and cultural upheavals to produce its own preferred Utopia, mostly guided by the patronage of educated middle class at the production and reception site alike. In an article on Uttam Kumar written a decade ago film critic Suryo Bandopadhyay comments on the lack of reflection on contemporary social turmoil in Bengali popular films:

...even the subject matters selected for making films were of inferior quality. In films such as *Dhooli*, *Achyutkanya* ...or *Bordidi* there was no image of patriotic terrorism, no agitation--- in one word anything whatsoever pertaining to Indian politics. Lots of dull, lifeless films moving with sentimentality (*nyaka nyaka*), ran in the halls and the middle class people used to watch them. And got so engrossed in them that they even used to forget the Famine [1943]...¹¹

Almost a decade later Bandopadhyay rearticulates his argument in more generalized terms in the context of Bengali cinema of the colonial period:

¹¹ The films cited in the passage broadly speaking belong to the genre of *socials* but do not follow any historical order or have any strict similarity in thematic concerns which could necessitate any explicit engagement with Indian politics or nationalist patriotism. For eg. *Achyut Kanya* (1939) was a celebrated *social* dealing with a love story centering around issue of 'untouchability' in a rural scenario whereas *Dhooli*(1954) was a social dealing with a love story centering around the journey and experience of a village artist into a urban context. *Bordidi* on the other hand is adapted from a social novel by celebrated writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay dealing with domestic conflicts and could refer to either the 1939 version or the 1957 remake of the same. In all probabilities Bandopadhyay expresses his general reservation with film *socials* exhibiting popular narrative elements (Bandopadhyay 1996, 107).

...in political sense Bengali cinema has primarily accepted the dominance of British governance. Save a few exceptional ones, most themes of Bengali films were predictably tradition bound, [at times] slightly reformist and [almost invariably] middle class and Calcutta centric (Bandopadhyay 2001, 9).

In the next few decades saw a wide range of political unrest and turmoil that shook the roots of many cultural communities including Bengal. Bengal experienced an onslaught of historical events in the following decades including the crippling Famine of 43, various riots and unrest based on political agitations such as in Tebhaga and Telenagana, finally culminating in the tragic Partition and Independence in 1947. However Bandopadhyay observes that speaking of cinematic representation, the situation had not altered 'fundamentally' in spite of attendant transformations and limitations impinging upon the formal and industrial facets of popular cinema. While the thematic concerns remained as insensitive to socio-political context as before, he notes some specific changes in narrative structuring and acting styles which now suited the spectatorial demands in the wake of social and industrial transformations. Therefore within such constraints the lead actors of Bengal had to continuously innovate on styles of acting. Bandopadhyay argues that that in this arena the most remarkable figure was Uttam Kumar:

...it is noteworthy that among other things Uttam Kumar's diction of delivery, physical movements, mute expressions spoke of an effortless command over technical skills...thus Uttam Kumar the cinematic icon of the average man who had to go through the daily grind of survival, the man who owed conditional allegiance to high idealism (Bandopadhyay 2001, 9-10).

On the other hand the disillusionment of independence gave rise to a middle class inspired by the Communist Party and democratic ideals. Bandopadhyay goes on to argue that it was the same class of people who had the potential for conjuring up new dreams by the conscious act of disaffection towards the nation at large. Thus Uttam Kumar became an inseparable part of such an enterprise (Bandopadhyay 2001, 9).

The concrete historical trauma of Bengal's encounter with the Famine, riots and Partition are by now vividly recorded and studied by historians, some of which have been related to attendant crises of Bengali cultural identity amidst dynamic forces shaping a nation undergoing major transformation by the time of Independence (Bandopadhyay S. 1994; Chatterjee 2002 ; Chattopadhyay B. 2002; Chakrabarty 2005). By extension from such arguments Uttam Kumar's success as a star and romantic persona came to be based upon his ability to stand in for the community and camouflage the 'real' social traumas impinging upon the Bengali nation, thereby rendering necessary the construction of a melodramatic universe albeit of a different order from its earlier renditions. Various film critics who reflect back on 50's romances from a contemporary perspective elaborately state such historical arguments. Arguing on these lines Saibal Mitra comments that during such a traumatic era, the Bengali subject was buffeted by various political and economic upheavals:

...the pan-Indian cultural complex exerted a negative pressure on the Bengalis thereby dragging him towards a cultural disaster. He was fighting back to retain his cherished inheritance but was not being too successful.

The post-Partition existential crises were rocking the foundation of his traditional value system (Mitra 2001, 15).

The screen image under such conditions bore the colossal task of suturing the emerging and fatal splits within the imaginary community. Thus at such an overwhelmingly restless juncture there was only one who held within himself all the lost treasures of Bengali culture in such a way as to make those treasures appear untarnished by time. Mitra expressively comments, “He was Uttam Kumar. Not in reality but on the silver screen of Bengali Cinema...he alone embodied their ‘memory, being and future’.”¹²

Such explanations to account for the cinematic success of 50’s melodrama are as widespread as they are insistent in Bengali film criticism up to the current decade. While the obvious interrelations between popular representations and their immediate socio-political context are undeniable, still the way in which the ‘historical’ articulates itself unto the representational realm might be more complex than is imagined by such arguments. Inherent to them is the assumption, that while the popularity of the romantic duo is unquestionable; the explanation for it lay in contextual events outside the representational universe.¹³ Additionally, the relation between the two realms is most

¹² I have paraphrased the earlier lines due to the confusing and virtually untranslatable syntax used. The last phrase however is a quotation from eminent Bengali poet Bishnu De’s book of poems titled ‘*Smriti, Sattwa Bhabiswat*’ [*Memory Being Future*] published in 1965 (Mitra 2001, 15).

¹³ Bhaskar Sarkar has recently offered a different kind of analysis of the dynamics of presence and absence historical trauma from the body of cinematic representation during the pre and post-independence years including the romantic films. His arguments seek to explore the logic of silence and sublimation as tropes of meaning making in representations of the contemporary (Sarkar 2005).

often assumed to be of a reflective nature where a deficit or lack in one field is filled by a symbolic entity or phenomenon in the other. The assumed relationship of the screen phenomena and social history, as shall be argued in due course, is more complex as the range of social and historical determinants shaping up the representational work are multifarious in nature and often conflicted in their semantic contribution to the popular imagery. The very notion of 'cultural work' involved in the formulation of any popular representation indicates that they are complex and layered constructions symbolizing many interrelated tensions rather than a single linear force. One can also perhaps inflect the notion of 'cultural work' to argue that representations themselves 'work' or function at many levels beyond the immediate contexts which guarantees their success. As shall be soon evident the very rise to popularity of the screen duo was fraught with innumerable tensions and criticisms, which symbolize a range of social concerns that directly feed into the production of the romantic Utopia. Working beyond the celebratory applause to the screen duo's capacity to emanate a charming aura in the face of existing trauma, was a sense of sensitive apprehension towards other meanings that such romantic images could proliferate to a community under flux. The earlier problem with the simplistic reflective account of stardom has been considerably challenged by some critics who tend to read the melodramatic imagery as a negotiative phase in the wake of new social formations under process. However I would argue that even those revisionary critical accounts most often end up with similar reflective conclusions in the process of describing the thematic or narrative concerns in the language of contemporary historiography. In other words such arguments often end up implicitly suggesting that melodramatic representations of

the social universe enact and therefore validate the very mode in which a larger social history evolves under altered political conditions.

The academic debates that come to inform descriptions of popular cultural forms before or after Independence have often been influenced by a range of interesting accounts produced by recent historians of the colonial period. Some amongst many ideas that have been borrowed to explain a range of different objects and situations including representations of social scenario of the post-colonial nation-state are the various versions of the argument regarding modernization of tradition in colonial India. The theoretical notion employed to validate such arguments is often referred to as 'new patriarchy' following contemporary social theory's invocation of the concept in colonial history where the nationalists were refashioning their domestic scene in response to colonial critique. In one variation of the argument, political theorist Partha Chatterjee uses the conceptual phrase 'our modernity' to understand the anxiety of colonized Indians over the authenticity and ownership of the parameters of Western modernity that they were forced to operate within (Chatterjee 1997). Under such a reigning confusion regarding the possible perimeters that modernity could invade, one cultural reaction tended to construct a conceptual split and a concurrent interior realm where a notion of 'tradition' could be reworked to meet the demands of the Western public gaze. At the same time, once produced, it could be conceptually sealed off from that gaze to symbolize an authentic domain where the colonial subjects could enjoy their sovereign gaze (Chatterjee 1993a). Secondly there was an internal critique of the universalistic claim of modernity which

rendered the concept revisable in local contexts so as to enable the aspiring citizen and budding symbolic nation to be producers of their own cultural conditions rather than being at the receiving end of a Western donation. While such critical accounts often work well in penetrating the complex discourses with the nationalist struggle, they would surely need many more qualifications if they were to be applied to understand the problems of identity and cultural relations in a post-colonial scenario. Yet in various forms, similar arguments have been forwarded explicitly and implicitly as a key to unlock many issues and problems beyond the colonial context. I would like to point out the problems and limitations that such approaches often encounter in the course of their descriptions of representational practices pertaining to social reality.

Before coming to a concrete example and the attendant problems of such forms of analysis with respect to Bengali popular cinema, I would like to emphasize certain points which I have raised and partly discussed in the context of articulations regarding romance in Bengali literature and its relation to broader questions of identity and citizenship. The conflict between traditional and modern modes of belonging in a post-colonial nation such as India is indeed a mundane phenomenon expressing itself in various forms of everyday discourse and media representations alike. Romance itself often tends to be one of the sites around which such discourses manifest themselves. But to disentangle the cultural significance of such debates would surely entail a more substantive analysis of relationship between modernity and intimate relations. Unless one adheres to an extremist position like Nirad C Chaudhuri who often points to the colonial introduction of

relational modalities as the harbinger of modern heterosexual romance in India, it is easily demonstrable that romance in various differentiated forms have dominated Indian narratives in medieval and modern times alike (Chaudhury 1970). In other words, it is not enough to describe romance as we see it now, as ‘modern’ and retrospectively trace out the roots and influences of such a tradition. One has to clarify what is substantive about such ‘modern’ relationships and encounters, which distinguish them from earlier forms of amorous encounters. The consequent challenge is to understand the conditions within which romantic imaginary has come to be framed in post-colonial India and to what kind of uses does such romantic imagination enable within a modern framework. Undoubtedly, one such condition is the very process of reconstruction within the patriarchal family, which attempts to discipline the romantic impulse within its own bounds. However, the anxieties and upheavals pertaining to this realm are evident in all popular and modern representational forms in and outside Bengal. Bengali popular cinema’s specificity in this regard shall be discussed in detail in the following chapter but at the very outset it must be noted that the overemphasis of the cinematic representation’s loyalty to real transformations in the ‘social’ realm might often lead to an ignorance of many other evident factors that constitute and determine the complex romantic imagination at work in 50’s melodramas.

Dulali’s Nag’s essay, “Love in The Time of Nationalism: Bengali Popular Cinema of the 1950’s”, which is amongst the few contemporary ones having an elaborate commentary on the Uttam-Suchitra phenomena, uses some important and critical

arguments regarding stardom and social history and simultaneously demonstrates the sort of analytical problems I have been pointing at (Nag 1998). The attraction of Nag's essay over other similar examples rests on the fact that the arguments presented explicitly aspire to work at a revisionary level which would comment on other possible explanations offered by popular discourses and earlier trends in film criticism. However, in her attempt to pinpoint the link between social history and its relations to popular representations that are produced under such conditions, she once again resorts to the notion of a mystical appeal overwhelming an assumed mass of cinematic spectators. Nag takes up one of the first hits of the romantic duo, *Agni Pariksha* (Agradoot, 1954) as a paradigmatic example of the Uttam-Suchitra romantic series and attempts to explain the social factors that went on to produce the evocative charm of these popular narratives. In her own words:

This film is a landmark in the history of Bengali popular cinema in that it was the first hit of the legendary star pair of Bengal , Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, who succeeded in establishing a tradition of romanticism in Bengal that has survived the social and political upheavals of almost half a century (Nag 1998, 779).

Thus the argument for choosing this film as a key to unravel the mysterious charm of the star couple rests on the assumption that, "...it is the signature film of the romantic genre of this period because the film established the marker characteristics of the image of the star pair that survived all through their career as a pair" (Nag 1998, 779). Nag goes on to consider some general questions regarding romantic representations and their possible resolutions in the context of social history of Bengal. How does one make sense of the signature line referring to Suchitra Sen's screen personality in the popular women's

magazine *Sananda*: “the woman whom one loves, desires but cannot possess ” ? (Nag 1998, 779). The romantic depiction itself is often described in similar popular discourses by phrases such as ‘extra professional’, ‘intimately personal’ or as a ‘mystical relation’ (Nag 1998, 780). But what then would be the significance of such mysticism that characterizes this particular screen romance over and above many other instances of romantic depiction? Clearly, the term here is not used in any quasi-religious sense as in the context of devotional films. Nag argues that:

Cinematic representations of sexual love and desire ... the most successful of them, narrativize contemporary dilemmas around these issues to allow us to think through the conflicted pale of desire as it maneuvers to manifest itself by ordering the contradictions that give rise to it (Nag 1998, 779).

Nag’s elaborate textual analysis consequently focuses on two issues: one pertaining to the question of spectatorial desire in a historical context and the other to the issue of women’s agency in a given social context. She argues that the structure of romantic imagery and longing evident in 50’s *socials* was, “fictional resolution to the crisis of Bengali striving to be a middle class ie. trying to survive in an urban context with a rural past still alive in memory and network of social relations”(Nag 1998, 780). The notion that representation of non-conventional romantic longings of an upper middle class propertied woman could serve as a fantasy resolution for the struggling up-rooted Bengali community involves assumptions mentioned above which work within the ambit of simplistic wish fulfillment. To harbor such a conceptual grid is to inevitably fall back on and allude to the ‘escapist’ description of popular romances which revisionist social theory criticizes at the very outset. In case of Uttam-Suchitra films, the attempt to

develop a distinctive structure of romantic longing across a series of texts is intimately tied to the couple's ambiguous location within the dynamics of the journey from the 'country to the city'. However, the series of films rarely depicted any rural past except by way of some unspecified symbolic locations and rather exhibit a deep-seated romance in and with the 'urban'. It is this particularly ambiguous love-hate relationship to the 'urban', which is one amongst the factors that earned Uttam-Suchitra romances a distinctively mystical designation. It has been argued that realist endeavors of the same period represents a markedly different kind of engagement with spatial coordinates both in its urban and rural manifestations in contrast to the Uttam-Suchitra starrers , which tend to have a more symbolic approach to articulation of locales (Biswas 2002, 2004). Interestingly, in this context the limitations in realist representations of the 'urban' or the 'rural' in a strict sense, is a narrative strategy rather than a mark of pre modern backwardness. Thus Nag's attempt to compare and contrast Tapasi's zeal for modernity in *Agnipariksha* with the representation of Arati in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) or Bimala in *Ghare Baire*(1984) as an articulation of the popular high culture is perhaps a bit misplaced (Nag 1998, 780). Tapasi seems to be located within spaces which continually pre-define and mediate various actions that lead her towards the confrontations at hand. On the other hand Arati's predicament is more materially mediated by the graphic presence of urban space that tends to define the city itself as a character with respect to which the social drama develops.¹⁴

¹⁴ Tejaswini Niranjana makes a different sort of critique of Nag's essay as one amongst the representative instance of feminist readings in the field of film studies (Niranjana 1999).

On the other hand, the only characteristic Nag mentions as the distinctive marker of the romantic sub-genre of films is the characterization of the protagonist duo where Suchitra Sen inevitably plays the role of a modern, educated and urban woman engaged in modern professions while Uttam Kumar plays the complementary counterpart, often with a rural/traditional background. Nag sees the ambiguity and conflict in such characterizations as something unique which articulates a popular high culture capable of disrupting the stable tradition /modernity dyad to a certain extent through representations of feminine agency as an autonomous force with inherent capacities of subversion. Marriage as a resolution of the conflicts within patriarchy serves to exemplify a popular logic, which inevitably sees the occasional antagonism between romance and formalized social bonding as reflection of the conflict between modernity and tradition. Nag contends that in accordance to the logic of dream resolution, "... this popular image of this desirable woman subverts the elite nationalist construction of a woman as the repository of cultural authenticity...producing an image that the elites have always hastened to disown" (Nag 1998, 780). However, while the disrupting potential is kept alive in various forms and ambiguities, the major narrative thrust of the romantic *socials* would tend to stage a narrative resolution of the attendant crises so as to stabilize the erotic charge by making the somewhat emancipated heroine submit to laws of 'new patriarchy' through a series of negotiations. It is to be noted that the cultural implications Nag mentions are part and parcel of the innumerable plots recounted in 40's and 50's *socials*, which explicitly dealt with reinstating possession (of property and well as female subject) through patriarchal negotiations which involved marital transactions in frequent cases. Moreover, the explicit intent displayed by the plots themselves cannot be

considered as explanations of the mysterious and effective charms that the romantic couple emanated nor of the resistances their overwhelming popular success encountered. Furthermore while such a plot structure is certainly dominates narrative of *Agni Pariksha*, all films of the series do not testify to such tendencies, at least wholeheartedly. The implication of marital future as a strategy of narrative closure may in fact involve much more complex investments than is imagined by Nag, particularly if one considers the ways in which such representations are staged in various instances across the decade. To have a more critical understanding one requires to untie the narrative logic and iconography that is systematically developed in these romances.

One can point out certain ordinary assumptions behind the motivation to choose a specific successful film in order to explore the popularity of a broader cultural phenomenon. Nag assumes that the most representative hit of the star pair would demonstrate the most obvious narrative features that guarantees its success and would also exhibit traces of the overarching tendencies that enable the symptomatic translations of contemporary social reality. While it might be true that the success of a popular cultural product does in fact involve certain technical aspects that the particular product explores successfully, widespread popularity amongst a community as a systematic phenomena, often involves more complex factors associated with a broader cultural imagination. Thus the significance of the popular romantic imagination articulated by Uttam-Suchitra films can be better understood by studying how a set of narrative motifs evolve and rearticulate themselves over the decade. I would rather argue that although

Agni Pariksha did successfully showcase the star pair by exploiting their screen presence and romantic possibilities, it is by no means a film that harbours the variety of narrative features responsible for the sensationalization of the screen romance. To put it clearly the object of enquiry here is the solidification of a distinctive cultural imagination through mediation of a star pair who acts as its vehicle. While various individual film texts may be instrumental in refracting or reinforcing certain mandates from the social Symbolic, reconstruction of a cultural imagination is a much more dynamic process. Such a process is most often characterized by accumulation of meanings through an interaction with contemporary reception contexts. It is precisely this phenomena ie. an accumulation and restructuring of social meanings through development and streamlining of narrative tendencies that I shall try to pinpoint through a study of reception of Uttam-Suchitra romances. It has to be noted that *Agni Pariksha* is not the first film of the pair and in the same and previous years Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen came together in more than three films such as: *Maroner Pore* (Satish Dasgupta 1954), *Sadanader Mela* (Sukumar Dasgupta, 1954) and the hugely successful comedy *Share Chuattor* (Nirmal De, 1953). Both the performers were mildly noticed or acclaimed in these earlier films but their status as a successful romantic pair was acknowledged explicitly only after the release of *Agni Pariksha* in September 1954.¹⁵ *Agni Pariksha*'s importance lies in outlining a certain trajectory of representation, which was worked over meticulously in the series of following films to produce what can be described as an 'iconography of romance'. By the

¹⁵ Interestingly, the suggested lead pair for *AgniPariksha* had been more established duo Bikash Ray and Anubha Gupta. The idea was dropped due to filmmaker Bibhuti Laha's (a key member of the directorial team Agradoot) eccentric insistence on casting the relatively unsuccessful duo Uttam and Suchitra, as a form of experimentation (Mukhopadhyay 2000, 25).

term icon I simply refer to a style of cinematic depiction, which condenses and fixes specific meanings into and across the frames in such a manner that they become repositories to be utilized beyond the single film text. The structural aspects of the 'star' or 'matinee idol' as cultural objects in fact facilitates the smooth unfolding of such narrative phenomena and works towards staging of associated value in the form of 'fantasy'. It seems that Nag's argument takes a very crude and simplistic understanding of the term 'fantasy'. Rather than understanding the term as a way of masking real historical problems one can conceive of 'fantasy' as modes of articulating the mis-encene of conflicted desire of inhabiting a certain form of emergent modernity (Cowie 1994). Such an approach could give us a more elaborate account of the cultural problems associated with addressing the demands of post-colonial modernity and their relation to the complex reception of the star pair. Moreover such accounts might help us to problematize the simplistic insistence on reading of narratives of romance as short-circuited resolutions to deep-seated anxieties having merely material roots. The specificities of such iconographies and their articulation of the romantic utopia in the context of historical evolution of the 50's melodrama shall be further analyzed meticulously in the next chapter. As of now I shall restrict myself to the concrete context of reception and public culture in the 50's Bengal to see how they problematize the prevailing understanding the relationship between representation and social reality.

Nag as well as most other contemporary scholars and critics writing about this period in the history of Bengali cinema, tend to assume that the fact of overwhelming

popularity or celebration was a homogenous phenomenon requiring no further exploration at the level of historical reception thereby positing an analytic or causal explanation as the only required task. I shall attempt to show that the alleged popularity was a rather contested issue according to contemporary historical evidence and the very evolution of the screen romance involved a set of complex anxieties, a consideration of which might make way for other possible readings of the cultural phenomenon. A significant historical fact often overlooked is that numerous popular magazines, journals and newspapers as well as consciously critical film magazines of the period concerned were highly critical of the Uttam-Suchitra romances from the very outset. The nature of these popular concerns and anxieties should help us to shed a different light on the novelty of the romance. The issue at hand is not only to arrive at an explanation of the sensational popularity of romances but also to analyze the role of cinematic representation of romance within a complex and often conflicted set of social drives that produce it. Perhaps a better way of approaching the subject at hand is to locate the socio-cultural milieu in which discourses related to popular cinema circulated. One of the major concerns of film critics and historians of the period has been to explore and disentangle the connections between popularity of screen images and the emergent Bengali nationalism in the aftermath of Independence. Here the most pertinent question would circulate around the role that cinema as an institution comes to play in framing such nationalist ideas. Rather than picking up specific narratives as an embodiment or reflection of cultural problems it is better to approach the question in slightly broader terms. Thus the task at hand is to explore the ways in which cinematic institution on one hand reconstitutes emerging shifts in patriarchal paradigms and on the other

problematizes the very terms under which such nationalist attempts at social reconstruction is sought to be implanted in the Symbolic.

Two Discourses of Reform

From even a cursory study of evidences scattered in the archives, one could argue that one of cinema's major roles in post-colonial Bengal was to provide a symbolic platform for imagining and materially reproducing a new community and civil society for the modern ethnic collective. I would like to draw attention to the various concerns reflected in the debates of the decade, which dealt explicitly with questions of romance, women's issues, popular cinema and their relation to social reconstruction. Public concern with youth and emergence of liberal sensibilities is a phenomenon identifiable in many different regions and phases of Indian history. But the nature of framing such concerns and the curious way that these are often related with specific issues of representation during this era, is a matter requiring careful exploration. Many recent studies have testified to the fact that early researches on film audience were triggered by extreme anxieties regarding cinematic representation and exhibition practices subsequently facilitating many censorship and reform initiatives during the colonial era (Prasad 1998 a; Srinivas 2001). Interestingly some of the audience research documents and material regarding discussions of Bengali cinema in print media of the 50's give us access to a rather different but interesting picture of the reigning social concerns of the period.

At this point one needs to distinguish between two broad varieties of media discourses that were engaged in an assessment of the aesthetic status and socio-political responsibility of Bengali cinema. As has been mentioned earlier, one such discourse stemmed from reformist agendas undertaken in the wake of widespread film society movements and exposure to International 'art house' cinema. This strand of criticism was most operative behind the formulation of a realist discourse suitable to socio-political conditions within the region and often launched a stark criticism of popular cinema and its middle class aspirations. The critique itself covered ideological as well as formal aspects that oversaw production of social melodrama amongst other established genres prevalent during the 40's and 50's. Proliferation of such elitist discourses, which constitute a large chunk of serious film criticism in India, has often hindered an exploration and analysis of the complex layers of meaning articulated in popular representations. Moreover such attempts overlook the way in which other mainstream discourses of the period were engaged in problematizing the popular in a strikingly different way from its elitist counterparts. As Ravi Vasudevan observes regarding the broader field of film history, "Historically avant-gardes have been more politically conscious about understanding the logic and dynamism of mass cultural forms, rather than just dismissing them" (Vasudevan 1999, 5). He argues that in the Indian scenario, while some contemporary scholars are currently paying due attention to various aspects of popular and mass culture, other sections of intelligentsia, "tend to remain mired in an elitist disdain for popular cultural forms. The effective silence or dismissive stance of third-cinema writers in regard to Third World commercial cinema has ...been unhelpful and politically regressive" (Vasudevan 1999, 5). Moinak Biswas has recently pointed out

that 'film-sense discourse' or critical discourses displaying concerns regarding cinematic treatment and specificity was by no means a sole endeavor of movements related to Calcutta Film Society and could be identified as components of broader debates over the medium in the colonial period as well (Biswas 1999, 1). However there were numerous other discourses around the status of Bengali cinema and its aesthetic or industrial aspects that parallely proliferated mainly through a range of writings and public debates in daily newspapers or pulp magazines and journals devoted to cinema or to the arts in general. The number of small scale local journals in the region, which often engaged in film criticism were quite huge of which some went out of circulation during the 50's while most others continued publication up till the 60's if not beyond.¹⁶ A cursory look at the state of film criticism and public concern over the medium during the 50's makes it quite clear that the post-colonial scenario rejuvenated in a new form, a number of common issues related to cinema that were topics of frequent debate in earlier decades. It is to be noted that most of such popular discourses had a very strained connection, if at all, to the critical milieu in which film-sense discourse had propagated through the earlier decade as well as the post CFS period. In other words, though the critical concerns of both discourses were superficially similar in some instances, the arguments were often framed and debated keeping very different sort of social and aesthetic concerns in mind. It was

¹⁶ Apart from daily newspapers, some of the major popular journals available locally and devoting primary or secondary attention to Bengali cinema before the 60's were: *Nachghar*, *Dipali*, *Kheyali*, *Ruprekha*, *Chitrapanji Roopmancha*, *Chitrabaani* and literary journals like *Bharati or Parabshi* etc. in Bengali and *Varieties*, *Filmiland*, *Photoplay Weekly*, *Cinema Times* etc. in English. For an insider's account on the state of popular film journalism in Bengal see the long essay by the editor of *Roopmancha*, Kalish Bandopadhyay. 'Shilpo Sanbadikata Khetre Roopmancha' in *Roopmancha*, 1955, (Issue 4): 2- 32, 90-92. For a more critical account of the cultural milieu of popular film criticism see Biswas's essay referred to above (Biswas 1999).

such popular strains of film criticism in opposition to which the desire for a more serious aesthetically oriented and socially sensitive film culture sprouted and finally took an organized shape with concrete initiatives of film societies and collectives during the late 40's.

Nevertheless, one can possibly demarcate such popular discourses as a distinct arena of film consciousness both in content and form of dissemination. Firstly, the strands of film culture and critical writings I draw attention to, despite having a reformist orientation, were overtly populist, widespread and more loosely defined than their contemporary film-sense discourses. Most often such discourses could not be attributed to specific institutions or publications and emerged out of debates carried on in various heterogeneous forums. While writings prevalent in journals such as *Roopmancha*, *Chitrabani* and certain editorials of newspapers such as *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* or *Dainik Basumati* frequently circulated around certain common reformist concerns and critiques, their elaboration often sprung from ongoing dialogues with spectators-readers who did not belong to any explicitly defined ideological frame nor had any clear frame of reference regarding the evolution of film history. However, certain features could be easily attributed as characteristic marker of such discourses. The common point that both discourses shared by early 50's were their general condemnation and distrust of mainstream Bengali cinema and the socio-economic scenario that was deemed to be its cause. However, unlike film-sense discourse most of this criticism directly invoked a sense of nationalist vigour laced with concern for an ideal moral fabric conducive to a

new social order. The concern was less about the developments in film aesthetics or about the use of film as a specific language and more focused on the moral function that cinema, as an institution was possibly capable of overseeing. Discussion of legal and institutional sites capable of initiating reform based on community demands was one of the directions taken by these debates. I would like to draw attention to the cultural parameters of such discourses, which developed with a renewed vigour in the post-colonial period and took up a definitive stand with respect to the popularity of romantic *socials*. Since a tabulation of all the features of such a loosely defined critical discourse is cumbersome, I shall try to pinpoint its general nature and some of its major concerns through concrete examples and outline its critical contribution to the ongoing redefinition and transformations of Bengali identity during the 50's.

A wide range of journals during the period as well as newspaper columns were engaged in multifarious debates regarding the existing conditions and quality of output of Bengali film industry. Interestingly, a huge number of general readers and film audience were actively taking part in the debates through critical inputs, questions and suggestions for development of a 'healthy' film culture. Thus a considerable number of audience polls, reports and debate topics and letters to editors were published, in which it is possible to discern the growth of a critical discourse with a distinct flavour. In 1956, *Roopmancha* (established in 1940), one of the most successful magazines of the populist-reformist variety, featuring film and other arts, felt the need for an informal audience research the function of which would be to assess and analyze the cultural psyche of the

Bengali audience in order to facilitate a new aesthetic of cinema and a socially sensitive film culture in the region. In January 1956 the journal announced an audience poll and promised readers that their responses would be published.¹⁷ The framing of the enquiry itself testifies to a new mode of address and dialogue that was emerging between the cinematic spectator and public media. It is interesting to note how the *Roopmancha* editorial group frames the questions keeping specific objectives in mind and what kind of replies they obtain thereby. The readers were asked to assert their right to express their opinion in face of a national problem regarding the degradation of Bengali cinema. *Roopmancha* announces the enterprise in precise terms: “Please fulfill your responsibility as spectators by supplying valid answers to the questions listed below.”¹⁸ The request certainly replicates the structure by which the state would address individuals as prospective democratic citizens. A distinctive feature of this enquiry is that audience feedback is not treated merely as information to be evaluated by experts, as is usually the case, or simple reflective accounts but is valued for itself, as public opinion. Interestingly, the collection of queries covered almost all the aspects related to the cinematic institution that is accessible to the spectator-reader. Apart from the general enquiries regarding preference of generic forms, frequency of film viewing or access to para-textual information on cinema (ads, reviews etc.), the journal also displayed concern over audience perceptions on exhibition setups and the social nature of the film viewing practices. Of these, I shall focus on a few interesting lines of enquiry and some complex

¹⁷ Many of the collected responses were serially published by *Roopmancha* in a regular section titled ‘Kalpoloker Maramakatha’ run by editor Kalish Badopadhyay under the pen name ‘Kalapahar’. The responses were printed a number of *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 4 -7, 10-11).

¹⁸ Kalish Mukhopadhyay(ed.) *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 10): 77. Henceforth all the specific references to *Roopmancha* will follow in the footnotes.

responses they produced. The reason for focus on these areas of the enquiry is that they foregrounded some relevant anxieties pertaining to the cinematic form and its dissemination amongst general public, leading to dialogues and debates within and beyond pages of a specific magazine. Quite a few offshoots of the emergent dialogue directly addressed the issue of Bengali nationalism with respect to contemporary film cultures and the growing popularity of foreign language popular films. There is a noticeable tendency amongst the responses to interpret the questions in a manner that makes the ongoing dialogue deeply entrenched in the process of reconstruction of a modern Bengali community. My second important concern is the way in which the dialogues indirectly and sometimes directly implicate the ‘romantic *socials*’ into the cultural politics around the cinematic institution and the nationalist zeal to formulate cultural norms conducive to an ideal social order. As we shall see, most of these issues re-emerge over the decade, either directly or obliquely in newspaper debates, reader responses, editorial debates or other writings in the print media. I shall be charting such critical discourses in considerable detail to draw attention to a wide range of historical data, which have never been explored or evaluated in the context of Bengali film or social history, particularly in the context of popularity of film romances. Most often the myth of popularity obfuscates other conflicting drives that contributed to social significance of such cinematic representations.¹⁹

¹⁹ I should clarify beforehand that I am not envisaging the existence of two separate and mutually exclusive audience constituencies that evaluated new *socials* in their own ideological terms. Any new genre of narrative form encounters some degree of resistance at various points in history depending upon the social context it circulates in. In all probability a vast majority of audience who publicly expressed their disapproval of romantic films might have contributed to their box office successes. However the phenomena retains its significance due to the fact that it indicates a clear split in the historical spectator’s

In the case of this specific audience poll, a number of interrelated issues emerge, which are so intermingled in the dialogue between the editorial groups and its readers that it is often quite impossible to separate the range of symbolic concerns they collectively address. Hence I shall take up some examples and discuss the kinds of questions they raise and social concerns that are then mediated by such public interactions. Let us consider two queries that indirectly provoked comments on linguistic preferences and the nature of movie going as a social practice:

Q9. Amongst films made in these three languages Bangla, Hindi and English, which do you watch most frequently?

Q10. Do you prefer to watch movies alone or do you like to watch films with friends (*bondhu-bandhab*), or [just with your] girlfriend (*bandhabi*)²⁰ or relatives (*atmiyo sajan*)? ²¹

Technically speaking, such questions were meant to be objective and information seeking but their very formulation provided the space for much more than information and attracted quite provocative responses. I would argue that the nature of replies does point to the kind of socio-political investments movie-going practices had assumed in Bengali

field of desire and signifies a range of emerging social dilemmas which have reverberations beyond the concrete cinematic context.

²⁰ In Bengali there is a seeming confusion of terms referring to gender when the phrase ‘friend’ is used in everyday language. While ‘bondhu-bandhab’ (friends) could collectively refer to either gender, ‘bandhabi’(girl friend) specifically refers to a woman friend who might or might not have a romantic relationship with the person concerned. Thus how such an address is interpreted could often vary according to specific interpretation by the informant.

²¹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 10): 65

culture of the post-colonial period. Furthermore certain emerging cultural ramifications of such widespread social consciousness are quite at odds with and often plainly ignored by the reformist film-sense discourse. As I pointed out, the new narrative experimentations provided by Uttam Suchitra romances lent them to be thoroughly implicated in the whole ethico-democratic enterprise evident from the dialogic discourse. The question regarding preference of company for frequenting cinema halls is most often interpreted in moral terms. In many of the responses this was considered to have crucial significances in production of a 'healthy', regional film culture. Devdas Gangopadhyay, a 20 yr old youth from Tripura comments in response to Q 10:

... I am ready to give up on the habit of watching films and yet I am not prepared to watch films with anyone coming near to being a girlfriend. Moreover I never had any girlfriends to speak of and there is no chance of having one in near or distant future.²²

Picking up the term '*bandhabi*' (girlfriend), one 19yr old Haradhan Khara from Howrah, similarly makes an addendum to his response, "...no girlfriend has entered my life, because I avoid them to the best of my ability."²³ It is indeed curious and rather amusing to observe the number of responses, which decide to interpret the question in moral terms thereby enabling them to comment on the social aspect. One could argue that the use of distinct terms 'friends' and 'girl friends' might have been intended to address men and women spectators separately, as frequenting cinema halls with partner of romantic status

²² *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 10): 69

²³ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 10):79.

was still a relatively rare practice amongst general middle class public in the 50's.²⁴ However the question is systematically interpreted as addressing a moral issue whereby film-going practice becomes entwined with the ideality of social practices in general. Most people who answered this question directly never failed to make a passing remark regarding the ideal nature of movie going practice. Sometimes the issue of 'girlfriends' was not taken up directly but was rather supplanted by enlightened opinion carrying oblique references to contemporary films. Referring specifically to his experience of watching new genres in contemporary films, Sankar De, a 28 yr. old businessman from Puruliya district in Bengal comments, "There is no trouble in watching [contemporary films] with friends. Problem arises with girlfriend or relatives..."²⁵ To take another random example coming from Sumita Adhya, a young housewife from Kolkata:

...the kind of films which are coming up nowadays cannot be watched sitting beside seniors for e.g. mother, elder brother or mother in law. As a result so I watch films with my husband. ²⁶

The specific nature of the discomfort shall be clearer if we consider another remark, now from a 30 yr. old housewife from Varanasi called Shefali Devi:

...generally I watch with friends (*sangider sathe*). But I have been and will continue to be somewhat embarrassed to watch films like *Sagarika* or *Ekti Raat* with those who are younger to me in relation... ²⁷

²⁴ It is to be noted that by the 50's audience polls were fast becoming a popular public forum in national and international publications some of which were available to the general public. Borrowals from such prevailing formats in itself introduces certain elements of modernity into the public discourse thereby producing a space for discussion of cinematic institution as part and parcel of a modern social order.

²⁵ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11): 41.

²⁶ *Roopmancha*, , 1956, (Issue 6):79.

At this point one can identify an emerging point of reference, which was partly mediated by another query in the reader poll regarding generic preference. The fifth query in the same questionnaire directly foregrounds the growing relevance of certain coinages referring to narrative forms which were recently emerging as recognizable categories in their own right:

Q5. What sort of films do you usually watch? Socials, mythologicals, romantic films (*pronoydhormi chobi*), music or dance oriented or films with social message (*uddesyamulak chobi*)?

It is quite evident that over and above the recognized categories that are commonly mentioned in film journals and other print media, two specific designations have emerged as important. The latter phrase '*uddesyamulak chobi*' (films with social purpose), while vague in its specific reference is easily recognizable as describing a film practice aiming beyond mere entertainment, evidently addressing the realist-reformist drive emerging in Bengali cinema initiated by the discourses of film society and distinctly in focus at the time due to the release of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* in the previous year. However the other genre that gets a separate mention is that of 'romantic' films which are now clearly distinguished from social melodramas and established as a specific sub set of the '*social*'. By the end of 1956, various controversies over models of Bengali spectatorship had converged primarily around two specific Uttam -Suchitra hits namely: *Sagarika* (Agradoot, released 1st Feb, 1956) and *Ekti Raat* (Agradoot, released 11th May, 1956),

²⁷*Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11): 43.

both of which were circulating roughly during the period in which the questionnaire had been disseminated and responses got printed. Just prior to the comment on girlfriends, the same Devdas Gangopadhyay quoted above, comments in relation to Uttam Suchitra starrers such as the comedy *Ekti Raat*, "...the lack of discipline exhibited by such films is a sore to the eye ..."²⁸ The film itself had initiated rather interesting responses about which I shall discuss more below, but one should note the way in which many different concerns are converging upon a single cultural object: the so called 'romantic films'. Despite the editorial collective's complicity in the reformist critique of romances, the questionnaire seemed to be designed for discussion of general issues rather than such exclusive ones. However, the introduction of a single label, 'romantic films', in one query provided enough provocation to attract such dissenting responses. Each respondent reinterprets one query or another to suit her/his own way of expressing concerns over the 'romantic films' and their various possible negative impacts on society. Alongside there were innumerable comments regarding exhibition conditions and audience behavior, which sometimes took up similar tones. The same Shefali Devi prior to her comments on *Ekti Raat* makes markedly ethnic observations on cinema hall ambience at her residential location, Varanasi:

...leave alone ambience. Here Hindustanis and Bengalis are of the same stuff. If a Suchitra-Uttam film releases then it all the more so. Sometimes they start behaving in such an outrageous manner that we feel irritated being with them in the same place. Where due to pomposity of artists and directors even good films express themselves in an ugly form, there is not it natural that the state of the audience too will deteriorate?²⁹

²⁸ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10) :67.

²⁹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11): 43

The authenticity of such observational remarks regarding concrete viewing ambience might be dubitable but the publication of comments and responses across print media, along with other instances of similar critique gives the critical discourse a public dimension worthy of consideration. The critical milieu gives us an insight into a specific sort of emerging social consensus, which now conceives of the popular cinema and its spectators within a certain imagined hierarchy keeping film romances as its referential frame. An elderly businessman expresses his concerns after confirming his preference for traditional *socials* over other genres:

...nowadays romance signifies a monotonous whining, coquettish dialogues and attempts at sexual arousal with the aid of various bodily gestures. The same goes for song and dance films.³⁰

However qualifications are made to point out that it is not romance per se which is objectionable but rather certain contemporary modes of representing the sentiment. A student, Biswajit Bandopadhyay comments:

...I also like romantic films, provided they are truly romantic. However as for the popular films of the day, which try their level best to pump up the veins and arteries by depicting torrents of lust, nothing more needs to be said.³¹

³⁰ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10): 75.

³¹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 4):72.

Some respondents take up the responsibility of specifically mentioning the Uttam Suchitra duo as the root of discomfort before general comments as they venture into pondering upon the probable agency to blame for production of such illegitimate romance:

...if obscene Bengali films receive adulations from a class of cinephiles thereby leading to moral degradation of the youth, who should be blamed-- the audience or the persons involved in the film industry? ³²

Towards a Respectable Cinema

Now let us observe another aspect of the ensuing dialogue, which circulates around the negative response to contemporary romances. The very same critical discourse frequently emphasizes the community question and the possibilities of a loss of ethnic identity in face of the upsurge and influence of foreign modes of entertainment. Most often the resistances circulate around the perceived vulgarity of foreign culture and associated self-images of a community under socio-political pressure to operate within a centralized polity. However as becomes evident soon, the ethnic anxiety itself is related to a conflation between region and nation that is explicit in many writings on popular culture of the period. An elderly gentleman from West Bengal shares his amazement:

³² *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 4):.78)

How can I watch Hindi films! Such peculiar advertisement features ...the moment I see the tasteless behaviors of actresses, the suggestive gestures of the female dancers, I get palpitations in my heart.³³

A similar amusing complaint comes from a much younger person who confesses:

...generally I do not watch Hindi films. Those exhibits of sex appeal nauseate me. No matter how good a Hindi film is I do not watch them because they invariably have things like revealing blouses, obnoxious manners of dancing...sometimes I watch English films but their 'long time kiss' is intolerable for me...³⁴

Such widespread accusations and resistances facilitated cultural investments into the construction of a 'bad object' in relation to which the status and future of regional cinema could be mapped. As is evident from the information provided, the resistance was not restricted to elder generations who were condemning contemporary youth culture, but rather involved a constituency varying widely in age and occupation.³⁵ However, the desire for a respectable cinema was not a merely moralist prerogative as the self-representation of the authentic Bengali spectator-citizen in such discourses often resulted in revealing explicit and implicit tendencies towards reconstructions of ethnic identity, often through a conflation of descriptive terms. Paresh Mallik, an aspiring actor from Hooghly district in Bengal asserts:

³³ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10):75.

³⁴ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11):46

³⁵ The audience poll in *Roopmancha* requested for identity details and possibly photographs to be furnished along with response letters. According to the evidence of the published responses there were almost equal responses from both genders and the age ranges respondents varied roughly from 17-32 including teenage students, working men or housewives between early to late 20's.

...I can say without hesitation that I watch more Bengali films, that's because I am a Bengali first then an Indian. Unless the Bengali speaking Bengali and Bengali culture survives India will not.³⁶

In many such instances the qualitative degradation of Bengali cinema was regarded as symptomatic of the overall fate of the Bengali nation. A young man from a Bengal village claims:

Only the directors and producers of such films know what good can possibly accrue for the nation from the form that Bengali cinema is taking up at present. So it is my request to them that they should move in their own directions taking heed of the refined section of society. Vande mataram!³⁷

A critic of *Roopmancha* writing under the significant pen name Durmukh Ray and running a popular column titled 'Apriyo katha' (Unwelcome Words)³⁸ states the agenda with more idealistic vigor and conviction:

...those who are trying to submerge Bengal by inviting flood of extrovert wave of sensations as in Bombay and Hollywood; they are not aware that the soil of Bengal will not tolerate such turbulence...³⁹

³⁶ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10):81

³⁷ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10):78.

³⁸ The Bengali pen name 'Durmukh' translates as 'one who is foul mouthed' being a reflective pun on the content and title of the column mostly dealing with idealistic and unabashed criticism of corruptions and scandals related to the film industry.

³⁹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10):116.

In the same column Ray warns that the emergent contradictions in public and private life of stars owing to influence of hedonistic pursuits prevalent in other film industries coupled with the influx of dubious sources of finance could prove detrimental to the healthy development of regional film culture. The expressions of linguistic regionalism evident in such protectionist discourses are not naively idealistic, as they might seem at first sight for they are most often framed in relation to larger anxieties regarding Indian national culture. The choice of a language is not simply a choice of one's own mother tongue; it is also an assertion of the conviction, that to claim oneself as a part of modern, national polity one must first frame her/his location vis-à-vis a well defined regional modernity. Sanat Ckarabarty who claims to be a 27 yr. old factory worker from Bengal, goes much further to demand legislative measures in order to secure an infrastructure for a modern Bengali film industry. He argues for securing government support to export Bengali productions as an answer to Bombay film industry's exploitation of regional market. In fact he goes even further to explicitly endorse legal means such as bans and restrictions on migration as well as extra-legal measures such as blackmail of leading stars in order to protect and secure the regional market. ⁴⁰

One major aspect of such critical discourses that sets them apart from the parallelly working progressive-reformist drive was the assumed interrelationships between linguistic preferences and the evolution of Bengali film history in the context of attempts to refashioning the community image. Throughout the dialogue respondents

⁴⁰ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10): 83.

express their aspiration regarding an ideal film culture by citing concrete references that give us insight on the critical location of such enunciations. As indicated earlier, the discursive arena under discussion is approximately simultaneous with high point of the self-consciously reformist film-sense discourse and its historical culmination in the release *Pather Panchali* in 1955. However in a wide arena of popular writings on Bengali cinema, there is almost no acknowledgement of the aesthetic and historical achievement that *Pather Panchali* came to represent. Audience perception of the role of formal articulation of ‘reality’ in screen narratives differed widely from the dominant film society discourse which would systematically read *Pather Panchali* as a landmark event in narrative experimentation and development of film language in a Third World context. Rather, what emerges specifically as a novel but problematic aspect in this particular era in film history is the intervention and development of new Bengali *socials* in a seemingly complex direction. In the same audience poll, Maya Gupta, a housewife from Assam makes her own distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ brow films categorizing them as films of ‘*uccha rasa*’ (sensibilities of a higher order) and ‘*nichu rasa*’ (pornographic sensibilities). In her opinion *Pather Panchali* (Satyajit Ray, 1955) and *Udayer Pathe* (Bimal Roy, 1953) exemplify the former whereas the latter is exemplified by contemporary films of passion (*adi rasantak chobi*). She argues that:

...due to familial constraints I usually cannot watch the films I want ... but for films like *Pather Panchali* , despite all problems I make it a point to watch them... The filmmakers produce cheap, erotic films in order to attract people. But are we the Bengali such lowly people! Don’t we have finer sensibilities and refined tastes! In that case how are films like *Udayer Pathe*, *Bhabikaal* [1945] or *Pather Panchali* popular?⁴¹

⁴¹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11):38

She, like many others, also makes a further distinction between adaptation of respectable literature and commercial literary production suited specifically for the screen. The latter was the industrial practice responsible for some of the most successful romantic hits of the Uttam Suchitra duo. While replying to an earlier query she refers specifically to romantic films, “I like watching films on Saratchandra’s works. I particularly dislike watching those romantic films based on stories catered to the making of such films.”⁴²

Her description of *Pather Panchali* as a relatively good film worthy of viewing testifies to the general consensus prevalent in such reception contexts where modernist realism was often considered as a sophisticated continuation of mid brow social melodrama. Another young respondent, Narendranath Kundu, in the same poll validates this point when he asserts, “We want films such as ‘*Bhagaban Sri Krishna Chaityanya* [Devaki Bose, 1953], ‘*Pather Panchali*’ and ‘*Mahakabi Girishchandra*[1956] In order to develop Bengali cinema industry one has to stop watching bad films and actors and actresses have to perform well.”⁴³

In the same audience response poll, Hena Devi, another housewife casually comments on all sorts of genres:

⁴²*Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11):37. There were several screen adaptations of literary works amongst successful Uttam-Suchitra films namely *Ekti Raat*(1956), *Trijama* (1958) *Saptapadi* (1960) or *Bipasha* (1962). However in most of these instances there were severe public criticisms about the changes made to suit the film versions. See discussions of *Ekti Raat* earlier and below. The adaptation of *Saptapadi* from Tarashankar Mukhopadhyay’s celebrated novel also generated ample debate.

⁴³ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11):36.

...I like watching films based on the biographies of great men. I like to imagine the events depicted in biographical films as true to life. I also like romantic and plot oriented films but a little less... I like films having an air of naturalness in them such as *Pather Panchali*.⁴⁴

Similarly Mihir Ranjan Mukopadhyay a young government employee refers to *Pather Panchali*, *Babla* (Agradoot, 1951) and *Bosu Paribar* (Nirmal De, 1952) as good films in the same vein while *Sagarika* and *Ekti Raat* are cited as examples of the worst tendencies in Bengali cinema (*Roopmancha*, 16th Year, Issue11, pg.46). These deadpan references to the various stages of development in the realist aesthetic in Bengali cinema set forth by films like *Udayer Pathe* (Bimal Roy, 1943) or *Chinnamul* (Nemai Ghosh,1950) and partially evident in stylistic approaches of films such as *Babla* before culminating in Ray's Apu Trilogy, could reinforce the 'culturalist' convictions of critics who would pose such audience constituencies as prospective recipients of reformist initiatives. However within the critical imagination of such popular discourses any form of representation that approximates the perception of social reality mediated by popular literary forms would be deemed as 'realistic' despite its concrete stylistic elaborations. What remains to be clearly understood however, is the reason of discomfort with new *socials*, over and above superficial allegations of indecency, which made it almost obligatory for the contemporary spectator-subject to pay systematic lip service to the ongoing harangue of romantic films.

⁴⁴ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10): 86.

The Scandalous Embrace

These token samples of critical remarks refer back to the wide spread anxiety regarding Uttam-Suchitra romances, which was not only restricted to high popular magazines like *Roopmancha* but most popular writings across print media of the period. One could virtually pick up any newspaper or journal of the period posterior to the release of *Sagarika* to get the overview of the critical milieu in which Uttam -Suchitra films were circulating. The broader issue requiring critical attention is the significance of such a concern over a set of films that used a mixture of realist and melodramatic conventions in the most straightforward manner to narrate allegedly simple, ‘coyish’ love stories. Now, if according to formulations of the average audience *Pather Panchali* and *Bosu Paribar* were to be credited for their realistic treatment of respective social domains they represented, in what way would films like *Sagarika* and *Ekti Raat* be different? Is it because they are relatively inauthentic representations of the social world they portray? Or is it the case that the range of social situations and/or ideas they attempted to depict were in some sense unsanctioned domains that problematized the ongoing attempt to reinvent of a modern community network? I shall make a case for the latter condition as one amongst other determining factors facilitating the emerging scandal as well as the consequent sensationalization of film romances. There were ample published reviews and critical accounts, which would take up certain narrative lapses and illogicality within the plots of certain films of the romantic series. But the systematically adverse reactions to the representation of romance itself cannot be explained by these alleged shortcomings that could be present in any genre of films including the earlier *socials* that were

preferred by a large section of mainstream audience. In other words even if realistic representation of social situations was an issue it was certainly not the main focus or target of such criticisms. Thus I shall elaborate two separate but related explanations to account for the paradoxical love-hate relation to film romances of the historical spectator of the 50's. Currently I will chart this specific field of social imagination where cinema takes up a specific status and value with respect to reconstructions of cultural identity under the aegis of existing modern mandates. Analysis of this aspect will help to reveal the broader social significance of the debate that used cinema as a locus of configuration. Secondly, as I shall point out further in the next chapter, there were specific intonations in the very structures of visualization and narrativization of intimacy, which provoked these conflicted audience reactions. One could argue that these cinematic representations of intimacy refigured certain emerging aspirations for citizenship and simultaneously articulated such desires in ways that threatened to disrupt the structure of social field that was meant to oversee and regulate such conceptual productions. In other words the romantic intervention produced a definitive rupture in a field of social imagination and thereby produced a range of ambiguous and contradictory responses.

On the whole, one could argue that the regional film culture involving the practice of movie watching and dissemination of dialogue around them could be understood as a way of negotiating socio-cultural identity vis-à-vis the newly formed nation-state. Instead of approaching the various responses merely as transparent, conservative backlashes of a reigning moral consensus affiliated to older or 'new' versions of patriarchal regimes, one

should perhaps also take note of the ways in which the field of cinema is transformed and appropriated as a democratic forum to discuss the future of the Bengali nation and its citizens. The issue at stake is not what is morally acceptable on screen but rather how a modern Bengali polity will now self-fashion themselves as sensitive citizens on their own terms. It is the spectatorial relationship to the cinematic image that now stands for a model of relationship between the 'spectator as citizen' and the state. The problem at stake then is to re-produce a mediating entity, which oversees the relationship in the context of a new range of demands placed on the regional citizen. In other words the various cultural contours overseeing the screen- spectator relationship are assumed to produce a model that could subsume a broader relationship between the regional citizen and its ongoing negotiations with nationalist demands in the post-colonial context. The complex discourse I'm hinting at should not be understood as a metaphoric articulation of separatist regionalism but rather as ways of reframing and dispersing nationalism using terms of reference outside it.

Let us take a brief look into the ways in which public media implicates romances as the site of illegitimacy that requires a democratic mobilization of spectatorial demands. As I pointed out above, print media discourses on 50's Bengali cinema emphatically pitches their reformist agenda through a severe critique of Hindi cinema as a cultural form that is alien and unsuitable for the local audience. I am not claiming that such a critical position was a geographical or culture specific phenomenon or is restricted to the post-colonial decade but surely the appearance of the new romantic films exposes

interesting dimensions in the re-articulation of such critiques. The 1956 year- ending report on cinema in the newspaper *Hindustan Standard* mentions 119 Hindi as opposed to only 49 Bengali releases. This was roughly the period in which hugely successful Uttam Suchitra like *Sagarika*, *Ekti Raat* , *Shilpi* etc. were released or were in the process of production. It is quite obvious that the general lay audience was largely acquainted with the popular Hindi fares running parallelly in Kolkata and outskirts of Bengal, but public opinion expressed in print tended to be critical of the aesthetic conventions of the latter. Samples of such nationalist fervors were evident every now and then in the media whenever there is the slightest opportunity at hand. In the review of a Bengali mythological *Lakshaheera* in the regional daily *Dainik Basumati*, 20th April 1956, the critic writes, “We are not worshippers of Hindi cinema and we can unhesitatingly acknowledge that Bengali cinema is much more developed than Hindi cinema.” Obviously the ‘development’ referred to here is conceived as cultural sophistication as opposed to technical sophistry of foreign cinema, which is perceived as a sign of upstart snobbishness and cultural vacuity.⁴⁵ However one can observe certain features that distinguish such critique from an elitist, reform oriented project, particularly at a time when the entire intellectual mobilization in serious film criticism hinged on disseminating an awareness of the power of cinematic language and regional consumption of cinematic realisms. The reviewer of the Hindi release *Naya Zamana* (Lekhraj Bakhri, 1957) makes the discourse clearer from the perspective of a popular Bengali nationalism:

⁴⁵ In one sense this discourse parallels contemporary popular critiques of Hollywood as a merely capitalist enterprise out to produce more and more cultural gibberish.

Generally we consider Hindi cinema of Bombay to be light films filled with song-dances, fun and frolic. *Naya Zamana*⁴⁶ from the point of view of plot has completely altered our perspective and we don't know how much pleasure it will give to the general public. But it can be forcefully said that there are sufficient indications of Bengali attitude working behind fabrication of the story. It is commonplace that Bengalis love narrative laden with emotion and pathos and the scriptwriter of this film particularly emphasizes on the element of pathos...the story has a moral appeal (*Dainik Basumoti*, July 19, 1957).

A similar tone is discernible in a review of Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar*, which was described as a bit too intellectual and lacking in affect:

Bengalis are emotional people. The Bengalis prefer to evaluate things more on the basis of heart than the head. Whoever succeeds in presenting any subject by striking the right chords in his heart will win approval from Bengalis (*Dainik Basumoti*, October 17, 1958).

The curious focus on emotions and pathos is a regular feature in newspaper appraisals of Bengali cinema throughout the decade. The overall direction of criticism vaguely served to distinguish and legitimize Bengali popular narratives as a specific form dealing with distinctive cultural sensibilities that is deemed valuable. It is on this cultural psyche that the 'romantic' films would be accused of having a damaging influence. Therefore the attack on and defense of such films were often articulated in terms of a threat to cultural identity. As pointed out earlier, several critics and writers were concerned with an influx

⁴⁶ It is to be noted that the film concerned is a Hindi adaptation of Bimal Ray's Bengali *social Udayer Pathe*, which happens to be an important marker in development and use of progressive social reform themes within a realist framework.

of undesirable lifestyle practices amongst film industry people. Sometimes the filmmakers and other media people were directly accused and collective resistances sought among audiences. Most of the rhetoric is adorned with nationalist fervor that aims at public mobilization and seeks complicity across social forums. Ramanath Ghosh a respondent to the *Roopmancha* poll writes:

...money by itself is enabling as far as unscrupulous practices are concerned. But this cannot be done in case of the Cinema. However, one class of producers in the Bengali film industry is recently engaged in suicidal gambling... 'we shall not watch bad films' : this ought to be the resolve. Actors, actresses, technicians must distance themselves from such trash; otherwise they will be written off in the court of history for having been too crude. ⁴⁷

If there are any remaining doubts regarding the object of his supreme anxiety we should go down a few lines where he comments:

Sagarika goes and *Ekti Raat* comes. There seems to be no end to this coming and going. Leaving obscenity behind, Bengali cinema will have to strike out a more glorious path. And this is everybody's responsibility. I would like to know why journalists are not aware of this state of affairs? ⁴⁸

The anxiety has explicit relations to representation of intimacy and most of the responses and writings take up the issue explicitly with respect to the influence of Hollywood and Hindi films which are credited as the cause of the entry of similar influences in Bengal despite their relative technical merits in specific cases. A standard resentment centered on

⁴⁷ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue11): 41.

⁴⁸ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 11): 41- 42.

the perceived lack of official and community initiatives against the unwarranted popular celebration of romantic films. Shyamacharan Saha , a spectator from Kolkata complains:

In English and Hindi films there is an explicit expression of sexuality, which is intolerable and tasteless for Bengalis. It is regrettable that nowadays even Bengali films have started giving primacy to the phenomena of sex appeal. Cinema halls are full. The Censor Board is inactive. They don't even have the time to look after the advertisements and billboards.⁴⁹

At this point, the pre release campaigns of romantic films had become a somewhat scandalous affair resulting in frequent resentments from the general public regarding specific posters such as those of *Sapmochan*, *Sagarika* and few others. Evidently structure and elaboration of these campaigns quite clearly reveal an awareness of the sensitive and controversial material with which the production team was dealing and a part of the erotic charge was undoubtedly conscious productions to facilitate sensational popularity of the films concerned. However as discussion of some concrete reception problems with romances will show, the root of the problem involves a more abstract concern than is represented through various concrete articulations on print.

I would argue that in order to understand the conflicts within the historical imagination at stake; it is required to move beyond the obvious references to modernity and sexuality that abound print media of this period. A general perception of the monotony and lack of novelty in mainstream *socials* was frequently reported in many

⁴⁹ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 6): 83.

write-ups and reviews during the early 50's. In Feb 1, 1953, a journalist from *Hindustan Standard* explicitly comments on the lack of freshness in contemporary Bengali cinema.⁵⁰ He points at the systematic repetition in plots involving romantic triangles, a general monotony in narrative elaboration and describes *socials* as an unrealistic genre lacking authentic roots in real social conflicts. However the concrete evolutions undertaken by film melodrama in the following years with the ushering in of new *socials*, was not perceived as any substantial solution to the desired authenticity and social sensitivity in cinematic representations. In *Dainik Basumati*, April 20, 1956, a reviewer comments that new developments in screenwriting had done nothing to reduce the crudeness of *socials*. A review of the film published in another daily *Dainik Basumati* around the same time pinpoints the lapses in realistic treatment facilitated by the obsessive concentration on the romantic element:

Sagarika's story could not impress us. Most of the characters are not quite healthy and natural. In order to fit his imagination the writer seems to have imported characters from some artificial space far away from normal environment of society (*Dainik Basumati*, Feb 6, 1956).

I shall elaborately discuss the narrative and reception of *Sagarika* in the next chapter as an exemplary instance of audio-visual staging of the romantic imagination but for the time being it should suffice to note the general unrest created by the creative investments around the romantic theme. The experience of *Sagarika* produced further anxiety and anticipation regarding the aesthetic orientation and creative aspirations of Bengali film melodrama. The production news of Agragami's next Uttam Suchitra romance, *Shilpi's*

⁵⁰ Also see the article titled 'What is wrong with our films?' by Sukumar Dasgupta in the same issue. *Hindustan Standard*, Feb 1, 1953.

mentions that the film would appear to the Bengali audience with a new perspective (*Dainik Basumati*, Nov. 30, 1956). The established and popular film critic of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Nirmal Kanti Ghosh, writing under the initials ‘NKG’,⁵¹ like many others in the profession expressed his explicit disapproval of new experimentations in *socials* in a language that reinforces the curious connection between romantic theme and their lack of rootedness in contemporary social reality:

At a time when utter realism and faithfulness to life is acknowledged to be the bed rock of sound film drama, this screenplay never gives out the suggestion of anything more than a mere midsummer night’s fantasy...(*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Feb 17, 1956).

However, their status as ‘unrealistic fantasies’ did not take away their potential to undermine and threaten the new found community ethos. The undercurrent of anxiety becomes explicit in the rhetoric laden production news of the same film in *Roopmancha* :

...the film *Sagarika* which appeared to assault the cultural senses of the common man releasing a flood of sex appeal--- it was against the drumbeating of which the refined section of public and critics raised their voice of protest----the same directorial team Agrabami’s next feature shows Asit Baran and Suchitra Sen in a sequence still ... we hope *Shilpi* will not turn out to be a repetition of the same, if it does the society of Bengali audience community will suitably react.⁵²

⁵¹ It should be noted that ‘NKG’ was also the acting Vice President of Bengal Film Journalists Association(BFJA), which was an influential body mediating the reformist politics around cinema within the State.

⁵² *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue10): 9.

The retrospective spectatorial and critical gaze that now idealizes the Uttam-Suchitra era as being a high point of Bengali film history seems to suffer from a systematic amnesia regarding the nature of its historical reception. Such collective amnesia in turn produces as byproduct, a certain kind of critical milieu, which engages in continual and repetitive re-assessment of the mythical celebration rather than analyze the contradictory conditions of production and sustenance of the iconic popularity. To bring forward a rather curious example from the historical era, the popular critique of ‘romantic films’ touched a high point around an Uttam-Suchitra hit that did not cast them as a romantic pair. *Ekti Raat* adapted from acclaimed writer Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s short story ‘Bhim Pallasri’ was designed as a farcical social comedy centering around the theme of mistaken identities. Evaluating Uttam Kumar’s artistic achievements many decades later, Mrigankashekhar Ray observes: “...Uttam Kumar’s acting skills added a new dimension to representations of comedy. A shining example of comic acting of the Uttam-Suchitra duo was Chitta Basu’s *Ekti Raat*...” (Ray M. 2001, 24). A cursory scan through archival materials reveals a rather contrasting perception amongst the critics and audience of the period. The story of *Ekti Raat* deals with the encounter of a man and a woman who are stranded in the same train compartment on their way to their respective in law’s place. Circumstances compel them to pose as husband and wife in order to procure shelter for the night at a *mofussil* lodge. The rest of the narrative proceeds towards resolution of the developing confusion and impending scandal through a series of comic social situations. The scandalous overtones of the narrative were in fact part and parcel of the production process itself, which sought to sensationalize the newly established romantic pair. One of the print ads for *Ekti Raat* which appeared in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* on May 3, 1956

shows Uttam-Suchitra in close up as a part of a newspaper clipping describing a petty runaway scandal. The very next day the ads in the same daily describe the ‘sensational’ Suchitra Sen as ‘super-sensational’ when paired with Uttam Kumar. It is interesting to note that the severe cultural anxiety triggered by this comedy circulated on the production of such erotic fantasy rather than a representation of sexuality itself.⁵³ The reviewer in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* observes an offensive approach of the production team in the depiction of narrative situations. The actors and the heroine in particular are accused of, “...voluptuous dressing and demeanor including vulgar innuendos and suggestive erotic half tones...”. He argues that their respective marital status and therefore fidelity to the same is not explicitly established as the character of Santana never mentions her husband and the male protagonist remembers his wife cursorily on a few rare occasions. The outrageous indecency leaves a foul taste in the critic’s mouth who finds it rather strange that:

...the scenarist and the director in a hurry to transplant a foreign story to Bengali soil ignore the fact that a happily married woman vamping so inelegantly with a married man of honest intentions at night and within barred doors would shock all persons of decent taste (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, May 25, 1956).

⁵³ A viewer quotes the same ad referred to above while complaining about the scandalous aspects of the film in a letter to the editor in *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 4): 89 It is rather ironic and symptomatic that Mrigankasekhar Ray confuses the film’s story and describes the lead protagonists as erstwhile lovers rather than strangers. Such an act of (mis)remembrance actually reinforces the romantic charm missing in the original literally text thereby unconsciously justifying the production of eroticism that enraged the historical audience. (Mitra and Mukhopadhyay 2001, 24)

It is blissfully forgotten for the moment that the narrative far from being foreign, is an adaptation of a renowned Bengali short story and was parallelly being accused of transformative distortions. In a letter to the editor of *Roopmancha*, a viewer earnestly urges the editorial team to write a harsh review of the film:

...what is all this? there are some such bad scenes which have no meaning at all...I have read Bhim Palasree which is a comic story...there are no uses of slang language there...Chittobabu has used Suchitra cunningly and Uttam has also tried his best to retaliate accordingly and pull *Bhim Pallasree* towards a dirty direction. If Suchitra Sen does not control herself she will have to take leave soon...⁵⁴

While it must be acknowledged again that such responses cannot be taken at face value and such resistances often have paradoxical complicity in sensationalization of popular representations, one must note that in so far a certain kind of public domain approximating to a indigenous civil society necessitates and structures such responses, they will have to be understood as representative discourses of a social community. These are not always angst ridden private responses but explicitly articulate a sense of emerging community consciousness seeking reform initiatives in face of a perceived cultural problem. On the one hand these are kinds of responses that are not wholly implicated and somewhat oblivious of the reigning film-sense discourse, which was seeking reform on very different grounds. An overemphasis of the progressive discourses often tends to serve the negative purpose of complicity to the systematic homogenization of Bengali mainstream cinema and film *socials* in particular. One of the problems with Dulali Nag's

⁵⁴ *Roopmancha*, 1956, (Issue 4): 82.

analysis discussed above lies in her uncritical acknowledgement of the mythical celebration of romantic *socials*, which involved a process of systematic manufacture and production of a retrospective gaze through re-circulation of films through various media. As is evident, the historical reception context involves a severely critical milieu within which the films concerned worked out their concrete successes and failures. Thus, to bracket off the phenomenon as a symbolic remedy of a historical trauma would involve an ignorance of the very conditions that produced their sensational status. Furthermore such an explanation would be unable to account for the deeper cause for social resentment possibly shrugging them off as a general reaction to emerging instances in representations of modernity. It is evident that some of the narrative mechanism involved had explicit relations to reformulations of patriarchal network within the modern family sector but the films themselves, which explicitly acknowledge their intent, over determine the explanation itself. Thus Nag's argument certainly does not explain the hostility the films encountered or the mysticism the pair evoked. In fact I would argue that the resistant strand in popular consciousness possibly holds the key to the symbolic rupture enacted by representational work of romances and also to the popular rapture discharged in the process. In fact one could read the critical scenario at hand, as a process of production that is not limited to the superficial mobilization of cultural resistance

Romance as a Matter of Debate: Reconstruction of the Regional Citizenship

One can perhaps conceptualize the historical milieu as an effect of co habitation of two simultaneous phenomena that reinforced each other in the wake of concrete socio-political events. Implicit in the structure of dialogue between several entities such as the audience, ordinary readers, publishing houses, reformist collectives and institutional criticism of cinema etc. was a developing notion of community consensus whereby popular cinema, in general, and romantic films in particular were in the process of being formulated as ‘objects’ around which certain political constructions could be developed. As has been argued time and again, historical conditions facilitating the transformation into post-colonial versions of community life placed several demands and constraints on the Bengali citizen. Such demands were to be negotiated in order to gain access to possible cultural identifications conditioned by larger political upheavals pertaining to the reconstruction of the Indian nation-state. Apart from a desire to formulate symbolic fantasies to suture the perceived threats to one’s cultural identifications, there existed real political interests to approximate various available mandates into the realm of modern citizenship. One amongst many ways to enact the journey into modern polity would involve an attempt to redefine the conditions of an overarching modernity at a regional level so as to enter into a negotiation with broader forces in successive phases. Such a demand often requires production of specific objects around which productions of an

imagined consensus takes place amongst aspiring citizens within and beyond the geographical boundaries of the state and which facilitates formation of social communities through material uses of public media and other institutions. Thus the popularity and cultural resistances to an object such as a specific genre of films, which have equal amount of material manifestations, are not necessarily to be interpreted as representing two oppositional community camps fighting over moral issues. In fact they could very well be implicated in the same process, which produced and sustained a specific cinematic genre as a temporary object around which a social collective could launch its attempt to redefine itself as a modern community. It is to be noted that private opinions and responses do not in themselves constitute a political forum. The production of a modern forum is determined by the range of practices undertaken by public institutions and the range of cultural objects that serve as a fantasy support to animate these institutions into the field of real politic. The object itself functions through production of certain fantasies around which a notion of 'consensus' can develop through a range of contradictory responses that progressively attain public status.

One could go on further to argue that the critical discourses were concerned with a broader range of anxiety than the immediate cinematic object they were addressing. Rather than articulate any solution to the threat that all phases of modern reconstruction poses for any traditional patriarchy they were in fact systematically engaging in the broader attempts to negotiate with the cultural concept called 'romance', which was gradually erupting in to the social domain. A detailed look at the archival material from

the era supplies much evidence for the centrality of debates around romance in Bengali public life. In fact, along with issues pertaining to the question of women, new forms of intimacy amongst citizens was on amongst key issues around which democratic debates around community life was being forwarded in Bengal at this historical juncture. It has to be acknowledged that public debates around sexuality are nothing novel and circulated profusely in colonial period as well. But most of those debates were framed to achieve control of women's sexuality within the context of a resistance to colonial domination on community ethics. But the significant aspect of the post-colonial debates is its confrontation with a new socio-political situation, where a growing access to higher education and public services by women from middle class households by the time of Independence would bring the sexes together in different manner than before and consequently redefine their aspirations (Ray1991b). Despite Nirad C. Chaudhuri's insistence that Indians had not been educated into a 'healthy' practice of formal courtship, there is ample historical evidence of romantic liaisons proliferating around Bengal as in other sates of India (Chaudhuri 1970, 67-86). Ample autobiographical accounts, songs, poems or other literary and cinematic representations from the post-independence period testify to the ways in which public spaces and urban culture reframed the couple and their conjugal aspirations.⁵⁵ The growing importance of the romance as a social issue and its cultural implications could be understood if one looks at

⁵⁵ The early Bengali silent film *Jamaibabu* (1931) has directly depicts romance in urban, public spaces to stage comic predicaments of the rural simpleton. Bengali silent film titles such as *Romantic Lovers* (1931), though inaccessible, allude to the growing popularization of romance as a social phenomenon (Ray 1996). Some pertinent examples of writings from the colonial period discussed in chapter 2 have clear references to the proliferation of romantic courtship and new emotional demands within the society under transformation (Ray 1991; Ray Chaudhury 1999).

the role of print media. Many of the newspapers and journals of the period devoted spaces for discussion of issues related to family and transformations in modes of socialization in urban Bengal. Let us consider one expression of the growing concern over reconstruction of social relations, which coincided with the growing popularity of romantic *socials*. From around mid 50's the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* started running a regular page on each Saturday for discussion around social issues relating primarily to women. In January 1956, this section titled 'A Page for Women' witnessed a vigorous debate that continued for several months bringing together engaging contributions from men and women from many quarters within the educated middle class readers. It is difficult to ascertain whether a proliferation of such discourses facilitated the development of romantic genre in popular cinema or the films themselves produced a space for such discourses. In all probability the discursive productions had a more complex relation than any connection of cause and effect. But it is more important to understand the issues at stake in these debates and how the intervention of film romances simultaneously problematized the very terms of the debate. A closer look at the nature of the actual debate might help us to decipher the larger anxieties at stake.

The women's page in question featured writings on a wide range of socio-cultural problems and issues ranging from women's work, their career possibilities or dowry related problems to proper grooming and training of would-be housewives or even child

and home management.⁵⁶ Contributions included features produced in-house, readers' submissions and the views of experts or local personalities.⁵⁷ cursory scans through the pages reveal an array of animated arguments and discussions on contemporary civic life and associated problems from both traditional and liberal social perspectives. The specific debate, which concerns us currently, started with a set of articles by few women writers who were addressing the desirability of new and liberal practices within a social domain largely supervised by established traditional customs. The discussion centered on certain familiar problems regarding socialization between the sexes and role of women in the family within the context of changing social mores. Opinion was broadly divided amongst two conspicuous positions, which debated over nature and desirability of love marriages over the dominant, traditional system of arranged marriages in India. In between arose a few moderate lines of argument that mediated the both camps to facilitate acceptance of modern practices in order to reform the undesirable aspects while broadly remaining within the traditional social setup. As one follows the debate one can observe a certain constellation of concerns which sought to acknowledge and at the same time problematize the emerging mandates provided by new social expressions of modernity. It appears that the comments were provoked by an article called "True Love"

⁵⁶ Similar topics were also under discussion in various other English and Bengali language dailies throughout the decade but not necessarily under a specifically attributed column.

⁵⁷ It is to be noted that names of men and women writing on the Saturday and Sunday supplementary were frequently accompanied by their educational qualifications. For eg. the article on dowry problem published on Jan 15, 1956 was written by a contributor signing as: 'Indira Majumdar, M.A'. Possibly, the use of initials were intended to stress their level of erudition enabling them to articulate qualified opinions on social issues on the basis of their acquired modern education and not by mere intuitive or common sense.

by Brenda Brienne Roy which had been published in an earlier issue of the paper.⁵⁸ From the published responses it is quite clear that Roy's article had forwarded a defense of the emerging trend of choosing one's own marital partner, drawing examples mainly from Western civic life. In the article, "To Marry and Love and Not Love and Marry" (Jan 15, 1956), Kumari Suchitra Dey responded to Roy by attacking 'love marriage' for its alleged indulgences in sexual matters. She continually uses a vague term 'lovemaking' to stress on the hollow basis of love marriages, which according to her are based on sensual pleasures. She argues that 'lovemaking' is, "like the attraction of iron and magnet...as long as electricity is there love is there –then it vanishes". Paradoxically she goes on to say, "I can tell you when love-making goes on, the young partners act and react as two divine souls having no regards for their sexual hunger" (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Jan 15, 1956). Her argument is far from clear from an analytic perspective as she seems to waver and confuse terms but her caustic reaction clearly stems from a prevalent Occidentalist conception that sees love marriage as a logical by product of a sensually driven Western culture. The article, "Hindu Marriage" (Jan 22, 1956) by Pratima Devi is a much clearer argument from the same perspective. She launches a severe attack on Roy based on statistical data and charges the Westerners for ignorance of their own social conditions. Her collected data supposedly demonstrates how 1 amongst every 4 love marriages in the West breaks up, resulting in almost 52,000 breakups a year. She draws attention to the 1953 Reuters's Report and a *Chicago Tribune* article of November, 1954, which provide detailed accounts of the legal complications and growth of criminal tendencies related to proliferation of divorce suits. Thus she argues that the 'sickening immoralities of love

⁵⁸ Unfortunately there is no exact reference to this date of publication and referred article could not be located in the earlier issues perhaps due to accidental damage of the specific issue or page concerned.

marriage' does not stop at mere ruining of families and relationships but rather infects further to breed crimes, suicides and other mental deformities that affect societies as a whole. Sometimes an affirmation in Orientalist lines comes from the foreign contributors as well. David Rockwell, director of the Asiatic Research Expedition, writes "it is difficult for anyone who is not a real Hindu to understand the salutary rituals of sacramental Hindu marriages." Thus the marriage system unlike the West is an arrangement for, "a happy and stable conjugal life for best protection of joint family systems and above all performance of obligations to Devas, Rishis and Pitris." (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Jan 22) In such cases sins of the flesh could not be an issue as Hindu marriage systems indulge in sexuality only for purposes of progeny formation. However, acknowledging recent changes in social attitudes he comments: "There may be recent perversions in married life ...but they are rare...all of them are due to foreign influences" (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Jan 22).

However , not all respondents belong to one or the other end of the 'culturalist' spectrum and some moderate voices started emerging as letters started flooding in from the next week to voice arguments which had interesting reverberations regarding the cultural significances of such public debates. In an article titled "An Ideal System of Marriage among Simple People", a reader took up Suchitra Dey's argument against viability of love marriages, "This criticism of Suchitra Dey is mainly directed at students. The said 'socio-economic system relates to their social status on the foundation of

finance of the pair of lovers.”⁵⁹ She draws attention to the dowry problem by giving examples from other regions such as Sind, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar where she argues, parents generally go to the extent of selling grooms and/ or try to capitalize on children.⁶⁰ Love marriage is frequently cited in such writings as a progressive force and prospective agent that could break down class, caste related and religious or regional provincialism and therefore exemplary for the modern nation. Such arguments proliferated in the face of severe opposition from those who saw such a move towards liberalization of the marital system as a threat to age old tradition. Thus in “Wooing the Bridegroom” the writer enumerates the ideal features of a prospective groom in a quintessentially patriarchal manner resembling debates around sexuality in the colonial period. The writer argues, “...there should be compatibility... but then they must also know each other...In India the only way is to match horoscopes. If they meet they must refrain from ‘bad practices’ and retain ‘family prestige” (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, February 6, 1956). The defense of tradition follows from two broad and commonplace arguments. On the one hand there is a vehement emphasis of the notion that romantic love is an essentially novel component in contemporary social scenario which does not naturally flow from the Indian psyche which is more at home with ideas related to various phases and duties in the course of one’s social fulfillment. On the other hand such established notions are considered as pragmatic and beneficent for the community life as a whole. While there is

⁵⁹ In all probabilities this vaguely articulated sentence refers to Suchitra Dey’s anxieties over sexual impulses involved in free mixing amongst youth, while the current contributor makes a case for the broader predominance of marriages out of love amongst more matured and responsible citizens. In the same page another letter to the editor insists that: “couples must allow love to mature without sex ...till they are sufficiently fit to finance the need of each other”(*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, January 29, 1956).

⁶⁰ Arguments in these lines often point towards the fact that the conservative resistance to love marriages, in principle, facilitates oppressive and undesirable social practices.

an acknowledgement that romantic interactions might be at vogue given new social and legal conditions of socialization it often results in breaking of traditional bonds thereby rendering marriage as a mere legal contract easier to dissolve precisely because it is deplete of any traditional moral values (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, March 25, 1956). Similarly a respondent, Meera Paul argues in another response that love in itself is unnecessary for sustenance and stability of a relationship. She argues that: “Adjustments are essential and happiness can be achieved even if one meets her husband after marriage”.⁶¹

It is rather interesting to note that critical oppositions to such defenses of tradition are most often voiced through arguments uncannily similar to their opponents at one level. The defendants of love marriage often site similar historical texts and traditions to prove the predominance of romance as a condition of sacred union amongst individuals. Respondents like Dolly Routh and Dorothy Parks maintain that no secured relationship can take shape where the hearts of participants themselves are not spontaneously engaged in understanding each other. Thus love when considered as a spiritual connection between souls could work as a more pragmatic bonding for social scenarios where free mixing is becoming popular (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, April 22, 1956). In a separate column Leela Nandy urges the debaters to look back into ancient and medieval history where instances of love proliferate profusely. In fact she cites a few mantras from marriage rituals to demonstrate the legitimization of love as a condition for union of

⁶¹ *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, March 19, 1956. Some respondents in the same issue claim that love by definition is ‘mad’ and therefore ‘impractical’ as a condition for secure social relationships.

souls. While she maintains that love is not a psychologically or scientifically measurable object, none the less its is essential to the well being of couples who are most often forced into non-spontaneous physical unions legitimized by negotiated marriages. Thus a social sanction of love marriages could, according to her, lead to a more healthy state of affairs not only at a familial level but also at a community level where various insensitive atrocities such as oppression of women and child marriages would cease to exist. Brenda Brienne Roy who had initiated the debate and invited much infamy later contends that the constant harangue and abuse against love marriages go on to demonstrate that the very system the opposition wishes to defend has been rendered insecure and requires modern reforms to operate in socially beneficial ways. She goes on to defend 'love' as a sacred bond as against the popular perception of romance as a fleeting, insecure emotion.⁶² These moderates among the contributors argued for free mixing between couples to facilitate appropriate choices but clarified that they should be restricted to educated people who are not likely to commit mistakes of the erotic kind. The task of social governance was often imagined as a reformist one that could provide a support system and constructive criticism in case of possible pitfalls rather than one which lays down insensitive restrictions without concern for individual citizens.

Parallel to the specific debates on issues related to love and marriage, the print media ran several columns containing diverse write ups regarding domestic issues such as child management, psychology and suitable designs for a modern home or exemplary

⁶² See the articles in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, April 22, 1956. The whole of Sunday supplementary page was devoted to a discussion of love and arranged marriages.

discourses on duties of a modern woman within the domestic front. Notably, various sociological concepts are implicitly and explicitly used in such writings to explicate the notion of a 'new woman' who in her suitably liberal, sophisticated and yet restrained incarnation must assume suitable relationships to both public and household life. In the article the "The Thoughtful Wife", (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, February 26, 1956) Leela Bose explicitly refers to 19th century tracts in relation to the transformations in social life requiring the Bengali woman to assume her appropriate duties. While on the one hand the article refers to virtues of ideas such as cleanliness and decorum as contributory to healthy domestic life it also attempts to mediate such norms to the contemporary demands on an effective conjugal life. Phrases such as 'conjugal happiness', 'companionate marriage' now assume specific meanings within a critical discourse which pleads for rational choice and against blind submission to tradition. More importantly, one of the articles by Bijaya Bhattacharya acknowledges the contemporary overtones of the debate as she goes on to emphasize that, "the expression 'love marriage' is in much use within educated youth today. But love alone is not the factor as certain section of modern people hold" (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, March 11, 1956). Some of the articles expressed a desire for rationality in the context of marital decisions; the perceived 'rationale' now focusing on interpersonal familiarity rather than pre-determined arrangements. Bhattacharya goes on to make a distinction between 'genuine' and 'spurious' forms of love claiming that the genuine feeling would be a delicate yet strong and durable one as opposed to aggressive sensual longings that wither away easily. Marriage she contends is a 'rational scientific procedure ...a judicious mixture of emotion and intellect' and divorce is a final resolution only in cases of absolute failures

of adjustment. The debate continued in supplementary pages and editorial column. Finally a contributor, B.N.Singh sends a humorous write-up making an exasperated appeal for a poll through advertisements of both men and women readers to settle the issue once and for all. But in the style reminiscent of sarcasm evident in film audience polls one might contend, '*Sagarika* was to come, followed by *Ekti Raat* and many others like *Shilpi*, *Pathe Holo Deri*, *Indrani*. et al'. There would hardly be any settlement and in fact the debate did actually continue for sometime further.

It is to be noted that during same period sensational pre-production advertisements of *Sagarika* flooded the media and public spaces in Bengal. The release of the film on February 6, 1956, intensified the ongoing debates. Later on I shall focus on the film text and its pre-release publicity but it is interesting to understand the developing interrelations between debates over social reconstruction and populist discussions on cinema in public media. Quite frequently public discussions outside the specific purview of film criticism took up films and other cultural texts as a point of departure to gauge modernity's practical influx into everyday life. More than positing films as reflective expressions of positive or negative transformations within society, they were seen as indexes enabling articulation of communitarian social critique. Thus, for example, the modernity depicted in '*Sagarika*' apart from spreading anxieties regarding its possible influences amongst youth also enables the reader-spectator to articulate and map the desired conditions around which reformist discourses of both tradition and modernity

could circulate. There is an overwhelming consensus in the public discourses that questions of desirability and acceptance of new norms of sociability required certain qualifying conditions that would guarantee their benefits for the community. Quite often an operative distinction between love in its so called ephemeral and spiritual forms, served as a parameter and interestingly this very crucial distinction, which marks of older forms of debates over intimacy from contemporary ones, most often refers to cinema as one of its sites of elaboration. The respondent, Bijaya Bhattacharya argues that, “physical attraction or love ...however thrilling or stimulating will not stand the test of time unless it is fortified by other congenial forces.”⁶³ As shall be revealed, the publicity materials used for *Sagarika* confirmed the general anxiety that contemporary romantic relations are headed in the direction of pure sensual pleasure.⁶⁴ In an article on cinema and its possible influence on children and youth, Indumati Bhattacharjee expresses concerns about the direction in which current social situations and its corresponding media representations might lead young minds. On the one hand she observes the problematic influence of upcoming trends in fashion circulated by contemporary commercial films on dress sense, attitudes and moral values circulating within the middle class population. On the other hand she also acknowledges the lack of progressive reforms that have left traces of monotony and attendant boredom in the drab schedule of everyday social life as well as the academic curriculum of educational institutions. Thus she resorts to vocal demands for effective legal and social reform and censorship measures to restrict proliferation of

⁶³ See the article, “Problems of Conjugal Happiness” by Bijaya Bhattacharya (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, March 11, 1956). Many other articles printed in the Women’s page or ‘Arts and Culture’ pages of the referred and other newspapers during the period, contain references and arguments along similar lines.

⁶⁴ As has been cited above, much such similar opposition would be articulated after the release and success of the following hits of the Uttam Suchitra duo.

confusing images of indiscipline amongst uninitiated youth of both urban Bengal and more importantly vulnerable population of *mofussil* towns who are no longer outside its purview, courtesy the dissemination of cinema. Interestingly she ends her long set of arguments by appealing, “We must note that at the transition period of our nation building no effort should be spared to make our future citizens perfect in body and mind.”⁶⁵

It becomes progressively clear that the logic of arguments transcend subjective opinions and the forum in itself attempts to approximate the conditions that enable them to speak out for an ideal modern community. It is quite evident that the imagined nation here refers to a regional community in preparation of producing ideal citizens, capable of negotiating extra regional imperatives of modernity from its own location. However, it still remains to be understood clearly why one form of screen romance would go on to problematize the very social imagination that produced it and sought to use it as a locus for articulating its modern aspirations.

Love or Arranged? : The Intervention of Community

⁶⁵ In this article, “Cinema and Our Schoolgirls”, (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, May 6, 1956) Indumati Bhattacharya elaborates a range of suggestions for possible reforms including proper and organized parentage as guidance against corrupting influence of commercial films, proper censorship measures to restrict entry of children into unsuitable films, restriction of proliferation of film related magazines amongst youth and state initiatives to introduce educational films suitable for children.

One can now look back at the debates and arguments to flesh out some broad points that would help us to deal with the problematic relationship between romantic films and the public domain within which it circulates in a specific historical context. A few disparate observations are relevant as successive steps to understand the range of problems at stake. One could argue that the entire debate proliferated around the coordinates mapped by the idea contemporary historians refer to as ‘new patriarchy’, which during the colonial period oversaw production and sustenance of the inner social domain of the educated ‘bhadralok’. These debates were marked by uneven anxieties about the appropriate extent and nature social transformation and circulated mostly within a male discursive domain where the feminine domestic world was addressed as an object of scrutiny and reform. However the historical era under current scrutiny provided grounds for development of a set of different social concerns, which played a decisive role in shaping the critical milieu. It should be noted that there were significant changes in the ways in which women reader-spectators were being drawn into public debates over regional and national socio-political issues through various print and other media forums. While the issues in focus often seemed to be reflecting general social concerns, their critical expression and orientation often revealed deep-seated anxieties about agency and subject hood in the feminine universe within and outside the domestic realm. The crucial difference between these debates and similar 19th century debates was the wider involvement of women and the change of tone and framework in discussions about issues pertaining to femininity. Not only did the print media designate separate spaces for discussion and debates over social problems related to women including their professional life and aspirations, they

explicitly implicated certain sections of educated women to take active part in shaping up such discussions.⁶⁶ The transition into independence apart from giving rise to political turmoil for a huge section of Indian population in certain regions also saw the proliferation and of new democratic sensibility which, in principle, included a range of progressive agendas to educate sections of the polity who had lesser access to modernity. The transformed social circumstances produced relatively greater opportunities for urban, middle class women in terms of their access to the modern public sector and related institutions. The independent nation-state and its new socio-legal parameters were gradually breaking down rigid restrictions on free mixing between the sexes. The post-independence era also saw vast conflicts over linguistic identities and geographical demarcation of states. Demands for broad progressive reforms from all institutional quarters including law, education or social customs were shaping new mandates of citizenship imperative upon the various regional communities, demands which often threatened their perceived identities vis-à-vis the larger national polity. The overall political scenario, in case of Bengal as well as other territories, demanded a collective articulation and mapping of their own location and access to the new agendas inaugurated by post-colonial modernity.

It is important to take note of two significant events related to the issues under discussion, albeit in an oblique way. Among a number of proposed reforms the ones that

⁶⁶ The print media debates in various newspapers of the period record a considerable amount of entries by women readers. A sizeable section of responses in the *Roopmancha* audience poll were also coming from young Bengali women from within and outside the state.

got concretely realized in the immediate post-independence years were legal reforms regarding the social rights of Hindu men and women in the form of a set of Bills and amendments. In 1954, the Nehru government decided to revise the old civil marriage law of the colonial period through a legislation resulting in the more secular Special Marriage Act. The passing of the Act, which was an amendment of the existing civil marriage act of 1872, provided post-colonial citizens with specific right to marry out of choice while remaining within the purview of their social and religious circles.⁶⁷ It is to be noted that such an amendment, in principle it paved the way for any secular marriage irrespective of faith or caste and community affiliations as requisite obstacles Interestingly the very next year, the petition for amendment of the Hindu Marriage Law also got its official sanction as a law on May 18, 1955 after a decade long fight against technical problems as well as legal and cultural resistances. The amendment concerned, among other things, the controversial issue of granting Hindu women a legal right to petition for divorce.⁶⁸ The

⁶⁷ In earlier version of the Law the subjects would lose their religious and thereby rights of inheritance if the marital act was unsanctioned by the religious or ethnic community to which they belonged. For a detailed and interesting history of the conceptualization and formulation of the Civil Marriage Law during the colonial period.(Mody 2002.) I shall briefly discuss the issue of debates surrounding the Law in another context below.

⁶⁷ It is to be noted that right to separate residence, maintenance or remedy of restitution were already granted to Hindu women in accordance to the Indian Divorce Act, 1869 and the Hindu Marriage legislatures of 1946. In fact the right to divorce on the basis of custom was available and practiced, though infrequently, amongst the lower caste groups of Indian society. The amendment concerned, which sought to make the provision for rightful dissolution of marriage available to the broader educated classes and women in particular, justified it by drawing attention to various social ills that could not be warded off by the right to separation alone (Basu 2001, 98-118).

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notion of divorce was so far alien to the religious definition of Hindu marriage, which conceived of the bond as a sacrament, and therefore the petition of the amendment suffered progressive resistances at various phases of its discussion and triggered off severe anxieties within all traditional social circles before it finally obtained governmental sanction in 1955.⁶⁹ Coupled with such socio-political upheavals the decade faced an urgent need for concrete transformations in women's role in public life and institutions. The 50's saw a gradual rise in co-educational institutions, women's entry into professional courses increasing their career opportunities, breakdown of erstwhile joint family units in face of new avenues of professional employment and as is evident various new social spaces that enabled a relatively free interaction between the sexes. It should be evident that such set of historical circumstances would necessitate reconstruction of social spaces where the approaching transformations could be conceptualized and debated collectively to access their complex role in formation of a new Bengali nation. As has been observed before, there is a systematic collapse at this historical juncture between public uses of the terms designating 'nation' and 'region' drawing attention towards the larger anxiety regarding imagination of a new regional community capable of confronting concurrent socio-political challenges.

make the provision for rightful dissolution of marriage available to the broader educated classes and women in particular, justified it by drawing attention to various social ills that could not be warded off by the right to separation alone (Basu 2001, 98-118).

⁶⁹ The amended law made four sets of matrimonial available to all Hindu women irrespective of social class and caste, thereby legalizing the possibility of dissolution of marriage under undesirable conditions of cohabitation. The provisions included: restitution of conjugal rights, judicial separation, and declaration of annulment or nullity, divorce. See *The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955* for details (Chaudhuri 1966).

I would argue that popular print and audio-visual media, particularly cinema, served as a locus for such implicitly political formations of a populist variety. In other words a section of popular media now provided the grounds for imagining a new regional nation which could no longer be conceived within ideas of social reform and citizenship disseminated by a community which mobilized around the challenges thrown by colonial modernity. The discourses related to the post-colonial aspirations were defined by demands for new forms of community and citizenship and more importantly a desire for concrete mapping of new social spheres, which could be enabled by media representations. The emergent public sphere as an integral part of such aspirations attempted to account for and legitimize social transformations in the wake of new upheavals attending the regional manifestations of the same. In other words the substantive specificity of debates around patriarchal norms and their regional manifestations now centered around the conceptualizations of emerging social spaces and relations, the 'nuclear family' and 'romantic love' being a few amongst its many expressions. What seems to be precisely at stake were the attempts to reconstruct an imagination of a community for legitimization and sanction of attendant transformations enabled by the social and legal machineries of the nation-state. Pervez Mody drawing attention to the oppositions to the Civil Marriage Act of 1872, argues that the resistances encountered by such legislations account point not only to anxieties regarding influx of liberal norms into the domestic realm but also about represent the coextensive construction of 'community' as a political forum which mediates between the colonial state and individual citizens.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Mody borrows from Veena Das's critique of romantic conception of social communities to argue for a

As has been briefly discussed earlier, popular debates regarding cultural and ethical significance of romance and familial relationships have often come up with sharp distinctions between the various ways in which such relationships were configured within historical contexts. Popular discourses have generally regarded romantic love as a relatively modern phenomenon in India often assumed to have affiliations with a Western outlook and thereby as an obstacle to the continuity of traditional kinship and marital relations. Sociological commentaries have often tended to read such phenomena as precursors to systematic social transformation and a symptom of the post-colonial condition.⁷¹ Although there are very few elaborate critical commentaries on the subject, the issue crops up every now and then in various arguments related to feminism and women's agency. Such writings often criticize the popular normative dictums regarding traditional social networks and simultaneously tend to place 'romantic love' within the ambit of modernity due to its emphasis on freedom of choice, agency and autonomy from the traditional value systems based on class, caste and kinship. Revisionary histories however have also pointed out rightly that the apparent freedom of choice shadows the

dynamic conception of 'community' as a unit of negotiation between various political formations within the nation (Mody 2002, 139; Das 1999).

⁷¹The few sociological works dealing with the subject happen to assume such critical perspectives (Donner 2002; Datta 2002). For eg. Donner assumes the active articulation of his respondents as the theoretical framework within which social changes could be analyzed. The second section Mody's essay attempts at a sociological analysis of the perceptions of love-marriages within in the concrete contexts of contemporary legality and thereby comments on the degree to which modern modes of socialization encounter resistances from the pre-modern framework overseeing secular institutions in contemporary India (Mody 2002).

internal complicity with traditional markers of class and caste as most romantic relationships and social alliances like marriage involve members of similar groups within the traditional hierarchy. While this might also pertain to social conditions facilitating amorous relations in the West, the Indian case presents a peculiar twist because the particular tradition of arrangement of marriage that had dominated the country has been relatively alien to the West. It has been argued that romantic love as a pragmatically and pervasively operative category in India has historically emerged after the opening up of higher education, co-educational institutions and access of women to various professional posts in the formal sector. This factor intimately ties up romance in India to a certain notion of modernity to which women in particular had no access earlier. This argument is often complemented by another one stating that such performances of modernity and democratic ideals in the Indian scenario are often framed with a reconfigured notion of tradition, which from within imposes limits to these actions and imaginations. Translated in terms of narrative such a social phenomenon is supposedly reflected in representational instances where even after external impediments are challenged by feminine agency, threats to existing social order are neutralized by transformations in the narrative whereby women willingly accept or transformatively abide by conventional social mandates. One could think of myriad examples of cinematic or other narratives where an otherwise questioning female protagonist consequently turns into a demure and dutiful wife or realizes the deeper significance of her romantic affection through varieties of codes which emphasize chastity, devotion, loyalty to the husband and larger family unit. All such examples are by extension assumed to be markers of a social tendency, which in the

real world represents the hegemony of patriarchal networks albeit in a more liberal guise than its earlier versions.

It is to be noted that the socio-historical circumstances in which romantic *socials* emerged on the scene was coextensive with a deep crisis in political efficacy of the regional community due to impending transformations impinging upon the region. The dissolution of colonial opposition was succeeded by a new democratic polity, which was gradually implicating all regional communities into its drive towards modernization. Therefore the immediate need was to formulate and reconstruct a new ‘community’ capable of acting as a political unit mediating between the regional citizen and the larger demands of the nation-state. I argue that the media and popular cinema acted as objects around which such reconstructive agendas could be materially mobilized. I furthermore contend that the romantic films themselves as cultural products rooted in such a political scenario transcended the very coordinates upon which the ‘community’ began reworking its social imagination of modernity. One has to read the set of emerging populist discourses around cinema and social life keeping mind these complex sets of historical drives at work and the endeavors for community structuring that they initiate. Evidently, theoretical invocation of concepts such as ‘new patriarchy’ would not suffice because conditions corresponding with such a notion are under a process of descriptive clarification in the very discourses under scrutiny. In fact one should move beyond the obvious and seeming oppositions between ‘traditional / modern’ or ‘conservative/liberal’ perspectives and focus on the contemporary driving force of the debate around love

marriages and its ways of conceptualizing of intimate relations. Madhava Prasad in his critical discussions regarding post-independence Indian popular cinema has argued about the co existence of two contesting but interrelated gazes that defined the dynamics of spectation and social imagination. While the ‘realist’ drive motivating the popular film *socials* were attempting to center narratives around the figure of the citizen operating under the sphere of law, melodramatic interventions systematically resisted such drives to reinstate an ‘absolutist gaze’ legitimized by kinship relations under a pre-modern imagination of community (Prasad 1998 b, 56-87). However as Prasad points out the both these drives work and mobilize themselves under the aegis of modernity rather than representing any archaic conflict between essential ‘tradition’ and intrusion of Western values. The conflict at hand is over the desirability of a proper model of modernity that can serve as a platform for initiation into emerging codes of citizenship while at the same time redefining the limits and constraints posed by newly constructed community nexus. The concrete screen manifestation of romantic desire as we shall discuss in the next chapter attempts to delineate the limits of this distinctively modern conflict in ways that sharply distinguish Bengali popular cinema from the nationalist populism evident in the dominant model Hindi popular.

But beyond the level of narrative manifestation the conflict around gazes converges upon the popular cinema itself as a cultural object that requires appropriation and shaping in order to facilitate grounds for deploying the gaze of ‘community’. I would argue that the debate around ‘love’ and ‘arranged marriages’ that implicated the Bengali popular cinema and its ways of imagining the social world, indicates the very nature of

modern sites of contestations. One should note a point of convergence amongst divergent voices commenting upon issues of social concern and if one is careful enough one could perhaps find a point of similarity in tone amongst these seemingly opposed cultural positions. At first sight it may seem that the critical discourses are generated by a concern regarding growing popularity of a modern form of relationship that is perceived as threatening to established social norms. Thus, it seems as if one can speak from either of the two 'liberal' and 'conservative' positions to defend or attack the corresponding social concepts of 'pre marital romance' and 'marital love' and their respective allegiances to other related social domains. A sociological analysis on these lines would lead one to read the process as cultural resistance to a society's historical move towards modernization. However the proliferation of arguments demonstrate that the system of 'romance' and 'traditional arrangement' are mostly used as descriptive terms with reference to the more concrete institution of 'social marriage'. I would like to point out that both the critical factions engaging in such debates within the popular realm, represent forces that designate a community consensus on the question of redefining the institution of marriage under a transformed set of historical and political conditions. In other words the conflict itself draws attention to a distinctively modern public forum whose immediate concern is with a new element in the process of marital negotiation that now requires to be conceptualized and managed within the definitional parameters of the new 'community'.

However, the problem gets all the more complex due to the appearance of yet another set of conceptualizations on the horizon, whose coordinates were virtually unmapped by the terms and conditions driving such popular discourses discussed above. I have already argued that one of the directions of development within debates around intimacy and eroticism in the field of literary representations in 20th century indicates a new formulation of intimacy as an essential element in negotiation of socio-cultural identity. In the post-colonial scenario, popular cinema in the guise of a specific genre of romances brings into being a similarly disruptive object that transcends the existing grids of comprehension. While the various discursive domains, cinematic or social seek to confront its 'bad object' they simultaneously stumble upon a very translucent core in the object that resists any easy appropriation. I would argue that both the mystic celebration and caustic criticism are generated by the way in which romantic narratives of the period situate its discourse in relation to other social discourses. As we shall see in the next chapter, it has a concretely palpable texture in terms of its visual elaboration. However at the level of purely critical discourse it serves to destabilize the dominant traditional opposition and newly emerging negotiation between discourses of 'romance' and 'arrangement' of marriage as social practices. As the myriad scattered evidences across public discussions point out, there is something fundamentally problematic about the nature of romantic elaboration that takes shape through the popular form of film romances. I submit that the modern reworking of community was predicated upon this obscure element that could neither be accepted nor be appropriated within the terms of debate that animated such social formations.

The problem is related to the romantic imagination's invocation of another crucial emerging distinction between notions of 'love' as a domain of imagination and the institution of 'marriage' that traditionally houses its expression, as two related but conceptually distinct domains. However the range of popular debates, which contributed towards the formation of modern public forums in the post-colonial era, seldom conceptualized 'love' and 'marriage' as two conceptually different sets of social phenomena that might require negotiation. It is precisely at this point that popular representation both literary and cinematic, in their corresponding ways created a conceptual rupture in the attempt to reconstruct a modern society under the watchful gaze of the nation state and 'communities' that mediate its interventions. In so far as the print media debates are concerned, all the divergent claims seek to conceptualize the problem within a discursive conflict between two possible forms of social arrangement and their mediations within the realm of modernity. In other words the discourses are centered on the possible and desirable forms of reconstruction that the social institution of marriage can undergo in the wake of real historical transformations, a concern often academically mapped in the field of sociology to study cultural specificities of societies under going modern transformations. I would argue that in the context of post-colonial upheavals the set of new cultural mappings re emerge to designate specific locations or points of enunciation and thereby destabilize the legitimacy of popular discourses at hand. In fact it is such unconceptualized enunciations that get implicated within the elaboration of on going discourses to produce a critical rupture. I have earlier indicated that the history of intimacy and its representation gets implicated into a larger discourse, which is concerned

with 'intimate history'. Such a history does not concern itself merely with representations of romance itself, but rather uses its myriad forms and expressions to conceptualize problems related to cultural and political identifications produced under specific historical circumstances. In the specific case at hand, the process of social mapping is rendered complex by introduction of conceptual elements that produce a rupture within the imagination of modern citizenship by a social community under the process of manufacture. To put the contention in concrete terms, the popular disseminations for or against 'interpersonal love' or 'premeditated arrangement supervised by family or community', were all located within the discursive realm designating the domain of 'marriage.' The debates were not about the distinction between 'love' and 'marriage' but rather about how the social phenomena called 'romance' were to be placed and located within the discourse of marriage. More importantly the discourse did not involve debates over the citizen's right to question or re define or new forms of social engagement within the realm of emerging public culture. The question that animated both the self proclaimed 'conservative' and 'liberal' factions involved a consideration of social factors that could legitimize 'romance' as a useful social form for the community's current aspirations to locate itself within the modern domain. What can make love a practically useful social discourse? 'Practicality' here is nothing other than a primary consideration of all those social factors that a modern conjugal domain would require to sustain its cultural specificity amidst attending transformations. If it failed to do so 'love' would fail to gain any social legitimacy. However, if it could do so it can very well become a legitimate form of approach to conjugality legitimized under the purview of the modern nation. The debate involved two competing models for appropriation of modernity manifesting a split

on the issue whether 'love' between modern citizens could ever enter and come to be framed within the marital discourse. In other words the legitimacy of 'love' is conditional to its negotiation with the traditional family sector and the modern national sector, in most cases with both of the sectors simultaneously. What remains somewhat alien and unfathomable to this imagination is 'a lover's discourse' which refuses to enter into such forms of negotiation and carves out its own frame within the social conditions available.

Let us now move on to demonstrate how the 50's film romances occupy certain specific standpoints in their depiction of modern aspirations towards citizenship within a regional context and implicitly elaborate a series of concerns regarding social identity and formulation of social relationships. It is required to chart the history and complex evolution of social melodrama from the 40's to its new incarnation of the 50's in order to speculate on the various implicit or unattended dimensions in representations of the 'social world' that the intervention of film romances brought into being.

Chapter 5

‘New *socials*’ and the mis -en -scene of Desire

Agradoot’s *Bipasha* (1962) introduces the star heroine Suchitra Sen, lost in her thoughtful gaze at the evening sky. The sequence alternates between close ups of Sen’s face displaying her pathos laden eyes and long shots of her figure sitting under a tree lost in her own contemplative reverie. For a ‘cultural insider’ familiar with the ‘new *socials*’¹ (which Sen along with her screen counterpart Uttam Kumar came to symbolize), these shots throw up countless associations of romantic anticipation, bringing into play memories of older film sequences depicting romantic spaces symbolized by studio sets of tree shades, flowers and foliages. However, a commonsensical interpretation of such imagery as mere manipulative reiteration of settings stolen from older hits like *Harano Sur* (Ajoy Kar, 1957), would involve an ignorance of broader socio-political factors facilitating re articulation of Bengali film melodrama in the 50’s. The ‘anticipatory gaze’ of Suchitra Sen, represents a specific figuration of ‘desire’ that had gained symbolic currency through the decade traversing many individual narrative instances. By the

¹ I have decided to use the coinage ‘new *social*’ in preference to other possible descriptions of the series such as ‘romantic films’ which is a journalistic usage or ‘new melodrama’ (*nabya melodrama*) as Biswas uses (Biswas 2005). The choice is based on the observation that the series of films refer to fall within a ‘genre’ in so far as they use systematic repertoire of representational techniques. Moreover they would have to be addressed as a subset of *socials* in so far as they centre around problems related to family, conjugal relationships and conflicts within a modern social context. This would help us to analyze how the sub genre uses and transforms melodramatic and other conditions of meaning making in order to arrive at a historically specific romantic imagination.

early 60's, the high popular phase of the Uttam-Suchitra screen romance was almost on the wane and would be soon followed by narratives of breakdown indicating various manifestations of crises in the texture of urban romance. In this chapter I analyze the concrete cinematic elaborations of this trajectory of screen romance from its inception in early 50's to its symbolic demise in by the mid 60's, staged in films such as *Jatugriha* (Tapan Sinha,1964) or *Sandhya Dwiper Shikha* (Haridas Bhattacharya,1964). By the time *Bipasha* was released, one could clearly demarcate two separate lines of narrative development and resolution rather than a broader one engulfing the sub theme of romance. Herein lies the substantive specificity of the 'new *social*', whose deeper symbolic significance I shall attempt to elaborate through my arguments. My intention is to understand the larger socio political drives overseeing narrative strategies and audio visual preoccupations that enabled the so called 'new *social*' to achieve its popular yet scandalous status, as discussed in the earlier chapter. But primarily it is important to identify and analyze the substantive representational elements that went on to mark the specificities of the stylistically evolving Bengali film melodrama during 50's.

By the time the star duo started churning out box office hits consistently, they were both experienced workers in the industry albeit with very few prior successes. Thus at the very outset one has to ascertain what components went on to produce the so called 'magic' that remained elusive before the release of *Agni Pariksha* in 1954. Both Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen embarked on their career by late 40's and early 50's respectively, from very different personal locations. Uttam Kumar's rise to popularity is now a part of general myth making that

follows rise of star personalities, involving narratives of toil, hard work and unfortunate circumstances in early struggling years.(Chakrabarty 1980). Following a few unfinished productions and a series of minor roles in mostly unsuccessful films, Uttam achieved the sarcastic status of the ‘flop master general’. It wasn’t until the relative success of *Bosu Paribar* (Nirmal Dey, 1952) that Uttam got any independent certification of merit as an able actor, from the press and public alike (Chakrabarty1980). During the same period Suchitra had also fared just about ordinarily in a few mediocre *socials* until she came together with Uttam Kumar in the same Nirmal De’s hugely successful comedy *Sare Chuattar* (1953). However, apart from appreciative mentions they gathered for their effective performance as minor characters, no other remarkable possibilities were noticed during this period. Suchitra continued to star in middle and low budget productions including off beat ones such as *Atom Bomb* (Taru Mukhopadhyay, 1954), with the exception of *Bhagavan Srikrishna Chaitanya* (Devaki Bosu, 1953), where the film along with her performance had earned some attention in the press (Roy 1992). A similar fate befell Uttam who continued to draw sparse attention of the press on and off, whether or not he was paired with Suchitra (eg. *Ora Thake Odhare* and *Sadanader Mela*, both directed by Sukumar Dasgupta, Feb and July, 1954 respectively).² According to popular press and critical accounts, it was the success of *Agni Pariksha* (Agradoot, 1954) which created a fertile ground for the star duo’s forthcoming career successes. But rather than treating the film as a paradigmatic example of Uttam Suchitra’s ineffable magic, *Agni Pariksha* can be better described as a contingent historical marker which managed to capture the duo’s capacity to evoke romantic charm on screen. In fact the series of films, which

² *Ora Thake Odhare*’s moderate success did accumulate meager appreciation of the duo’s performance (Chakrabarty 1980; Roy 1992).

followed *Agni Pariksha*, took off from its popularity to systematically explore new narrative conventions in rendering of Bengali film melodrama. Thus, it will be more useful to consider some of the significant motifs that came to dominate these narratives of coupling, rather than analyze a few popular hits from the period.

It is necessary to register the nature of this transformation and the accumulating motifs that constituted the so-called ‘newness’ of 50’s socials. In the earlier decade popular *socials* were centrally concerned with ramifications of cultural conflict usually between a ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ ethos, which encapsulated and supervised the romantic plot as one amongst its various expressive dimensions. However, during the 50’s, the romantic plot gradually started taking up a relatively autonomous narrative function thereby overriding the parameters imposed by plot structures predominant in earlier *socials*. Moreover one could now notice a significant displacement in thematic concerns and social habitation of the central romantic pair, often expressed in terms of social identity and/or profession. At the outset, it should be noted that some of the narrative motifs, which reappear in the series of Uttam-Suchitra starrers through the 50’s, actually begin to emerge in films such as *Sadanander Mela* and *Maraner Pare* (both by Satish Dasgupta) that were released before *Agni Pariksha* in the same year.

Sadanader Mela explicitly deals with a story of uprooted people flocking into urban Bengal in search of work and shelter. Admittedly, the historical references to 'Partition' and its attendant misery for the migrant population are cursory in the narrative, which tries to use the historical tragedy as a backdrop for a social drama in a somewhat comical vein. However, the comic narrativization of the socio-economic struggle revolves around two set of characters that would reappear in various similar incarnations through the decade. The young male protagonist is depicted as a geographically and socially dislocated middle class individual (played by Uttam Kumar) striving to internalize a set of identifications concurrent with the emerging social mandates in a new urban milieu. On the other hand Suchitra represents an economically secure and articulate young woman with stable urban roots, whose search for ideal companionship goes hand in hand with her zeal for independence in social as well as professional terms. In films of the duo till *Agni Pariksha*, the romantic dynamics between the couple seems to be overshadowed by set of broader narrative concerns involving reorganization of the older patriarchy in the social context of the years before and after independence. *Sadanader Mela*, for example, stages an encounter between two forms of older patriarchy in the guise of ideological conflict between the heroine's arrogant, industrialist father and the benevolent patriarch who seeks to re establish the lost community ties through production of emotional and social bonding amongst displaced individuals.³ Here, in fact, the desire for a new and legitimate social order often overrides the class conflicts evident throughout the story.

³ The two roles are played by eminent character actors Pahari Sanyal and Chabi Biswas respectively, who would reappear in most Uttam-Suchitra films throughout the decade. However it is to be noted that the roles they play in *Sadanader Mela* are quite uncharacteristic of both because they eventually came to symbolize contrary psychological traits. Pahari Sanyal most often

Maraner Pare weaves a 'fantastic' plot of reincarnation and deceit to situate the story of an aspiring romance among an urban couple. Here, the young male protagonist's inability to initiate or enter into a romantic exchange is represented as having associations to his identity related trauma. On the other hand, the heroine is always already posited as an articulate individual who instigates the romantic negotiation with a hesitant hero, thereby initiating a narrative trait to be invoked time and again through the decade. In fact the heroine's display of affection and sympathy towards her rustic and mentally disturbed stepmother symbolizes her capacity to transcend her class based identities concurrent with her progressive social outlook. As we shall see later in the context of other examples, melodramatic constructions in popular film *socials* often tended to revolve around similar problems of legitimate social identity coupled with theme of property or inheritance, a tendency evident in *socials* of the earlier decade as well as some early films featuring the star couple. These thematic strands underwent considerable transformation as Uttam-Suchitra 'starrers' went on to develop their distinctive characteristic features. I would suggest that to analyze the significance of these narrative tendencies, it would be more useful to trace how the theme of love developed an unique identity of its own by gradually becoming more central so as to marginalize other determinants that oversaw narrative structuring in earlier forms of *socials*. I would also like to argue that such considerations might shed more light on the representational connotations of 50's

portrayed the benign, self-oblivious patriarch while Chabi Biswas excelled in roles of arrogant aristocrat striving to conserve social identity in accordance with older patriarchal norms.

popular romance rather than the invocation of mystical appeal of the star couple as an explanatory concept.

Romantic themes have always been part and parcel of film '*socials*', although there are qualitative differences in their specific structural and narrative status within the text depending on the dominant conventions of the period concerned. The point at hand is to understand the concrete representational significance that the theme acquires in Uttam-Suchitra romances from *Agni Pariksha* onwards. Often generic categorization implies much more than is substantially validated by commercial factors overseeing such generic constructions. Evidently, the very attribution of a generic label such as 'romance' in popular and journalistic contexts points to larger socio economic drives overseeing narrative conventions. Barbara Klinger's historical analysis of so called 'progressive' melodrama of Hollywood in 40's and 50's including works of Douglas Sirk and other artists, points towards various non-narrative drives determining generic categorization. She argues that the newspaper and publicity discourses often situated the same films within a local genre of 'adult fare' promising a different variety of pleasure, thereby articulating the industry's reaction to invasion of other sensual forms of commercial entertainment (Klinger 1994, 1995). As the 'scandalous affair' discussed in the previous chapter indicates, there has been a considerable attempt to differentiate Uttam-Suchitra films from the standard fare of mainstream melodrama available to the audience, both in terms of narrative structuring and publicity processes. However, it is to be noted that most often artistes involved in production of 'romantic films' were not an entirely

new group, but rather comprised of writers and technicians who had been working in the mainstream industry and intimately associated with other genres as well as the conventional melodramatic format whose very evolution is under scrutiny. It should be further noted that both Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen were actively working in conventional melodramas alongside the more distinctive strand of 'romantic films' throughout their acting career during the 50's.⁴ Thus in the historical context under discussion, it is necessary to understand both the narrative and cultural logic that required for a separate coinage such as 'romantic films' (*pronoy dhormi chobi*) to designate certain Uttam Suchitra films rather than simply describe them as a category of 'socials'.⁵ Later on I will discuss the issue in some detail with reference to publicity materials designed for the Uttam Suchitra blockbuster *Sagarika* (Agradoot,1956). I shall try to argue that there are more culturally significant reasons for demarcating a certain strand of 50's *socials* from the mainstream fare over and above the concrete commercial strategies undertaken by the film industry. In the context of discussion over the categorization of 'romantic films' as a specific sub genre we might now formulate a preliminary question: what are the narrative conditions that enable an elaboration of romance to be described within the conventional of parameters social melodrama rather than as a specific category in its own right?

⁴ There are a number of mainstream films that both the artistes worked in which followed a structure similar to melodramas predominant in the earlier period. One can give many examples such as *Bokul*(1954), *Mantrashakti* (1954), *Sanjher Pradip*(1955) *Debotro*(1955), *Bratacharini*(1955), *Bhalobasha*(1955), *Mejobou*,(1955) *Subharatri*(1956). It is to be noted that in such cases Uttam and Suchitra would more often be paired with other actors and actresses rather than with each other.

⁵ See my discussion of reception contexts of Uttam-Suchitra films in the earlier chapter..

Melodrama as Form

One amongst the several defining features of melodramatic structure has been its inherent tendency to displace historical conflicts into symbolically narrower domains. David N. Rodowick observes that the aesthetic ideology overseeing production of Hollywood melodrama is characterized by factors such as their “... the systematic refusal to understand the social economy of the text, and the historical conditions which gave it form, in anything but familial and personal terms”(Rodowick 1987, 279). Such arguments taken in isolation could mislead us into assuming that melodrama necessarily serves a regressive function by its tendency to bracket off historical determinants of its textual production, unless we remember that Rodowick’s point pertains to structural aspects of the form. Melodramatic conventions have their own specific ways of approaching the historical domain, which often results in an uneven foregrounding of some narrative elements at the cost of others. It is interesting to note that in the melodramatic context the romantic plot is structurally situated within the text in quite different ways depending upon the specific historical circumstance and the available means of narrativizing social conflicts. Pemendra Mitra’s *Samadhan* (1942) is an illuminating case at hand where the desire to locate a historical conflict makes use of a romantic sub plot whose resolution merges with the broader theme. The film deals with a romantic liaison between two young people of opposed class and social status; a struggling and idealistic young man and the daughter of the industrialist whose factory he works in. The film explicitly works

with the often discussed, classical theme of identity and socio economic inheritance where narrative resolution often collapses recognition of social identity and legitimate transfer of property through conjugal bonding.⁶ But in *Samadhan*, the narrative elaboration of the romantic plot detours substantially into issues of class and cultural conflicts so as to articulate the major psychological dilemmas in relation to the broader social context.⁷ The central trope of the plot: ‘the inability to return economic capital to its proper source’, is posited as the ground of all misfortune and conflicts thereby displacing major negotiations of such conflicts outside the concrete field of romance. Towards the end of the film when the moment of transfer is impending, the ailing patriarch in a curiously symbolic move asks the lovers to lead him towards a new direction of progress. He refrains from explicitly confessing the source of actual injustice and performs a symbolic donation towards the cause of progressive reforms he assumes the protagonist to be associated with. In other words the narrative abstains from treating the act of injustice as a private and internally negotiable issue by posing the transfer of wealth as one assisting the cause of the oppressed class. It is to be noted that the

⁶ In such cases, problems related to social identity and inheritance coalesces through the trope of coincidences, reversals and recognition so as to enable resolution through a common transactional act. Such narrative features evident in early European melodrama often intervenes into popular film genres such as thrillers, gangster films etc. See Ravi Vasudevan’s discussion of the 1943 Bombay Talkies film *Kismet* (Vasudevan 1991). For a detailed discussion of historical evolution of such melodramatic plots see *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Brooks 1987).

⁷ The central plot here involves an emergency transfer of money by a dying sailor to his family, for which he entrusts a stranger whose inability to perform the task consequently reverses the fortune of two families. The guilt-ridden patriarch becomes a rich industrialist while the legitimate inheritors struggle for daily bread. The son takes up a worker’s job at the industrialist’s factory and gets romantically entangled with the owner’s daughter. The educated young protagonist is also represented as the one articulating the demands of the socio-economically oppressed through his involvement with working class collectives.

transfer of property rights and that of the daughter's responsibility is made in a single gesture thereby coalescing the two into a single act of resolution. Such variations at the level of plot often imply broader transformation impending in the narrative universe of *socials*, which gradually emerged in the form of narrative elements displaying an explicit consciousness of the historical domain.

The gradual induction of realist techniques into film *socials* since the early 40's under the influence of both Hollywood and emerging progressive art movements associated with IPTA and other collectives has often resulted in conscious attempts to implicate the text within an ideologically specific historical frame. The body of the text now started incorporating various cues that refer back to the larger socio-historical framework through cinematic elements like voice over narration, dialogues, setting or other aspects of mis-en-scene. This ongoing negotiation between realist and melodramatic conventions in structuring of film narratives eventually ascribed a definite identity and autonomy to the sort of narratorial voice, which foregrounds itself on its own accord by the time the spectator encounters the opening voice over of Nimai Ghosh's celebrated *Chinnamul* (1949). In fact one way to chart the evolution of realism into the 50's would be to follow the gradual dissolution of this narratorial voice into the act of narration itself. Apu's village in *Pather Panchali* (1955) would no longer require a separate narrative procedure to foreground its historically specific dimensions. *Samadhan's* final shot in a fascinating move sums up the specific approach to reception which distinguishes melodramatic interventions from a strictly realist approach to visualizing the social. As the old patriarch is led by the lovers to move

forward and stand in front of a window frame, the frame itself suddenly transforms into a screen reflecting non-diegetic images of workers on the march, while the soundtrack plays a tune associated earlier in the movie with mobilization of the working class.

It would be erroneous to assume that the magic of 50's romance is an effect of wholesale dissolution of realist imperatives as most movies of the period reveal a creative use of cinematic codes associated with both the realist and melodramatic tendencies inherent in the larger history of popular cinema in India (Prasad 1998, Vasudevan 2000 a). Nor is it sensible to argue that their successes were wholly determined by some mystic internal to the star chemistry or calculated products of a new generation of artists seeking to reflect the external transformations in social relationships. Thus, one has to unravel the larger cultural conditions that enabled the production and success of such specific representational techniques that were quite different from the prevalent conventions of 40's melodrama. I shall now elaborate more on this aspect of audio-visual structuring that lends a distinctive symbolic import to the representations of romance within the familial domain. I would argue that such stylistic approaches to narrativise the 'social world' have a role to play in the production of a distinctive reception mode for Indian film melodrama. Discussion of a few examples such as *Garmil* (Niren Lahiri, 1942) or *Jiban Sangini* (Gunamay Bandopadhyay, 1942) might help us to pinpoint the ways in which internal dynamics of domestic spaces in a modern context were visually mapped and rendered comprehensible through use of specific narrative codes. As I mentioned earlier, it is important to remember that a considerable

number of artistes and technicians who were responsible for lending ‘romantic socials’ their specific shape in the 50’s were also involved in the production of conventional melodramas in the earlier decade. The reason for choosing *Garmil* from a set of similar variations of a standard melodramatic theme, is based on the fact that it is directed by the same Niren Lahiri, who would go on to produce successful films in the next decade with Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen separately (*Sankar Narayan Bank, 1956, Prithibi Amare Chai , 1957*) and as a duo (*Indrani,1958*). In the course of their long career, both Lahiri and Bandopadhyay, had involved themselves in both sophisticated and relatively cruder productions of conventional *historicals, mythologicals* and *socials* (eg.Niren Lahiri : *Mahakabi Kalidas,1942, Baro Ma,1957 , Tansen, 1958. and* Gunamay Bandopadhyay : *Sati Simantini ,1950, Ma O Chele,1954*) in addition to ‘romantic films’. Filmmakers and screenplay writers like Ajoy Kar, Bibhuti Laha et al who would come to be characterized as major stalwarts of the more ‘evolved’ form of film melodrama, were all working as screen writers, art directors or assistant directors for conventional mainstream *socials* in the earlier decade. In fact, writers and directors like Nripendrkrishna Chattopadhyay and Ajoy Kar who worked as screen writer and cinematographer respectively for *Garmil*, went on to be directly associated in the production of major Uttam-Suchitra hits like *Sapmochan* (1956) or *Harano Sur*(1957).

The critically acclaimed and popular social *Garmil* opens with a familiar trope of conflict between two antagonistic social ideologies that historically assumed a public dimension in the wake of colonial interventions and attendant

transformations in the indigenous social domain. In film critic Rajat Ray's words, "the main subject of the film is the conflict between 'sanatana' (traditional scriptural) values and medieval notions with modern Western civilizational values for eg. rationalism"(Ray 2001, 77). He goes on to argue: "...but, of course, this conflict was not treated with any seriousness. Everything was presented with the background for a love story with a happy ending. As usual there were sufficient number of songs..."(Ray 2001, 77).⁸ As a careful analysis of the text shall soon reveal, the relation of the romantic plot to rest of the narrative elements and melodramatic motifs is far more complex than Ray seems to assume. The narrative opens by posing a conflict between two forms of education: the modern, liberal kind and the traditional indigenous form under threat in a contemporary context. On the one hand the newly evolved urban University format lays its claims on the younger generation under the influence of colonially induced rich aristocrats in favor of modernization. While the slowly outdated mode of knowledge based on faith in traditional wisdom and the *sashtras*, is represented as an authentic cultural weapon to counter the flood of impending modernity. In the film the two patriarchal authorities represent the two opposing perspectives on the ideal moral fiber of the emerging national community, while their respective sons seem to have taken refuge in the contrasting camps. The narrative moves on to develop further systematic oppositions such as: modernity/tradition, industry/culture, factory /temple, rationality/faith, religious ignorance/unquestioning devotion, romantic love/arranged marriage etc., which are to be resolved in due course through a series of coincidences and twists of fate. However the process of resolution quite clearly

⁸ Ray also points out the film was awarded as the best feature of the year by Bengal Film Journalists Association (BFJA) and Bengal Film Viewers Association, thereby certifying its commercial success and populist appeal.

favors the secular discourse by revealing pragmatic deficiencies in the forces symbolizing tradition and thereby attempting to prove such discourses as incompetent for negotiating modern mandates of liberal humanism. It is the character of the secular 'Professor' who comes to the aid of the disillusioned lovers and consequently helps the couple in eloping only to bring them back to stall a forcible arranged marriage. But even after the 'Professor' attempts to balance the seemingly antagonistic forces by arguing for a need for cooperation from both sides, the narrative events that follow clearly hint at fundamental intrusions into the space of tradition which can be negotiated at best, but not wholly resisted anymore.⁹ However there is another level where the film formally foregrounds and orchestrates such complex narrative conflicts.

Towards the beginning of the film, the protagonist Robin, the industrialist's son but an ardent disciple of the traditional patriarch Madhav Thakur, approaches and joins the family busy chanting devotional reveries in front of their home deities Radha-Krishna. An interesting cinematic rendition of symbolic mapping within a social space is evident in this song sequence which is a sophisticated representative of many similar audio visual arrangements in the 40's and 50's social melodrama. This sequence might help us in engaging with the evolution of formal features of the melodramatic form in a specific historical context. Here we can observe a systematic schematization of elements that foregrounds the intrusion of modernity into the domestic realm and the relevant positioning of subjects with respect to

⁹ The failure of traditional wisdom to penetrate the surface of contemporary reality resulting in misrecognition and oppressive marital bonds operates as one of the subplots in the text. It is the same 'Professor' who recognizes the inner human core of the decadent, alcoholic husband of the elder daughter and thereby helps in facilitating moral reform and conjugal bliss.

such elements. The debate around Peter Brook's seminal work on the historical and formal evolution of European melodrama has helped in critical rethinking about various aspects of melodrama as a cinematic condition (Gledhill 1987; Cook, Bratton and Gledhill 1994). Melodrama has been theoretically posited as a condition of signification with its own historically evolving parameters that cuts across various, often-irreconcilable generic tendencies. An understanding of such parameters requires us to move beyond the level of narrative content to a consideration of how such content is formally displayed within and across shots or sequences. It is precisely at the level of audio-visual mapping that the melodramatic form places its world view, thereby drawing the spectator into a specific relationship with the scene portrayed; a relation often very different from structures of spectation in 'realist' narration but not necessarily opposed to it in any totalizing sense.¹⁰

Now let us illustrate some specific aspects of such a mode of signification with the instance at hand. The song sequence in *Garmil* begins with a frontal shot of the Radha-Krishna idol and then begins to formally elaborate the devotional situation in relation to the dynamics of the social space which frames it. The song is question, a devotional reverie dedicated to the household Lord Krishna and his lover Radha, ('*dole piyal sakhe jhulona, dole Shyam Srimoti dujonai*'), is a variant of a traditional *kirtan* form suitably modified to mimic relatively casual romantic

¹⁰ However I do not wish to engage in an equally problematic and holistic defense of the resistant aspects of film melodrama. Rather one has to investigate melodramatic conditions in their historical context to flesh out their articulation of social history in formal terms. Often this relationship is strained and dialogic in nature, engaging with other forms to represent the social universe in ways that might require effective critique.

tunes often used in popular cinema. It is significant that the deity in *Garmil* is not merely a household idol of Krishna but also functions as a trope ('*Radharaman*') around which the discourse of 'tradition' proceeds. Here, the image of the amorous couple Radha-Krishna has been carefully chosen over other deities because it facilitates the lighthearted deflection in tune and thereby serves to locate intimacy as a trope to illustrate broader thematic conflicts. The opening frontal shot instead of cutting into reverse shot of singing devotees slowly tracks back to reveal the respective positions of the Brahmin patriarch and his two daughters engaged in singing on the right side of the frame.¹¹ The movement is repeated with slight variation a little later; now a rightward pan stopping to frame each of the sisters individually follows the frontal shot. The camera movements and editing of spatial blocks serves to divide up the world of household religion and social relations into symbolic fragments. There is a conscious attempt to signify the difference between the subjects in terms of their respective approach to the devotional event. The patriarch and the elder daughter are represented in a solemn, contemplative posture that reflects an internalization of normative mandates of the domestic devotional

¹¹ Here the editing obviously adopts a significantly different norm than the usual way of representing such sequences in a *devotional* genre. As has been often commented upon, a characteristic devotional sequence usually follows logic of *decoupage* that tends to divide the space of the deity and the social space of the devotees into two separate conceptual domains often through 180° SRS cuts. This method which was prevalent in early Indian films like D.G Phalke's *Sri Krishna Janma*, continues to be in vogue in later variants of the genre. However, one of the consequences of the development of '*socials*' in Indian cinema was the problem of depiction of secular space riddled with iconic configurations of various kinds, a problem which has been dealt with Indian filmmakers in engrossing ways depending upon the context they have worked in. Alongside evident Hollywood influences in development of continuity narration the melodramatic condition also dealt with the formal arrangements that could bring contemporary social meanings into play within the frame. (Rajadhyaksha 1994)

affair as an instance of traditional approach to everyday life. However, as the camera lingers on the younger daughter and heroine Malati's face, her expression gradually changes from a mildly somber one to one signifying frivolous mirth. Her glance towards the idols to the right of her is followed by a seemingly suggestive downward look at the direction of the door, thereby cuing an imminent intrusion in advance. Almost immediately a male voice joins in the melody and the camera swiftly cuts to a frame depicting Robin in a Western attire singing at the door. Simultaneously the song turns into a duet gaining progressively playful dimensions and draws attention towards the impending romantic liaison. The following frame proceeds to organize the formative signifiers into a clearly defined structure. Now the depth of focus increases and the camera is placed over the shoulder of Malati, whose look is directly addressing Robin's glance, while the patriarch is seated in the middle of the frame looking rightward at the direction of the deities and lost in his own meditative mode. In fact the operative split at this point visually displays the network of social relations that have been elaborately foregrounded by the series of preceding formal moves.

As this new set of mappings form a kind of complex stasis the song ends and Robin is invited inside by the patriarch who seems unaware of the romantic situation at hand. Robin's verbal articulation of his hesitation to violate the sanctity of religious space by his inappropriate attire seems to be suggestively signifying his problematic location in between two antagonistic value systems.¹² The

¹² Robin's hesitation seems to work as a displacement of his guilt owing to his inappropriate feelings towards Malati in the context of his mentor Madhav Thakur's sanctified universe. Thus his

spectator is now implicated into the set of symbolic conflicts that would mobilize the narrative events towards their resolution. However the melodramatic motifs through their multiple layers of operation have already signified the structure of intrusion in the form of impending romance before it is concretely articulated as a narrative event in the next sequence where the clandestine attraction between Robin and Malati becomes explicit. One distinctive feature of melodramatic intervention is that it opens out conduits of narration that run parallel to the progression of the central plot, to work at multiple levels often involving a double articulation of formal elements such as mis-en-scene or dialogue track. Dialogue and other textual signifiers under such conditions come to acquire a capacity of referring to manifold spheres both inside and outside the diegetic universe. A classic example appears at the climax of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1959) where the mother Radha and confronts her wayward, tyrant son Birju when he is abducting a village bride. At the very outset, the signifiers in the form of their names 'Radha' and 'Birju', have already registered the excessive affection between mother and younger son on a pathological plane.¹³ The eroticism becomes all the more evident when Birju confidently claims that Radha cannot possibly kill her. At the level of the diegetic world the requirement of a sacrificial act on Radha's part refers to an idealist resolution leading to the shooting of her son to defend the honor of the village/Nation. While at another level there is a gradual development

modern attire here strangely serves to signify his submerged secular subjectivity despite his vocal allegiance to the cause of conserving traditional values.

¹³ The erotic dimensions in the mother-son relation become palpable at many points in the narrative. Birju is a derivation from Brij, one amongst many popular names that Krishna as a mythological figure acquires. In the film the younger son's adolescent behaviour refers to the popular tales spun around a young Krishna, for eg. in the mischief sequence where Birju flirts and teases village belles on their way to fetch water from the pond. Madhava Prasad explicitly refers to such dimensions of multiple articulations in his work on Hindi popular cinema (Prasad 1998).

of a certain symbolic illegitimacy triggered by the mutilation and consequent disappearance of the husband/father, which requires to be dealt through a similar enactment of violence. Hence the dialogue operates at these dual levels thereby displacing the erotic charge onto the diegetic domain so as to necessitate Radha's sacrificial act in order to dissolve the incestuous connotations.

Before continuing my elaboration of the formal features of 40's *socials* let me make a few theoretical observations following from the earlier discussion of *Garmil*. In his description of the melodramatic form Geoffrey Nowell Smith's argues that melodrama:

...as artistic representation it does not 'reflect' or 'describe' social or psychic determinations. Rather it 'signifies' them. This act of signification has two aspects: on the one hand it produces a narrated or represented content, the life of people in society; and on the other hand it narrates and represents to and from a particular standpoint or series of standpoints, 'subject positions' (Nowell Smith 1993b, 190).

Given in an excerpt, this formulation seems a bit tenuous, particularly the presumed difference between the fact of 'description' and that of 'signification'. 'Description' as a representational practice is part and parcel of the process of signification. Analytical work on theories of representation have clarified the idea that a given medium cannot 'describe' events, states of mind or social realities without employing a range of signifying practices and cultural codes. Therefore the pertinent question in this context would center upon those specific set of procedures that distinguishes a melodramatic condition from other forms of

signification. In other words what are the terms and conditions that give melodrama as a signifying practice its distinctive quality and mode of reception?

One could argue that under melodramatic conditions the narrative enactment operates through a process of 'showing/demonstrating' (keeping the aural aspect in mind) rather than 'telling', both of which are forms of narrative description. In fact Peter Brooks, in his discussions on structures of melodramatic imagination, draws attention to this aspect of representation where a notion of 'staging' takes on larger proportions than is implied by concrete instances of theatrical enactment. He argues that instead of contemplative analysis of symbolic depth melodrama prefers to display the complex network of connections and interactions that permeate the narrative universe and in the very process foregrounds the broader, cosmic significances working beyond narrative events (Brooks 1987, 28). It is perhaps in this context that one can comprehend the various constitutive functions of music in popular cinema beyond its appeal to traditional modes of entertainment. Background music and particularly songs, like comic interludes, are often categorized as modes of disruption (though not in a self-conscious, modernist sense) typical of the mixed variety of narration practiced in Indian popular cinema. Scholars have elaborately discussed the development of iconic configurations occurring at interstices of classical continuity codes or about song-dance routines and excessive display of affect as representations of psychic energy repressed under patriarchal determinations (Rodowick 1987; Vasudevan 2000 a). However over and above implicit psychic symbolism or unintended disruption of continuity codes, songs can also have a range of narrative functions

that constitute significant aspects of melodramatic work. As the analysis of the song sequence from *Garmil* shows us, it is possible to argue that the song here serves a specific narratorial function by way of interlinking and orchestrating the various image formations around the diegetic space. It does not merely comment on psychic states but rather designates them with reference to itself. The domestic space becomes vibrant with various emerging tonalities and semantic configurations as the editing reveals striking difference in gazes, postures and expressions of each subject in relation to the melodious event. In a melodramatic context, the primary function of the cinematographic apparatus is to divide and organize the frame into zones of meaning and then literally demonstrate those condensations of meaning that it seeks to achieve. The narrative significance of the earlier discussed sequence deals with introduction of a set of characters in a representative domestic setting. At one level the economy and arrangement of shots perform this function by establishing a strict rationality in terms of spatial configurations or screen directions. However in the very process it also seeks to demonstrate subjects as representing specific orders of meaning rather than merely flesh and blood characters. The song sequence does not treat the devotional event or the phenomena of romantic attraction as 'slice of life' representations, which furthers understanding of characters in terms of their socio-historical location. In that case a useful conversation sequence could have been devised where pieces of incidental dialogue and expressions could have conveyed the attraction between protagonists and the location of characters involved. On the contrary, here each shot draws out certain symbolic allusions by relating narrative elements within and across the frame. The camera specifies Malati's facial expression as bearing certain meanings only in context of its differential relation to others within the narrated

event at hand. It does not merely frame but rather the movement explicitly draws the spectatorial look to confront a particular set of meanings under production. In other words a merely rational decoupage of the space would not render the symbolic configurations comprehensible in terms of the broader thematic conflicts.

To clarify the specificities of such a mode of description let us compare it with an instance of meaning production that uses movements across frames in a different manner. Consider the sequence in Ray's *Aparajito* (1957), which precedes Sarbajaya and Apu's return to the village from their temporary shelter in an abundant household of an acquaintance in Kolkata. Sarbajaya is in the foreground of the frame, calling out for Apu, who suddenly walks through the background with a hookah in hand presumably prepared as an accompaniment for post lunch siesta of the householder. The camera cuts to a close up of a visibly anxious Sarbajaya while the audio track plays the sounds associated with a train journey. Thereafter Ray cuts to a shot of mother and son inside a train where the tune associated earlier with Apu's village plays to convey their decision to return back to their rural background. The fragment is often cited as an apt example of the use of temporal ellipsis in narrative cinema but my concern here is with way in which a complex range of meanings are evoked through the short sequence. One major narrative significance of this episode in the city concerns Sarbajaya's dawning realization that their dislocation and economic dependence on urban landed bourgeoisie can have detrimental consequences for Apu's moral growth. However this rather complex conclusion is articulated by means of a simple editing strategy where the narrative details and expressions are assumed to function as

logical premises. Once such information is intellectually comprehended, the conclusion would follow logically thereby justifying the ellipsis as a methodical economy of narration. The formal devices do not play a demonstrative role in validating the set of differential meanings; neither strives at producing semantic condensations that allude to broader symbolic themes. It is evidently a specific process of description that marks off this realist-modernist endeavor as a distinctively different mode of narration, often coupled with reformist zeal to ward off excesses inherent in the melodramatic intrusions (Ray 1993, 1982; Dasgupta 1980). To put it in more theoretical terms, the melodramatic conventions of framing /editing and the concurrent production of meaning seeks to foreground and render the phenomenon of spectation and cognition simultaneous. One can argue that the ‘moment of framing’ and the ‘moment of cognition’ are made to coincide under such conditions through the intervention of various formal devices. In the realist articulation the moment of cognition follows intellectually from the act of description, a feature often forwarded as the defining characteristic of aesthetic achievements in modern film narration, albeit in a different theoretical language. The distinction lies in the conventional usage of information and detail in the two processes of narration.

Thus one amongst myriad functions of melodramatic interventions is to facilitate certain forms of visualizations as a way of mapping the social universe in terms its constituent elements in conflict with each other. What one often misses out under the tussle of academic arguments on film aesthetics is the fact that artists in mainstream cinema were not merely attempting to formulate a mode of

economic storytelling through their borrowals from Hollywood continuity narration, folk, popular or mass entertainments like *jatra*, theatre or pulp fiction. Rather they were seeking to reformulate and use these heterogeneous formal conventions to articulate representations of social reality in accordance to a different logic of narration. The economy of Indian film melodrama, if any, lies in its formulation of processes for visualizing the social conflicts as consequential developments of colonial encounter. Evidently, in cinema, 'vision' functions as a definitive term for channelising expressions and eliciting public debate over social issues. But here 'vision' takes a specific connotation as a metaphor for semantic over determination. It is not sufficient to simply narrate but to be able to render the domain of modern social relations visually and symbolically palpable. However, as has been observed frequently, such symbolizations bear no loyalty to academic realism, notions of verisimilitude or representations of actually existing economic and political conflicts. Its primary function is not to analyze but produce and visualize social imaginaries through a certain set of representational techniques.¹⁴ All the stylistic features and theoretical aspects discussed above have some relevance for narrative articulation and visual structuration of romance in the context of Bengali film *socials*. As I pointed out earlier, the romantic theme in the case of *Garmil* is located as one amongst many narrative tropes that serve to elaborate on the representations of social dichotomies elicited by the arrival of modernity as a familiar cultural frame. Thus the romantic plot signifies the extent and logic of such symbolic conflicts rather than rather than a site of narrative

¹⁴ This is the precise source of lament for critics like Rajat Ray who are more concerned with the efficacy and political purity of film narratives rather than processes of meaning making. For similar arguments on Uttam-Suchitra films see the range of articles collected in *Chitrabhaash*, Uttam Kumar Special Issue (Mitra and Mukhopadhyay 2001).

conflicts in its own right. Perhaps one could argue that such melodramatic conventions allow for romance to 're-present' or stand in for other ideas but not 'represent' itself as a discourse in relation to allied conceptual domains. Here lies the reason why a single resolution is sufficient for tying up all the narrative threads, often in the form of staging of marital rituals as a performative closure. It should be noted that in this context, representations of marriage as a ritual mostly signify an effective negotiation of threats posed by elements of modernity; as a token instance to reemphasize that traditional community ties can still function as social cement despite the significant transformations in public and private spheres.

However, the heteronomous position of the romantic sub-plot is more structural in nature rather than an aspect of narrative content. Thus, structurally, the romantic sub-plot remains subordinate to the overall narrative thrust; this does not preclude the elaboration of the love relation at the level of content. It is to be noted that the film has quite a few sequences devoted to personal communication between the central couple, beyond any explicit supervision of patriarchal authority within the diegetic space. In spite of the erotic potential accumulating in such spaces due to the development of romance, the possibility of a concrete intimate exchange is most often hindered or displaced to accommodate other discourses. In one of the sequences centering on the couple, the development of an intimate dialogue is immediately hindered by Robin's unforeseen deflection into exalted commentaries on his social and moral duties in opposition to the ideology represented by modern industrialist classes. It seems as if the male protagonist is unable to engage in an intimate exchange without seeking legitimacy from broader

configurations that oversee the personal domains under existing social conditions. On the other hand, rather than a subject with own capacities for romantic articulation, the woman is figured here as an ideological collaborator on the basis of her assumed loyalty to her object of desire. However the film, *Garmil* at various points also locates the romantic motivation and the feminine agency as points facilitating circulation of repressed erotic energy. In another sequence Robin arrives at the newly inaugurated classroom, intended to reinvent traditional forms of teaching, to find Malati as its sole inhabitant instead of expected students. Under her playful insistence Robin proceeds to rehearse a token speech directed at future students seemingly unaware of Malati's enticing interests. Quite interestingly the attempted monologue and possibilities of its transformation into dalliance is hindered by a melodramatic intervention in the form of screeching factory sirens, evident aural signs of industrialization against which their academic revolt is directed. The sound images obviously bring into play intrusive gaze of patriarchal authority as is explicitly hinted by the following revelation that the factories belong to his own father. A frustrated Robin proceeds to close all the windows to shut out the noise unaware of the fact that in the process he is simultaneously producing an intimate space, which is symbolically illicit for an unmarried couple under patriarchal norms. However, now the developing erotic overtones are warded off by Malati herself who opens the door thereby reinstating the normative mandates of traditional patriarchy. Once again the range of narrative signifiers here serves a dual function by coalescing the broader social conflicts and the problem of romance into major and minor variations of the same thematic issue, thereby rendering a separate narrative and formal treatment of the two themes unnecessary.

Problems of conjugality as a theme endemic to the family melodrama often have a variety of symbolic expressions. One of the usual modes involves deflection of social conflicts onto a spatial plane often using the city /country demarcation as a dominant trope in narrative structuration. Narrative elaborations of modernity in 40's *socials* would involve the encounter of elements of tradition with cultural aspects of modernity in a graphic urban context. However, the actual historical process of journey into the city would be dealt with only by implication. Here depictions of 'urbanity' would usually be restricted to a set of signs functioning as representations of bourgeoisie home and culture rather than the dynamic presence of the city at large. Rather the symbolic staging of such encounters would involve a narrativization of the female body and psyche as a site of conflict either in the process of modernization of the docile, traditional body (eg. Prafulla Ray's *Parsomoni*, 1939) or the reverse process (eg. Madhu Basu's *Subhalagna*, 1955). A third narrative trajectory entails a splitting of the two forces into two female characters along with narrativization and consequent negotiation of the male protagonist's moral dilemma in relation to them. Gunamay Badopadhyay's *Jiban Sangini* (1942) is a classic example of this tendency, which would hint at live-in relations and multiple marriages, which were quite popular as narrative themes before emerging debate and reformulation of the Hindu Marriage Act by 1955. As indicated in the earlier chapter, the legal and sociological transformations had a role to play in transformations of discourses on conjugality and dominant paradigms of its representations in the next decade, where as I shall argue, similar themes were submitted to significantly different narrative treatments.

Jiban Sangini deals with a regular theme of conflict between traditional lifestyles and new wave of urban modernity, endorsed by colonial culture and uncritically accepted by a section of the aristocratic or nouveau riche, decadent urban population. The text illustrates the problem at hand through two representative female figures enacting the dual and irreconcilable roles amidst contemporary cultural upheaval: the 'traditional wife' and the 'urban seductress'. The opening sequence serves to introduce the broad theme about an ongoing conflict of values that will predetermine the kind of social formation suitable for operating under changing circumstances ushered in by colonial modernity. Through a usual trope the conflict is initially floated as a customary debate between a set of characters within the story that either stand for or mediate between two antagonistic positions. Evidently the historical grid gets a bit cluttered as this point as the negative aspects of modernity are aligned with colonial cultural exploitation while questions of social reform and its positive effects are mostly suspended to make way for schematizing a 'morally legible universe'. It is important to note that the entire drama takes place within symbolic parameters of the 'rich, urban household'. Rather than operate through a parallel discourse between spaces of tradition and modernity using the country/city divide, the narrative focuses on staging modernity itself as a spectacle of audio-visual signs. In such instances of narrative structuration, inanimate objects, background sets and various elements of mis-en-scene whose formal functions are purely descriptive seem to take up a life of their own tending to stage a visual excess often overriding other narrative developments in character psychology and diegetic events. Such elaborate settings were quite in vogue through the Studio era particularly worked

on in New Theatres *socials* of 1930's, which often used sprawling spiral staircases, vast living rooms adorned with oil paintings or conspicuous symbolic decorations that seemed to foreground themselves simultaneously alongside significant narrative events. Setting in such contexts enunciates a narrative discourse by itself rather than assisting thematically dominant diegetic events. The array of objects starting from the smoking pipe, cutlery, dressing gowns, staircases, brass decorations, abstract oil paintings etc. seek to compete with the dramatic action and dialogues in an attempt to attract audience attention. The specific system of organizing details that the melodramatic form excels in, here serves as 'stand in' for the absence of the historical co ordinates of modernity in its urban incarnation.¹⁵

At the very beginning of the film we are confronted with devotional chores through a song sequence seeking to establish the elements of tradition that the first and socially legitimate wife brings into the space of modernity as an effect of her conservative upbringing. Here we clearly observe customary tendencies to establish visual tableaux implicating such sequences into a thematic elaboration rather than describing a concrete event. Meanwhile, as we enter the set of a fashionable restaurant along with the urbane patriarch (played by young Chabi Biswas) we are confronted with yet another peculiar attempt at spectacularization of modernity, which the physical objects had earlier hinted at. There is a longish

¹⁵ As an aside it is important to note that the maintenance of clear cut division between linear narrative and spectacular tableaux becomes all the more problematic in such contexts as the thematic amplifications deal with more than one form of spectacle (Brooks 1987).

and elaborate dance sequence depicted as an accompaniment to the dinner program which confronts the spectators in a distinctly tableaux like manner. The entire sequence involves very few cut away to subjective point of view, most of the dance event is presented quite frontally as an elaborate staging of the problematic zone of modernity that is under narrative scrutiny. The propensity to indicate Westernization through visual details results in a somewhat comical effect as the entire backdrop to the dance group seeks to reproduce the exterior of a Chinese pagoda while the seductive danseuse is adorned in unclassifiable attire with dark skin paint quite at odds with the set. However, the issue at stake here is visual foregrounding of the thematically envisaged and morally dubious zone of modernity as a spectacle and a simultaneous act of its consumption. At the domestic front the demure wife confronted with her inability to sustain the husband's attraction admits to a contemporary woman's necessity of acquiring features associated with modernity and romance to please a husband who is acquainted with myriad attractions of city life. This results in the entry of the girlfriend and eventual second wife into the traditional domestic space causing further conflicts and moral dilemmas. The resultant poisoning of the pious Hindu home is curiously depicted through encroachment of the space by aristocrat friends of the mistress as representatives of the demoralized urban culture. In fact the 'poisoning' is literally demonstrated when decadent idlers attempt to use alcohol as a medical remedy for the ailing homemaker who vehemently refuses and is saved from contamination at the last resort by a loyal servant. The rest of the narrative takes a predictable route through a series of events causing the patriarch to realize the negative aspects of modern waywardness that had attracted him so far and the positive values of self sacrifice, affection and domestic organization that sustains

an effectively peaceful conjugal life. Once again, both the conjugal and social conflicts posed at the beginning are resolved in one go.

The melodramatic form often devises a way of visualizing and discussing conceptual issues for which organized law and politics have a different formal approach. The narrative logic overseeing such a cinematic structure facilitates translation of socio-politically relevant issues into a range of interlinked visual signs striving towards narrative resolution. The problem at stake in *Jiban Sangini* concerns the ideal role of the feminine agency in the domain of conjugality and family life under the aegis of modern state apparatus. In the next decade a range of similar thematic problems would be taken up by film narratives but approached through significantly different conceptual schemes. Orchestration of melodramatic motifs would now operate under very different narrative principles in order to render visible social universes and the relational conflicts in the post-colonial context. The substantive specificity of 'new melodrama' lies in its structuration of the romantic element in relation to other social conflicts so as to develop a discursive dimension that problematizes the paradigmatic conventions of family melodrama.

Melodrama as Farce

Evidences of exhaustion and over usage of narrative tropes crop up in the guise of unintended tragedy or sometimes in the form of farce. Such indicators of impending requirement for structural innovation in narrative forms are in some

contexts imminent to the signifying practices, often resulting in unforeseen self reflexivity in the body of texts. The introduction of formal transformations family melodrama was historically preceded by sparse but unmistakable signs of decline, which in themselves can become occasions of interesting reflection. I would argue that such tendencies, however rare, do foreground the redundancy of certain melodramatic tropes and prefigure the need for re structuration to meet the demands of various transformations in the industrial as well as socio-political plane. From the early 50's onwards formal elaborations of themes centering on family, intimacy and romantic desire would begin to symbolize a new set of emerging conflicts that cannot be represented within the parameters of the earlier melodramatic format. In 1951 the same Gunamay Bandopadhyay (of *Jiban Sangini* repute) made another social melodrama titled *Ganyer Meye*, which charts very familiar grounds in terms of narrative content but simultaneously kicks off a reflexive commentary on melodramatic structure in Bengali *socials* of the 40's.

As the title suggests, the story indeed revolves around a 'village girl', brought up under conservative guidance of her strict Brahmin father. The narrative is set in motion by the poverty stricken priest's inability to find a suitable groom for his daughter and his attendant anxieties regarding public disapproval of keeping a matured woman unmarried at home. However, a somewhat exaggerated foregrounding of the operative melodramatic parameters seems to be endemic to the narrative structure on closer inspection. The film opens with a series of pans establishing a bucolic riverside which gives way to another series of location shots portraying village people and cowherds engaged in daily chores. All the

accumulating signifiers finally converge onto an idyllic studio setting where a representative rustic couple is shown engaging in romance with a song playing in the background. The excessively synthetic figures and background sets gives the sequence the cumulative effect of a farcical attempt to signify a 'rural ness', reminiscent of countless previous films in the earlier decade. Evidently, the collection of these symbolic elements and characters do not have any further presence or function at the plot level.

The imagined city as a locus of decadence, figures only in verbal references while the village continues to foreground itself through artificial sets and explicit symbolic markers. The idea of cultural duality between the rural and the urban is initially brought forward through the dialogue where the father insists that the daughter stay away from her childhood friend, Subho, owing to scandalous rumours regarding his current wayward lifestyle in the city. Following a predictable plot line, the father wishes to hastily marry off the daughter to an ill reputed, local widower, under the influence of scheming matchmakers in the neighborhood. In fact he immediately contradicts his own moral dictum as he claims that the alleged scandals regarding the groom are nothing but rumours spread by detractors. The contradiction elicits a series of explicit questions raised by the daughter regarding ideal qualities of a husband other than his traditional social standing. In fact the dialogue exchange clearly identifies certain modern traits such as moral character, sensitivity, progressive outlook as requisite for a good husband. The interrogative stance and its attendant allusions are clearly in stark contrast to the thematic parameters within which the film works with. As is

expected, the dutiful daughter conforms to patriarchal demands thereby accepting her fate but the sentence she perfunctorily uses is repeated in an exact manner in a sequence that follows shortly ('your wish is equivalent to God's will for me'), thereby adding a bizarre dimension to the diegetic situation. Such disparate moves underscore the cursory nature of compliance as a ludic testimony to melodramatic norms of performance and narrative structuring. I would like to insist that there is a strange sense of unarticulated desire that remains suspended throughout the sequence for want of a suitable narrative context.

The narrative now shifts to introduce Subho, the male friend in question who is portrayed as the rich aristocrat using his inherited wealth to buy sensual pleasures in the city. The reflexive proportions of the plot become pronounced as the narrative consciously uses various oft-repeated melodramatic situations only to comment or amplify on those. In an earlier sequence of emblematic confrontation between father and son the latter explicitly and unashamedly states his father's inability to disinherit him due to the same traditional attachments, which he is in the process of shunning. He argues, " you can disinherit if you wish to, but with my [*formal*] education I can secure some employment in the city [*to maintain my wayward lifestyle*] but you will still have to look forward to my physical presence for participation in the death rites (*sradha*) in order to liberate your soul according to traditional beliefs."¹⁶ On the other hand, the text simultaneously incorporates cruder elements that remain absent in conventional elaborations of the form. In a peculiar move the film leaves out the entire episode of the heroine Sashwati's

¹⁶ Tapan Ray Chowdhury has discussed the social and historical significance of such traditional hangovers that enables the protagonist's blackmailing (Ray Chowdhury 1999, 66-67).

marriage and suddenly lands the spectator in the midst of acute domestic discord and oppression, which was predetermined by the nature of the matchmaking. The husband is portrayed as a pot addicted, self-gratifying ruffian who bides his time with good for nothing friends and ill-treats his wife in collaboration with her in laws. What is strange is the extent and degree to which such physical and psychological oppression is represented along with profuse use of rustic slang that remain a representational taboo in conventional versions of such narrative. The bride contemplates suicide after being literally dragged and kicked out of the house following exaggerated rumors about her chance meeting with her long lost childhood friend in a village field. It is important to note that all customary tragic overtones are carefully avoided in the suicide sequence to block any sympathetic identification from the audience. On the contrary, immediately after being resisted from the attempted suicide by Subho, she unhesitatingly moves off with her friend to start life afresh in the city. Not only is such a turn of events unprecedented in Bengali *socials* but the script neatly avoids any moral justification necessary for validating such a radical decision on the part of a married village woman. Upon reaching the city, the plot shifts to another series of elaborate exaggerations of urban modernity and moral corruption. Subho is portrayed as an aristocratic playboy immersed in decadent dalliances with a range of opportunist urban women. Not surprisingly the sequence is introduced by a song sung by the protagonist's current love interest who glamorously moves all around the house to display an over abundance of flowers as symbols of seduction, vases, abstract paintings, sofa sets or up market designs of lamps and furniture. The expressions of characters as well as décor and other paraphernalia serve to accentuate the shallow but fashionable aspects of urban life.

Significant confirmations of the reflexive layers in the drama appear through a series of comic interludes that connects the entire narrative elaboration to enterprises of popular film industry. The comic sequences center around a self-proclaimed literary artist and aspiring screenwriter who tries to convince the aristocrat to invest in film production.¹⁷ On being questioned regarding his profession, the writer answers: "... I don't work ...just write crude dialogues here and there. Look sir, I just need an opportunity. I will prove the writer's importance in the film industry to those who believe that we cannot produce screen stories". The relationship between literary artists and film industry is a direct comment on the prevalent interconnection between two domains of artistic production, which had produced significant narrative transformations in the last decade. It is a well-known fact that a host of popular writers of progressive outlook including those involved with the *Kallol/Kali Kalam* group (Pameda Mitra, Sailajananada Mukhopadhyay, Gokulchandra Nag et al)¹⁸ had been associated with cinema in various capacities ranging from acting to film direction itself, during the 30's and early 40's (Biswas 1999). However, the reformist model of screenplay he refers is none other than the conventional melodramatic structure of the kind that the very text uses and simultaneously comments upon. At one point the writer joyfully claims that there is a need to incorporate novelty into the industry products, "...in the beginning some one will get lost; either the father, mother or one of the

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Bidhayak Bhattacharya, an eminent scriptwriter and filmmaker in the industry to be soon associated with a different variety of melodramas, plays this character.

¹⁸ In the second chapter, I have briefly referred to their literary works in the context of their resistance to mainstream literature in the 1920's.

children... a lot of such disappearances have been staged in Bengali cinema till date. But in my film something different will happen; *pishemoshai* [paternal aunt's husband] will get lost and shall elicit a range of emotional reactions from people all quarters." Apart from the humourous angle this statement also comments on the exhaustion of narrative situations and techniques which popular cinema was confronting during the period. It is evident that such ludicrous and superficial restructuring of plots will be detrimental to any ambitious aspirations for a 'new melodrama'. At another comic sequence on being asked by a young follower whether he would use trick shots in his list of classics yet to be filmed, the writer barks back, "...you are all immature ... I don't believe in the camera(techniques), all I want is to just tell the story in a linear fashion." It is well known mainstream melodramatic practice sought to use to use a range of cinematic techniques to achieve the opposite end; namely to visualize and foreground social conflicts parallel to the straightforward retelling of the same following a written script.

As it progresses the text transforms into sarcastic commentary on melodrama, although it does not seem to acknowledge the applicability of the criticism to its own main plot. One more telling moment occurs after the heroine has become a successful film actress after playing roles of the pious but oppressed rustic woman. There is a whole song sequence, which represents shooting of stereotypical 40's *social* where the heroine is depicted as an exploited character driven to begging in urban streets. As the heroine roams around begging followed by lecherous stares of bystanders across sets of an urban street, we suddenly

confront huge street posters of Gunamay Bandopadhyay's own *Jiban Sangini* among others. The self-conscious nature of the narrative enterprise is now explicitly acknowledged by drawing a parallel between the production of the traditional woman in the erstwhile era and the exhaustion of cinematic conventions that go into the construction of such signifying tropes. Debi Mukerjee who plays the heroine's role was a minor actress in the industry but her physical similarity to the heroine of *Jiban Sangini*, accentuated through use of make up and expressive postures cannot be mere coincidence.

The final sequence accumulates all the major characters in a single space through a series of outlandish coincidences, while sudden unmotivated transformations of characters makes an effective resolution of the woman's question quite impossible in itself. The husband's hooligan nature remains unreformed while the other available protagonist is made to reunite and settle with one of his erstwhile girlfriends. The ailing father has been socially ostracized in his village due to his daughter's scandalous acts and is thereby at a complete loss to resolve the problems with reference to any moral scheme available within the parameters overseeing the representational domain. At this point he suddenly resorts to a meditative contemplation and magically acquires a novel solution: the father and daughter have only one choice, which is to renounce the social world and simply move away. The closing image depicts the couple moving away into the background of a foliage-adorned set reminiscent of the village established in the opening shots.

Narrative reform in various guises was indeed a chosen trajectory for a range of filmmakers who continued to work with representations of the modern social domain in the next decade. However the notion of reform was neither homogenous nor did it coalesce with the sort of aesthetic and political demands some section of the Bengali intelligentsia were making with respect to film narratives. As I have emphasized earlier, the distinctive mode of narration that popular romances acquired was not exactly rooted in the modernist sensibility that seeks to use or subvert melodramatic conventions for a range of political ends, as is evident in Ritwik Kumar Ghatak's work, for example. The determining modalities of a new *socials* centering on romance involves a constructive adaptation and reworking of melodramatic conditions with respect to elements of classical continuity narration. The reformist -modernist and avant-garde modes on the other hand requires a fully blown, conscious confrontation with the agendas and structures of the developing realist aesthetics; a historical event that mainstream cinema has tidily avoided in its attempt to deal with popular representations of cultural upheavals in the post-colonial era.¹⁹ It is difficult to pinpoint whether the phenomenon I refer to originates from a need to devise commercial survival strategies in face of exhausting narrative conditions or due to sensitivity of historical changes in society. However it is important to stress that historical or sociological transformations do not determine narrative forms but rather influence the alterations in narrative paradigms. The concrete innovations in conceptual and

¹⁹ Wollen distinguishes between various forms of avant-gardes in International film history (Wollen 1975). The more recent and specific demarcation of modernist reformism and avant-garde sensibility in Third World Cinema owes a lot to writings of Paul Willemen (Willemen 1994, Pines and Willemen 1989).

structural domain would flow from desire for symbolic representations of identity and subjectivity in relation to perceived changes in social reality. It would perhaps not be a matter of great difficulty for artists such as Bandopadhyay and many others to see through and rework the conditions of production and reception after consciously working with a certain aesthetic mode for almost a decade.

Melodrama as Narratives of Urban Coupling

Recent work on melodrama has taught us to evaluate the complex network of interrelationships between its evolving formal conditions and the historical forces that shape them. It is with such a complex network of determinants in mind that one should approach the formal changes which led to the formulation of the ‘new *social*’, consequently ushering in an era of sustained box office successes and a highpoint in Bengali film history. I shall now undertake a formal analysis of some important constituent features of the ‘romantic’ variety of melodrama, to unravel the various symbolic manifestations that the bodies of these texts articulate. As pointed out earlier, the sparse critical literature available on the subject reflects convergence of opinion around the idea that the entire drift of narrative energy in 50’s ‘romantic films’ went into foregrounding of star personae through various sensationalist strategies. Rather than restricting ourselves to commercial rationale for the predominance of a star pair, a useful analysis of this epoch should lead us to examine the narrative strategies that made the set of artists and performers function in a way unprecedented in the preceding years. Perhaps it is important to emphasize the contrary argument that the stuff of romance must lie in the material

it is made of. The melodramatic conditions which mediated the representational transformations under process would lead to a specific kind of use of star personae once they were identified. It is a matter of historical record that this new form gained tremendous popular appeal, amidst a certain amount of backlashes and other equally popular trends. But the calculated investments of narrative energy simultaneously sought to construct a historically specific social imaginary in addition to a working box office formula. Stardom facilitates this process rather than over determining it. The cultural logic motivating a representational practice is most often internal to its conditions of production. Hence a precise understanding of the socio political implications of this far reaching, 'magical' appeal necessitate an examination of the structural elements of such cinematic practice which embody the clue to the broader symbolic dimensions of the romantic imagination.

I wish to argue that the specificities attending 50's romances do not stem so much from simple changes in plot lines or content as it does from the structural and formal elaborations of the romantic theme in relation to other elements in the narrative. Such specific transformations in audio-visual layering of thematic concepts involve a process that is beyond the control of particular artistes or any simplistic notion of foreign influences. The fact that the genre of *socials* partially mutates to generate a category of 'romantic' films is not the function of external sociological changes but rather hints at an attempt to translate a different social network of meanings into the parameters of melodramatic conventions. The release of *Agni Pariksha* in 1954 sparked off the

affirmative public response to romantic films but the sensational recognition emerged subsequently with the success of films like *Sapmochan* (Sudhir Mookherjee,1955) and *Sagarika*(Aragami,1956).The accumulating popularity retained its effect throughout the decade but began to fade by early 60's sixties roughly after the release of *Bipasha.*, although afterwards both Uttam and Suchitra went on to act in numerous films together and simultaneously worked out their individual acting careers. However I shall restrict myself approximately to this decade (1954-64) during which this romantic theme reaches its heights of popularity and begins to decline.

One of the rudimentary plot lines exploited in the 40's survives the decade to attain a more prominent expression. This is the often used thematic of tradition's own encounter with elements of modernity, in the guise of an experiential journey into the city. It involves a couple's romance in and with the urban although representation of urban space operates within certain formal restrictions, the significance of which shall be evident in due course. The primary feature of the romantic plot line is its attempt to delineate its secular structure of romantic passion concurrent with demands of restructuring social formations in the post-colonial era. However the cinematic expression of such a desire required the development of specific narrative strategies and articulation of mis-en-scene, which hint towards many other connotative dimensions. Moinak Biswas puts one element of such narrative structuring in precise terms:

It is possible to trace a shift in the *social*, beginning in the late 1930s, from iconic characterization to individuation of a historical kind. The process would be inflected towards a

negotiation of the citizen-self later on, in the post-independence period, when it became almost imperative for popular cinema to make sense of events and destinies in relation to state formation. Class and professions increasingly define characters (Biswas 2002).

However in addition to the historical necessity, artists in the industry consciously sought to exploit the romantic phenomena as a marketing device by distinguishing these products from 'standard' *socials*. The range of advertisements for *Sagarika* preceding and following its release on February 1, 1956, explicitly adapted such strategies to foreground the unique nature of the film simultaneously hinting at some important narrative specificities as well. On 1st January, 1956, the English language daily *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* boasted the 'Big Deluxe Release' of *Sagarika* with the peculiar caption: "Suchitra-Uttam meet in it... In a deep sea of sky high romance!!" Interestingly, through the month of January, the producers changed the print advertisement visuals to re conceptualize the romantic imagery in different manners. One poster which appeared in the middle week of January had a picture of the stars as a part of medical student trio with stethoscopes round their necks thereby locating the romance in the upcoming coeducational institutions related to modern professions, which were emerging all across the nation. Such posters, some of which specifically mentioned the Bengal Medical College, would be complemented by quite curious captions such as: "A dose of heart warming and blood boiling romance will guard you against the biting cold and damp weather"(*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Feb.5, 1956). In a similar tone the directorial group 'Aragami' was described as a 'new team of youthful technicians'. I would argue that the term 'technicians' rather than artists or filmmakers, emphasizes the idea of production of a new romantic imaginary rooted

in and aimed at a younger generation of audience as opposed to the earlier ‘*socials*’ which were majorly marketed as wholesome family entertainment.²⁰ As the release date approached the blurbs became more and more sensational: ‘an oncoming surge of sweeping emotions’, ‘biggest romantic event yet’ or more concretely ‘Suchitra Uttam will make your pulse beat faster’. Most of these posters would have a two-shot freeze of the couple while some were adorned by corny poetry commenting on the visual images. On 6 February, 1956, *Dainik Basumati* accompanies the poster with arbitrary phrases like:

- a new honeycomb for those eagerly desirous of the pictorial form:
- . in an unprecedented painting of Suchitra Uttam romance
- . in an ambrosial birth of musical nectar
- . in an enchanting embrace of gripping drama

It is to be noted that by the time *Sagarika* released the duo had already acted in about 10 films of which some were overwhelmingly successful. But still, as the posters imply, there is a vigorous attempt to eroticize the romantic pair focusing on exclusivity and enchanting quality of the romance to be depicted. Such exoticism therefore is surely not only a retroactive construction of contemporary nostalgic viewers but also a conscious element in construction of the screen romance.

But parallel to this campaign ran another strand that conceptualized the romance in a slightly different manner. This set of advertisements worked on the

²⁰ In the same year a newspaper campaign for a currently playing family social titled *Sinthir Sindur* (Ardhendu Sen) runs as: “the life saga of a pious housewife of Bengal has pleased audiences of all classes *Dainik Basumati*, Dec 3, 1956).

tropes of 'blindness and vision' relating these to the notion of a 'journey'. From January 27 on wards, one print ad which ran in the Bengali daily *Jugantar* features Suchitra's eyes in extreme close up, while just below lies Uttam in a couch with bandaged eyes. The caption refers to a popular song in the film through a poem which talks about a journey across 'seven seas and thirteen rivers', a phrase borrowed from traditional Bengali fairytale, referring to fantastic journeys into uncharted and exotic territories often involving sea journeys. Interestingly the image of the couple's close ups held within the painted backdrop of a ship seems to articulate the idea of a romantic journey to uncharted spaces and zones. It is to be noted that this move away from cognizable social space was tied up with the trope of vision that would be the defining point of the Uttam Suchitra romance in the narrative of *Sagarika*.

Sagarika belongs explicitly to the sub genre of new romantic films, which were set in contemporary urban Bengal. Like *Garmil* the narrative opens by a display of an urban and modern institution of knowledge. However, while in *Garmil* such representation functioned as a symbolic domain within a web of oppositions, in *Sagarika* the narrative drive is to elaborate the concrete social dynamics of such institutions and its social consequences. Quite predictably the medical college is geographically specified through location shots before we enter the social world of medical practitioners under training. The story begins with a budding albeit initially one-sided attraction between young doctors, Arun and Sagarika, in the college hospital. There is a clear narrative investment in spelling out the social implications of co education and to represent such public spaces as

erotically charged. The narrative of romance is set forward by a situational ‘collision’ which triggers off some passionate feelings on the part of the male protagonist, thereby stimulating him to write private poems dedicated to the lady colleague.²¹ The introduction of ‘collision’ as a narrative event is not accidental, as it may seem. On the one hand it signifies an organization of social space that implies an assumption of equality and competitiveness in principle, alongside the looming physical proximity and possibility of attraction between the sexes. On the other hand the trope of ‘touch’ signifies the general apprehension that under transformed conditions of public mobility, physical contact can become one of the elements of social encounter and redefine intimate relationships in previously unfamiliar ways. The fact obviously bears problematic implications for traditional barriers of class, caste etc. over and above the obvious erotic connotations that it entails. As if to spell out the premonitions already looming over the diegetic space, in the very next sequence the stand-in patriarch in the form of college principal spells out the possible indiscipline which could propagate under existing systems of co education if students did not imbibe proper moral attitudes. The attendant moral dilemma is then exploited to construct the love-hate relationship in progress between the academically bright students. The notion of ‘touch’ as an intimate act is again brought into play later in the film through other narrative motivations.

The protagonist portrayed by Uttam Kumar is as usual an aspiring professional of rustic origin, who stays under the patronage of his father’s rich friend in the city. A flashback sequence in the beginning explains his tragic past

²¹ The poem that inspires the doctor is of course none other than Tagore’s ‘*Sagarika*’

and current aspirations thereby also locating the absence of patriarchal authority through death of the father and transfer of authority to a meek acquaintance who is visibly ineffective in overseeing modern social transactions. In the urban household the landlord's daughter is shown to be romantically inclined towards an oblivious hero. On learning about the protagonist's desire for Sagarika she plants a fake letter on her desk that eventually reaches the principal's desk as a proof of his flirtatious behavior. For a moment the morally upright principal attempts to stand in as the repressive patriarchal authority resulting in cancellation of reference letter for his approaching training trip to England on disciplinary grounds. Quite expectedly, Sagarika's late realization of her mistake elicits pangs of guilt as well as remorse and thereafter the narrative shifts focus. In order to fulfill his academic ambitions the hero is forced to take a loan from a rich village landowner by promising to marry his uneducated daughter whom he has never met. While he is busy in training abroad the anxious father in law, who by melodramatic coincidence turns out to be family friend of Sagarika, requests her to initiate his daughter into modern manners in preparation for her conjugal life with an England returned doctor. The bride to-be gets obligated to exchange letters with the prospective groom, a task that proves too much for her. She asks Sagarika to write the letters on her behalf while she succumbs to the decadent charms of modern life and duly gets involved in a fling with an upstart family friend. The hero, unaware of these developments, gets captivated and charmed by the romantic letters, which seem to positively heal his injured emotional state owing to the earlier scandalous incident. At this complex point he is forced to return home following an accident that renders him temporarily blind. Since the actual bride has by now become quite a wayward character and her arrogant father rejects the alliance with a blind

groom, Sagarika with help of their common college friend Kedar takes it upon herself to nurse him. But due to current circumstances she has no way other than pretending to be his betrothed to avoid further psychological stress for the patient. She promises to vanish from the scene once his vision is restored. But the text exploits this narrative situation to tease out meanings that serve to disturb the moral economy of the social melodrama. The final sequence of *Sagarika* occurs on the fateful day of eye operation, where following a successful surgery, Sagarika runs away leaving the original bride-to-be to claim her due right. But on restoration of vision Arun gets visibly disturbed on being unable to find the right person at his side. When the doctor anxiously approaches Sagarika claiming that he might again lose his sight due to shock Sagarika returns. The film abruptly ends then and there with the frantically passionate couple in a deep embrace.

I shall forward my arguments about the symbolic nature of the ‘embrace’, a regular feature of such dramas, at a later point when I discuss the issue of narrative resolution in more detail. This extended recounting of the plot is justified by the nature of observations I have to make which requires taking note of points that, in conventional *socials*, would be a matter of minor detail. At the very outset the noteworthy point is that the complex plot is sustained for the elaboration of the romance, which is the major and only theme of the story. All the other characters and events within the diegetic universe serve to aid or provide positive or negative instigations for developing the actual romance between the protagonists. Secondly there is an astounding absence of representative patriarchal authority other than the short rehearsal by the college principal whose action actually serves to intensify

the budding affair rather than effectively repressing it. While the social legitimacy of Sagarika's actions is open to question, the only person who had sanctioned Sagarika's emotional resolve is their common friend, Kedar, who bears no significant social authority at the level of narrative or in the network of existing social structures. Thus we arrive at a substantive specificity of narrative structure in the new *social*: the romantic relation does not appeal for any legitimacy from either the traditional or the modern social authority. Such authorities are either absent resulting in portrayal of either or both protagonists as orphan (eg. *Bipasha*, *Pathe Holo Deri*, *Shilpi*); or else the existing authority in question is rendered psychologically weak so as to be ineffective as moral locus (*Maraner Pare*, *Agni Pariksha*, *Harano Sur*). Most often as in *Sagarika*, the nature of consenting authority happens to be of a social status that signifies lenience rather than discipline (brotherly neighbor in *Bipsaha*, common friend in *Sagarika* both played by the same actor Jiben Bose, a docile and cooperative father in *Harano Sur*). In addition to this appears a significant transformation as the romance in question ceases to be a sub plot and occupies center stage. To put the observation in more theoretical terms, the romantic theme has no broad moral framework to negotiate other than its own social trajectory. It ceases to function as an illustration of broader conflicts whose resolution would coalesce with its own destiny; it now acquires a novel symbolic destiny in its own right.

In fact the plot of *Sagarika* incorporates both the lines of romantic engagement that its film posters had referred to. The first half tries to locate the story of coupling in a specific historical setting consciously focusing on the

modern world of aspiring professionals to which women had gradually started gaining access. The economy of this domain is charted out in melodramatic terms through the display of youthful dalliance and segregation of youthful medicos from the grim ethical order represented by the principal in his attempt to discipline the unruly possibilities represented by the system of modern coeducation. As is evident, the principal's disproportionate reaction to the allegation against Arun eventually serves to facilitate a passionate bond between the protagonists through a set of coincidences. It is to be remembered that letter writing, which is used as a trope for re-figuration of the affair, performs an ambiguous symbolic function in the narrative. The mail correspondence facilitates a development of privacy, which seems to be unattainable within the social domain while at the same time ascribes a problematic dimension to the affair through the attendant crisis of identity.²² On the other hand, throughout the narrative the romantic affair retains a socially illegitimate dimension in one sense or the other, rendered all the more explicit when the blind hero returns. The blindness to which the film posters refer legitimizes a physical intimacy that would be otherwise unrepresentable on screen given the moral codes overseeing film *socials*. The fragile and dependant status of the hero, an almost regular feature of most Uttam-Suchitra romances, here serves

²² The trope of letter writing has been often used to attain significant narrative effects in Bengali novels in the context of intimacy. Rabindranath Tagore's use of the same trope time and again focuses on the transgressive and disruptive possibilities of the phenomenon in stories like *Chokher Bali* and *Nastaneer*. Letter writing was a conventional channel of communication amongst educated married couple in 19th century where existing social conditions often demanded temporary separation for considerable periods. In fact the phenomenon continued to be a popular form of initiating and developing courtship in urban and semi urban Bengal and posed a transgression of the alleged conservative impulse to discipline amorous encounters. However its symbolic status has always been a zone of contest in the cultural history as it simultaneously involves a private affective register and publicly accessible technological forms.

as a pretext to articulate the sensual bonding.²³ Once the mentally disturbed blind hero is brought into the common friend's house and left under Sagarika's care, his physical world starts being literally re inscribed through her active effort. The sequences inside the house elaborately deal with the protagonist coming to terms with his temporary deficiency through a sensitization of his other sense perceptions, a situation that predictably requires an intimate physical proximity with his lover cum nurse. Thus the trope of 'recognition through touch' acquires several connotative layers as it extends to encapsulate an affective psychic domain vis-à-vis the inevitable physical intimacy. On being warned about impending scandals as a result of her constant social and physical proximity to a bachelor, Sagarika asserts, "I have the courage to bear the burden of scandals. Why do you fear scandals so much?" The ironic question implicitly refers to a characteristic rupture in masculinity signified in many similar narrative situations in the series of romantic films where the female protagonist assumes initiatives and responsibilities due for a conventional hero at the cost of a feminization of the male counterpart and also of the narrative universe (eg. *Maraner Pare*, *Harano Sur*, *Indran*, *Bipasha*).

In fact such a strand of characterization spills over to more conventional *socials* of the period with Uttam as lead, where romance does not operate as the

²³ Biswas elaborately refers to this phenomenon and relates it to the post-colonial subject's initiation to vernacular citizenship. Even Nag's reference to the issue is more about the complementary couple filling the lack in other thereby correcting the patriarchal imbalance (Biswas 2002, Nag 1998).

central plot.²⁴ At a sequence near the finishing end of *Debotro* (Haridas Bhattacharya, 1955) which primarily deals with problems of inheritance within the traditional familial order, the heroine at a climactic point explicitly harangues the hero for his consistent failure to take up any romantic initiative in spite of being offered ample opportunities. The restoration of pre-modern social order comes to the rescue of masculinity in a symbolic transfer of filial duties through marital bonding but the symptomatic ‘lack’ is nevertheless telling. A similar situation occurs in *Bratacharini*, (Kamal Ganguly, 1955) involving a splitting of the feminine principle into its opposed traditional and modern ‘avatars’ reminiscent of 40’s *socials*, where the protagonist is evidently portrayed as being unable to identify with his patriarchal role in either social domain. It is perhaps easy enough to explain this narrative problem as arising from anxieties about the decline of tradition. However such a line of argument might prove deficient in explaining the other instances of crises outside of the pre-modern domain where such failures often result in an excessive outburst of psychological trauma. The neurotic dimensions inherent in this of romantic encounter appears as narrative symptom in many cases (eg, *Sabar Upare*, *Bipasha*, *Harano Sur*) and can be taken up in more detail when we discuss another aspect of the romantic dilemma.

²⁴ It should also be noted that I have been trying to specify a tendency and not a series of sacrosanct conventions and therefore a few of the romantic films featuring the star duo, do act as exceptions to the general tendency I have been describing so far. For example the major hit *Sapmochan* (1956) would partially work with a set of concerns other than the major romantic strand and in some ways the development and resolution of the romantic theme does resemble earlier melodramas rather than the contemporary innovations being charted out here.

It is to be noted that the language in which Sagarika justifies the pre-marital relation introduces a set of previously unexplored ideas pertaining to cinematic representations of romance. She uses terms like ‘friendship’, ‘attachment’ and ‘affection’ giving them a meaning that locates these concepts outside the familial sphere. While discussing the romantic melodramas Biswas argues, “The new melodrama proposes distinctions between friendship, love and marriage, making the first two independent of the third. But the separation varies in degree and is tenuous: marriage often tends to subsume the other ways of bonding into its rhetoric” (Biswas 2002). However the distinction between ‘pre marital’ and ‘marital’ as conceptual domains seems a bit out of place in this melodramatic scheme and I suspect that the narrative resolution here does not always imply ‘marriage’ as ritual negotiation of social bonding overseen by relevant patriarchal authorities as was prevalent conventional film *socials*. The private correspondence coupled with affective zones inaugurated through elaborate physical proximity, to which none other than the couple had access, serves as the only available legitimation of the intimate bonding in romantic variety of 50’s *socials*. Privacy as a conceptual form and mutual access to such an emotional precinct would be the very condition of such a romantic construction. This particular conceptualization of romance requires a certain distancing from the semantic universe of earlier *socials*, where love is subordinated to the discourse of marriage. The Uttam-Suchitra romance however seeks to problematise this standard trajectory evident in various features of these melodramas, which try to approach such qualitative differences from multiple perspectives.

In the controversy that engulfed the film *Sagarika*, certain scenes and the characters themselves were deemed objectionable. Following from newspaper and journal commentaries of the period, it seems indubitable that the form of courtship represented did not suit the tastes of a major section of critics and audience alike. At one level the objections seems to be regarding the excess of sensuality depicted as the reviewer of *Dainik Basumati*, for reasons unclear, goes on comparing the exhibition of *Sagarika* to the lewd and aggressive behaviour of spectators at local football matches, which would be another paradigm for popular entertainment.²⁵ It is difficult to ascertain now whether audience reactions were indeed of that order but the general responses could give us an idea regarding the scandal that surrounded the film. One of the contemporary reviews of *Sagarika* acknowledges it as a romantic film but vehemently derides the primacy given to the theme of romance: “Sagarika is a story of love and love also is its main focus...there is over abundance of romance... crude expressions of turbulent desire is evident in various scenes...this sort of love is confusing for the present generation... it should be a matter of consideration whether such representations of love are conducive to the general good of the audience” (*Jugantar*, Feb 10, 1956). The point is not so much about sensuality per se, as I have pointed out in the last chapter, the reviews are no less critical in case of films such as *Ekti Raat* (Chitta Basu, 1956) that do not center around amorous couples or include explicit portrayals of sensuality. I would argue that the explicit rejection of sensuality masks a deeper concern regarding legitimacy of romance as a form of relationship in itself. As I was trying to point out, the problem circulates around the social legitimacy of the romantic encounter where the traditional or modern sectors are assumed to play a decisive role; a

²⁵ The anxious and negative review published in *Dainik Basumati* Feb 6, 1956 has already been cited in the earlier chapter.

phenomena that the representational trajectory that most films of this period neatly by pass and problematize at many levels. What *Sagarika* manages to do with the trope of ‘sensuality’ other films of the series accomplish by other means.

Melodrama as Formal Elaboration of Passion

Let us approach the issues under discussion from a different angle through other examples now. Agragami’s next successful feature *Shilpi*(1956), at its very outset displays one more significant preoccupation of the new *socials* : the unfinished journey of protagonist(s) into urban community. The tendency to situate the city as a locus of modernity remains pervasive in Bengali and Hindi family melodramas, as well as a range of developing genres in Hindi cinema of 40’s and 50’s, which center around urban conflicts of middle class as well as upcoming streetwise cultures. Works of Guru Dutt , Raj Khosla, or Chetan Anand bear testimony to the range of narrative treatment of the city as a space and character in itself , which distinguished these 50’s Hindi *socials* from other varieties of family melodrama.(Biswas 2004). The latter varieties of melodrama often resorted to relatively less vibrant references to the urban domain where thereby lending a city a more symbolic depiction. One strand of such developments can be observed in what Madhava Prasad has characterized as ‘feudal family romance’²⁶ dealing primarily with the negotiation of urban forces and industrialization as symbolic

²⁶ Prasad elaborately discusses the structure of ‘feudal family romance’ in popular Hindi cinema of the 50’s and 60’s.(Prasad 1998 b). This tendency would have a much weaker existence in the Bengali *socials* of 40’s and 50’s but forcefully and explicitly reappears much later in popular melodramas since mid 70’s.

sources of threat to the feudal familial order. Prasad refers to a dynamics inherent in the film *socials* of the post-colonial era in their conflicted approach to the question of modernity. On the one hand a strand of socials influenced by the realist rhetoric attempts to center narratives around the figure of the citizen operating within a secular, urban universe. This tendency is somewhat complemented by simultaneous productions of progressive reformist melodrama which addresses the questions pertaining to women's desire and agency through narratives of love mostly structured around a triangular romantic an urban scenario. While on the other hand Prasad observes a broader tendency of the evolved format of feudal family romance in the guise of social melodramas which try to annex the progressive tendencies by reinstating the absolutist patriarchal subject at the center of narrative who operates around notions of kinship and loyalty, now redefined by new nationalist fervors (Prasad 1998b, 64-87). Thus Prasad, in a way, attributes the dynamic resurfacing of the urban spatial order along with its historical approach to characterization to the overarching driving force of realist tendencies that are best exemplified in films of the urban thriller genre such as *Kala Pani* or *CID*(both Raj Khosla , 1956).

Two points merit mention in this context. Firstly Prasad's analysis of *Kala Pani* becomes interesting our context, given the uncanny similarity of the narrative Uttam-Suchitra hit *Sabar Upare* (Agradoot, 1955). Not only does the story of *Kala Pani* bear ample resemblance to the Bengali film, the narrative deployment also exhibits the new tendency of locating social problems within a secular search for

identity.²⁷ *Sabar Upare* like many other mainstream socials deals with the problem of patriarchal lineage and loss of identity through the story of protagonist's attempt to prove the innocence of his imprisoned father. However the enactment of the secular gaze instead of centering around the search itself gets deflected to the narrative of romance. While *Kala Pani* subordinates the love angle between Dev Anand and Madhubala to the primary plot of detection of truth under the legal order, *Sabar Upare* invests a psychic energy into the romantic plot, which is introduced as a sub plot but soon develops with an intensity parallel the primary plot structure. This deployment of energy results in an emasculation of the secular subject leading to a crisis of agency leading the narrative of romance itself takes up healing measures. The detection and court case proceeds towards resolution with a set of usual coincidences and turns of fate while the romantic couple enacts their independent narrative of bond formation. The journey across cities and paraphernalia of institutional networks like courts, archives, press offices etc. induces a sort of neurotic rupture in the protagonist which becomes the centre for the narrative of romantic conjugality parallel to the primary drive towards restoration of the broader patriarchal family. I will discuss more about the symbolic significance of neuroses and social crises in other Uttam-Suchitra later on when I take up the issue of marriage and couple formation. Secondly its is also to be noted that the triangular romantic structure in the form of narratives centering

²⁷ Both the films deal with the male protagonist's journey to another city in order to uncover the truth and prove the innocence of the father figure who was imprisoned during colonial period owing to villainous plots and error in legal judgment. In both cases the protagonist meets and couples up with a local professional woman who assists in the investigation and gets romantically entwined in the process. The investigative journey enables the protagonists to traverse numerous historically codified institutions (law, police, press etc.) that act as representatives of the modern nation-state as well as an array of urban public spaces like hotels, lodges, marketplaces, libraries, parks etc.

around contest over the female protagonist or around adultery or pre marital romantic history is virtually absent in romantic films featuring Uttam-Suchitra. The progressive orientation of romantic melodramas therefore constitute solely in their elaboration of romance as a secular form of affiliative relationship in opposition to prevalent ties defined by kinship and loyalty. The enactment of such a structure comes primarily through the portrayal of Suchitra as a desiring subject attributed with an agency to initiate and animate romantic relationships in tandem with other professional aspirations. As mentioned earlier Suchitra in most films of the period plays an urban educated woman associated with modern professions like medicine, nursing, law, journalism, teaching etc.²⁸ As shall be evident from my further arguments the very structure of romantic melodramas precludes the possibility of annexation by earlier formats of family dramas in Bengal or in the broader forms of Indian popular cinema. However there are other aspects related to the secular journey into the urban that require careful attention in relation to the question of romantic plot.

As suggested by the title, the story of *Shilpi* (The Artist) deals with the life of an artist who is displaced from pottery and image making traditions of rural Bengal, which were in decline. Bidhayak Bhattacharya's *Dhuli*(1954) made a few years earlier deals with a similar theme of migration of a village artist (a traditional drummer in this case) to the city , where he is condemned to cope with pressures for institutionalization of his artistic skills. Both films chart a circular journey at

²⁸ In some instances she is portrayed as rootless or orphan in which case an invocation of oppression locates the protagonist as a victim of historical violence of Partition or riots (eg. *Sabar Upare, Bipasha*) (Sarkar 2005, 175-176).

the end of which the artist returns to his roots with a transformed social consciousness. However *Shilpi* underplays the theme of disillusionment to facilitate the narrativization of romance itself, which retains a somewhat symbolic status in *Dhuli*, revealing affinities towards conventions prevalent in the 40's. *Dhuli's* scheme of characterization reiterates the narrative division of the feminine principle into two forms of social affect: the nurturing one (Suchitra Sen) and the morally dubious and exploitative strand exhibiting a discriminatory view of socio-economic hierarchy (Mala Sinha). However in *Shilpi*, Sen portrays an independent daughter of an urban bourgeoisie family who chooses to follow her romantic inclinations despite social and class taboos which haunts the possibility of successful bonding. This latter mode as I mentioned earlier is complicit with the normative agendas of the romantic genre.

Shilpi opens in a village where a potter community in the act of sending away a young orphan Dhiman to Calcutta with a neighbor, in order to join the migrant working class. The escort who works as domestic labour in a rich urban household, manages to find the kid temporary shelter under the patronage of the arrogant landlord (played by Kamal Mitra as in many similar instances during the period). However it is important to note that the representation of the city as a physical space is restricted to the sequence depicting their journey into the palatial house. After signifying the entry into the city through a montage sequence depicting shots of streets filled with trams, rickshaws and crowds of people, the narrative moves into a space of melodramatic narration where the city is no longer present as a physical fact. In fact the realist desire in articulation of cinematic space

in the text exhibits peculiarly uneven tendencies. Within the domain of the house (which now virtually stands in for the idea of ‘urban’), the narrative takes ample care in delineating the spatial geography of the relationship of the main building to its separate smaller wings which shelter various sorts of employees such as the daughter’s house tutor and Dhiman himself. It becomes progressively clear that the detailed elaboration is in preparation of frequent charting of this physical space to locate the developing intimacy between the romantic couple. On the other hand ‘space’ as a public domain remains less significant from this perspective and is therefore never represented in the same way.

The narrative follows the encounter and consequent intimacy between Dhiman and the patriarch’s daughter Anjana, represented as a form of childhood bonding of which the patriarch remains oblivious. It is significant that representation of Dhiman’s mentioned artistic skills are limited to producing innumerable portraits of Anjana. In fact the development of the young teenager into a mature woman takes place through a series of transformations on Dhiman’s canvas, which captures the urban bred heroine in various casual, contemplative and even erotically charged poses, clearly signifying the level of intimate access they have developed as friends. The consequent elaborations of the psychological facets of romantic liaison now begin to translate Anjana’s still frames in cinematographic terms. This is apparent in the interior sequence where her mother’s admonitory remarks about their constant togetherness, leads to a sexual awareness in the heroine. The whole sequence which employs background music instead of the usual song sequence follows Anjana around her room with expressive close-ups

which functions like traces of paint taking shape on an empty canvas. The elaborate series of expressions is then related to the spatial distance between the couple by way of another series of looks directed through the window in the direction of Dhiman's room. In fact, here lighting, composition and music together perform a complex function in building up a psychological correlative for the spectator. For example, background music combining with shots of the facial expressions serves not only to heighten the emotional impact but also facilitates the signification of a noteworthy transformation in the psychological landscape. The conventions of constructing star personae as a conglomeration of images of physical attributes and poses, here aids the purpose at hand by building up a parallel channel of communication that coexists with the use of songs and dialogues throughout the text.

The narrative elaboration of romance encounters a series of usual social resistances, which in case of *Shilpi* quite surprisingly foregrounds 'caste' as an issue in explicit terms. There are dialogues implying an awareness of caste barriers as well as the character of an unmarried sister in the household who represents the oppressive nature of caste discrimination prevalent even in urban Bengal. However notwithstanding the seemingly progressive intentions at the level of plot, the representation of 'caste' as a social problem is riddled with undertones suggesting implicit hesitations and operative defense mechanisms of various sorts. It is clearly by virtue of his exceptional creative talents that Dhiman can be defined as a subject transcending caste and class barriers; the very same notion of creativity which also prefigures his journey into community of secular urban artists from his inherited

caste markers of traditional community of artisans. The other members belonging to similar communities, however, are represented in their natural servility, praising the patriarch's social status and sympathetic material investment in sheltering migrant classes without suitable employment in the city. Therefore Dhiman's romantic aspirations that ignore or at least problematise the traditional barriers are legitimized as a spiritual longing following from instinctive qualities rather than as a subjective right of a secular citizen. In fact, in this context, it must be pointed out that concrete depictions of his social identity as an aspiring professional artist is not only hindered by constant references to artistic creation as a personal and non material affair but also lacks any form of visual correlative. The consistent reiteration of Dhiman's obsession with Anjana as an object of art and the sequence where his exhibition medal is used to commemorate the status of the romantic liaison rather than his public identity, testify to this logic.²⁹ It could seem quite strange that all references to the public world of art colleges, galleries, exhibitions, prizes are made in the form of dialogue within interior spaces. There is not even a single sequence devoted to the elaboration of Dhiman's public identity that Anjana constantly idealizes.³⁰ However such peculiarities might make a different sense if one keeps in mind the symbolic articulation of the romance as an encounter in the process of being bracketed out as private domain out of the purview of standard

²⁹We learn from a dialogue sequence that Dhiman has acquired a medal through exhibition of his artwork. However when he meets Anjana to announce his achievement he resorts to acknowledge Anjana's love and inspiration as the primary reason for his success and uses the public medal as a garland to celebrate their romance thereby deepening their affective bonding.

³⁰ This is in contrast to *Subharatri* (Sushil Majumdar, 1956) where the protagonist (Basanta Chowdhury) is also a painter and is shown as having a relatively concrete access to public spaces and institutions. However, there the narrative deals with problems of inheritance and identity, which would subsume the problem of romance within its own parameters eventually.

overseers of the intimate territory. As I pointed out above, the representation of secular and public aspects of space rather than functioning in a descriptive fashion serves to delineate the difference between itself as a social space under construction to house the intimate bonding and other legitimately available social spaces. In other words spaces would serve to indicate the symbolic orientation of the romantic liaison with respect to other elements rather than merely locating characters.

Such organizations of spaces are directly linked to the visual elaboration of the romantic stuff of the plot. The move towards spatial categorization of romance in relation to other narrative strands is a standard feature romantic melodrama that follows from an attempt to mobilize love as an intimate encounter involving psychic interiority of a sort, unrepresentable in earlier variety of *socials*. It is to be noted that romantic films of the period are characterized by specific spaces that usually house the concrete elaboration of romance as a personal exchange that operates through a sharing of personal history and intimate trivialities, which may or may not be followed by song sequences. In *Shilpi* the requirement of a spatial embellishment of the romance beyond the patriarchal gaze that constantly oversees them in the household, deflects the intimate exchange to an oft-repeated meeting venue, referred to as Botanical Gardens in the dialogue track. However portrayal of journey to and from this space is categorically avoided so as to specify this locale as a domain of private encounter outside the restrictive patriarchal spheres. This differentiation is further intensified by narrative techniques that clearly delineate a geographical as well as conceptual distinction between this specific domain and the

rest of narrative spaces depicted, where a more consistent development of continuity editing predominates. In every instance the camera uses explicit markers to move out from the romantic locale using techniques that are superfluous in terms of narrative motivation. At the end of the dialogue sequence during their first date in the Gardens the camera abruptly makes a rightward pan in a move reminiscent of cuing of spatial changes in the theatrical form; more like a conscious announcement than conventional cinematic shifts across scenes. In the next instance a dissolve is used to end the romantic liaison but midway through the very next sequence, as Anjana returns from a similar liaison, it is revealed that the dissolve that seemed to signify a small duration was a temporal ellipsis in actuality since we have been transported to the same hour of the following day. The discontinuity between the spaces is therefore reinforced in an indirect manner. However, while the locales are represented as public spaces in principle, there is virtually no intrusion of public either in the form of concrete presence in the frame or in terms of an abstract gaze, thereby giving a haunting aspect to such representational spaces. The repeated presence of such romantic settings and the couple's access to them are often characterized by a recognizable element usually in the form of a natural object like a tree or certain flowers or mountains etc. which serve to trigger off lost memories as in *Harano Sur* (Ajoy Kar, 1957) where the space itself works as a link between personal memory and public social mandates. Such a quasi mystical delineation of spatial coordinates are further intensified by the dual functions that are often performed by such spaces as symbolic proof bearers of romances, which animates settings into authoritative entities represented by people or public in other contexts. In other words the primary descriptive function of such spaces would be as settings lending privacy as

a facilitator of romantic bonding beyond the concrete supervision of the patriarchal authorities. But additionally, in absence of such authoritative agencies such spaces perform the function of legitimating the romantic commitment as a social fact. One could argue that in the latter instance spaces metaphorically but also literally become 'public' but in a very different sense of the term, as should be more explicit from the discussion around representations of marital bondings below.³¹

This latter complex use of space leads us back to the discussion of legitimizing agencies and marriage as a symbolic practice in film narratives. In *Shilpi* the couple exchange Dhiman's medal as a performative ritual to seal the relationship by referring to trees around as witness, reminiscent of similar scenes in numerous earlier and later films such as, *Sabar Upare* (Agradoot, 1955), *Pathe Holo Deri* (Agradoot, 1957), *Harano Sur* etc. It is in this symbolic context that the idea of coupling should be understood in 'romantic' films of the period rather than as any prior intimation of marriage as a social ritual expressing an older patriarchal contract. In fact some films like *Pathe Holo Deri* exhibit a conscious awareness of the problem of legitimation involved thereby distributing the process into two separate contracts. In this film a similar setting comprising of walls, trees and foliage is used to depict a space adjacent to the garden of the heroine's house overlooking the hills. In an emergency situation when the hero is in need of financial help to leave the country for medical training the film depicts an

³¹ Often the private commitment is explicitly pronounced with such objects as the only proof bearers and requires no further complementary social legitimation in the course of narrative resolutions. This issue shall be described in more detail when I discuss the representations of marital bonding with reference to *Pathe Holo Deri*.

extensive exchange between the couple in the above-mentioned setting. The heroine's anticipation of the non-consenting old patriarch's attempt to marry off his granddaughter renders a social contract necessary to sustain the relationship in the protagonist's absence. Their discussion centers on the problem that under circumstances of a personal commitment the social status of the relationship as well as the transfer of property to enable his foreign trip will remain doubtful. The woman convinces her partner as to the purity of the commitment as a sufficient condition for a social bonding and the couple decides to undergo a private exchange of marital vows without resorting to any form of social consent. Initially this symbolic exchange of vows is staged to seal the relationship with the overlooking Himalaya Mountains around as witness.

However the more interesting narrative move lies in the fact that the ensuing contract has to be re staged shortly. There is a break initiated by a dissolve, which presents the anxious grandfather pacing up and down in front of the house. The camera then cuts back to the couple as they enter the house through the other side. This is followed by another sequence of dialogue exchange in the interior where they re stage the vows leading to a transfer of jewelry belonging to the woman as maternal inheritance. The dialogues make elaborate references to the dead mother's aspirations regarding her daughter's marriage and her assumed consent to the daughter's decision. All the while the camera frames the couple in a series of mid close and close shots revealing only parts of the room background. The series of shots is broken by a single cut to an extreme close up of the symbolic engagement in the form of ring exchange. In the other shots we are presented with

lower half of the room background comprising of a bed with pillows, table lamps to the right and corner of a window at the left hand corner of the frame presumably beside the bed. In the next sequence the hero sets off on his journey abroad and the heroine is presented in her anticipatory mood standing by the window. The sequence begins with her younger brother's entry into the room from right of the frame while the camera makes a gradual leftward pan revealing the room as the same one represented in the earlier sequence. A lighthearted conversation ensues between them as the brother attempts to tease the sister regarding her romantic liaison. However, there is another implicit function of the sequence which addresses the spectator directly vis-à-vis the frame. We are now confronted by the same room in straight on mid shots revealing more of the background than earlier. On the wall across the bed and the same lamp in the background, we now clearly see a framed picture of the dead mother, which would precisely be located in a position overseeing the ring and vermilion exchange in the earlier sequence. It becomes quite obvious that the marital vows were restaged to enact the absent social sanction under the maternal gaze in absence of a concrete patriarchal authority. However, a part of its enunciation still remains suspended in domain of the privacy that is beyond the reach of the maternal gaze and therefore cannot be encapsulated completely. Thus the second staging is not so much to legitimate the intimate contract itself, which is always already undertaken through use of private 'performatives' but rather to enable the transfer of property and ownership rights, which would remain a sacrilege with the given nature of personal contract. It is obvious that the narrator exhibits a consciousness of the problem in social terms and works out ways to negotiate them under various circumstances.

The status of marriage as a social event is rendered problematic in most films of the romantic series no matter what the explicit plot might imply. It cannot be a mere coincidence that scenes representing marriage as ritual are systematically absent in almost all films of the series under consideration, no matter who makes them. Niren Lahiri's *Indrani* (1958) condenses most of the melodramatic features discussed above into a single plot. The story deals with a young graduate couple, who meet through a common acquaintance, fall in love and eventually plans to marry. It is perhaps the first and perhaps a novel instance in Bengali cinema where a working woman not only takes romantic initiative but also convinces her unemployed and reluctant lover to marry her with explicit promises to financially support him during his non earning phase as a research student. The protagonist's reluctance stems from his apprehension of resistance from his joint family household where he still has a dependant status. Thus the couple jointly decides to elope and marry at an outstation friend's house in Ranchi expecting an easier social sanction once they have undergone the marital rituals. Once the hero leaves his house in Calcutta, we observe a series of vague and short dissolves depicting exterior spaces followed by a direct and abrupt cut that transports the spectator to the site where the marriage rituals would be presumably held. The shot has a rather radical and haunting effect as we find a garlanded couple in their wedding attire looking out at exotic scenery through the verandah, which is reminiscent of usual romantic spaces discussed above. Not only does the entire ritual activity remain visually unstaged, additionally not even a single entity apart from the couple is visible in the frame in the whole sequence, which comprises of a song and then shifts back to Calcutta as abruptly as it landed into this space. The friends referred

in the dialogue as public witness and legitimating authority appear to be an absent abstraction. The only visible witness to the contract happens to be a mandolin strumming tramp humming a Hindi song that functions as a locus of intimate conversation between the couple as the groom translates the foreign lyrics to his wife. The insertion of the Hindi song, in itself a rare occurrence in contemporary Bengali cinema of the time, intensifies the connoted seclusion of the couple and lends a otherworldly aura to the depicted space thereby further differentiating it from the social scenario within which the romance had sprouted.

The representation of unconsummated marriages in various guises, a recurrent theme in the 50s, is also associated with the idea of self-legitimised matrimony. In *Bipasha* the groom's failure to turn up at the wedding ceremony threatens to render the bride inauspicious (*lagnabhrashta*), a standard narrative trope of social melodrama repeated endlessly in earlier decades. The resolution occurs through the heroine Bipasha's sensational public proclamation of her bridal status and symbolic application of vermilion by herself. In more conventional 50's *socials*³² such as *Subharatri* (starring Suchitra Sen) and *Bratacharini* (starring Uttam Kumar) a similar symbolic move involving the bride's implied marital status without the partner's explicit consent, is endowed with very different narrative significances. In *Bratacharini*, the story unfolds in a traditional village family where the patriarch adopts and treats his friend's orphan daughter as his own. Impressed by traditional qualities and household skills of the woman the doting patriarch publicly proclaims and treats her as his younger son's wife hoping

³² The term conventional in case of 50's socials signifies the set of films that continue to work with and therefore resemble narrative features prevalent in the earlier decade.

to acquire an obvious sanction from his oblivious son. However the son in question lives in the city where he gets engaged with a modern, urban acquaintance and vehemently refuses the status of the traditionally imposed match. Here the sanctity of the bridal status in question is posited and endorsed by the pre-modern authorities in the village which conceives marriage as a social bonding dissociated from conjugal charms promised by its urban variation. Thus a consummation in so far as the partner's approval or physical involvement is concerned, is rendered superfluous by a narrative logic that attempts to chalk out the conflicts between two forms of conjugal ordering. *Bratacharini*'s plot opts to lay out the problem of situating traditional femininity in face of dissolution of its legitimizing agencies. The impending dissolution of the pre- modern version of patriarchal gaze through literal death of the family head leads to the hero's consequent acknowledgement of the previously non consensual bond but also of his inability to pursue its social consequences in face of more appealing conjugal options. By the 50's polygamy has de-legitimized as a legal or social option thereby brought about reformulations in narrative frameworks dealing with social formations beyond the purview of the modernity. Thus the imposed bonding retains its sanctity through oral legitimation but cannot be transported into the domain of modernity, thereby necessitating the traditional bride to accept a self-imposed exile from the social scene.

Subharatri deals with an economically downtrodden lady who arrives to the city in search of employment and meets a young painter whom she confuses with her cousin. While the romantic liaison develops she remains unaware of the

fact that the protagonist is in reality the member of rich business family who had left home over conflicts with his dominating father to pursue his creative vocation and gain self-independence. The economic hardship leads her to unknowingly seek employment as a nurse at the ancestral home of the painter. However she is forced to impersonate as a married lady to gain employment and entry into the household dominated by the cynical patriarch. Here her symbolic adoption of marital status with the lover's framed photo as witness occurs after she realizes the actual situation and thus testifies to the implicit internalization of the social mandates thrown up by the patriarchal order. The invoked social position has already been occupied by the protagonist, thereby rendering the resolution as a matter of 'recognition' of the situation from an appropriate patriarchal perspective followed by restoration of moral order through proper distribution of rights and properties. However, contrary to films of the earlier decade, where the imposed or self-imposed 'bride hood' appealed only to ideal norms of femininity, the 50's versions acknowledge and dramatize the thematic problem psychological terms. Films such as *Subharatri* and *Bratacharini* resolve the psychological dilemmas of the male and female protagonist by enacting a scenario of recognition and thereby erasing out elements that do not complement their framework of resolution. However in the case of *Bipasha* the narrative logic that motivates and sustains the self-legitimation works on a very different logic that is contrary to the idea of social 'recognition'.

In *Bipasha* as well as many other films of the romantic series the self-legitimation in question tends to be posed either in opposition to or independent of

the social sanction of marital discourse. Bipasha's sudden resolve to undergo a solitary ritual commitment and search for her partner does not tantamount to an internalization of any imposed mandate, rather externalizes a psychological longing into an impetus to concretize the conjugal bond. In other words the process does not involve a search for a 'husband' figure that is already in place, but rather a struggle to re construct a conjugal relationship despite the various threats that the social circumstances pose. It is to be noted that in such contexts, the problem of conjugality cannot be resolved once the problem of social identity is dissipated because in a certain sense these two themes dissociate from each other to seek independent trajectories.³³ The narrative resolution is not merely a process of social 'recognition', but rather a different order of 'cognition' has to be set in motion to realize Bipasha's conjugal imagination. Not surprisingly the narrative of *Bipasha* stages a double resolution of sorts conceptually differentiating two modes of community formation, which are difficult to separate in actual social practice. The resolution related to the identity problem is staged in the hospital sequence through a predictable confessional letter from the father that cleanses moral guilt and eventually leads to a partial restoration of the disrupted family signifies through the final shot which frames the couple clinging on to the mother. However the romantic resolution occurs in the same hospital sequence in between the two familial encounters and displays a different order of thematic preoccupations. The frail hero lies in a hospital bed after his failed suicide attempt, wracked by doubts regarding his social identity and vehemently attempts to dissuade his lover from

³³ The complications in *Bipasha's* romantic narrative arises when just before the scheduled marriage the male protagonist learns about his disputed and illegitimate biological origin and leaves in search of his legitimate parents leading to an eventual nervous breakdown culminating in a suicide attempt.

the romantic commitment so as to save her and their would-be descendants from impending scandal. At this point Bipasha explicitly takes up the issue to advance an order of resolution, which hints at the structure of romantic imagination invoked in the text. As the hero ponders on the nature of explanation they can possibly offer to the future generation when questions of lineage are raised, Bipasha strikingly intervenes arguing: “Why? We will tell them that there is no family lineage prior to what they see, you shall be the source and originator of this family and your children its first line of descendants.” The father’s discourse in the form of a confessional letter follows this dialogue exchange to resolve the identity problem but as is evident, a different order of negotiation has already been invoked which renders the primary strand of resolutions superfluous from the conjugal perspective.

The problem of closure often condenses significant levels of meaning as it becomes a defining structure of such romantic melodramas. This specificity also has to do with detachment between the romantic resolution and resolution of other thematic problems, of which the doubling of resolutions is merely one among various manifestations. In fact such dissociations mark off a major distinction between the two domains of representations within film *socials* that both deal with discourses of the modern family as a social unit. The customary ending sequence where group tableaux depicting the family as a united cluster or the often repeated celebration of marriage as a ritual resolution of passionate dilemmas is consistently absent or at best skillfully negotiated in the romantic incarnation of *socials*. The former type of endings are a standard feature of conventional film *socials* that

enable the broader family as a unit to enter the frame thereby legitimizing the moral lapses and symbolizing a restored economy. As mentioned earlier, *Sagarika* consciously freezes its narratorial discourse at a point when the broader social sanctions are yet to be realized, instantiating a logic of closure that operates in various guises in almost every romantic hit from the period. The loose cut away inserts of the common friend and doctor's close ups do not succeed in reinstating any patriarchal legitimation. The embrace as a concluding seal takes up proportions larger than a routine ending in the context of romantic films by the time we approach the end of the decade. *Chaoa Paoa* (Jatrik, 1959) uses the Uttam-Suchitra embrace as an emblematic freeze which stands in for a set of routine resolutions in conventional *socials*.³⁴ The climax of the film simply refrains from any attempt at resolving the thematic problems such as the male protagonist's professional insecurity, his explicit endorsement of the affair or the patriarch's sanction of the bonding. Both the male counterpart and the dominating father of the heroine remain hesitant about explicitly expressing their respective positions regarding the social commitment thereby producing a stasis. The problem is negotiated when the emotionally articulate heroine takes initiative to express her romantic intentions through a forceful embrace thereby stalling the hero's departure and the narrative mechanism itself. The use of specific backdrops, songs or the passionate embrace as a visual embodiment of romance is part and parcel of the marketing specificities that sustained popularity of the Uttam Suchitra series.

³⁴ The story deals with a romantic encounter of a newspaper magnate's arrogant daughter who runs away from home and accidentally chances upon a junior reporter working at her father's office. Driven by the desire to retain his insecure job with the sensational news item the reporter stays with the oblivious heroine with the intention of returning her to the family and gain the employer's favour. The complications arise when the lady falls in love with the protagonist who is reluctant to indulge in the affair considering the difference of social and economic status.

However, for the embrace as a visual emblem to take up such signifying capacities, so as to render explicit narrative resolutions redundant, required other operative conditions that oversaw cultural production itself. On the one hand the embrace signifies the overwhelming necessity of enacting the passionate bond as the major driving force of romantic *socials* and simultaneously signifies a condition where the bond can define its own terms of evolution by a refusal to allow other narrative elements to manipulate its structure and trajectory. In other words the couple in question does not inhabit positions to be actualized by legitimation from representative social units; rather the romance is represented as an effect of intimate negotiation based on internal parameters.

Most often, as is evident in *Sagarika* and *Harano Sur* the couple's desperate embrace often following from a commencement of psychological crisis closes off the narrative before the representatives of social order can penetrate their space to take an active part in legitimation of the aspired bonding. However in case the representative authority attempts to intrude into the intimate climactic domain one of the protagonists dies, thereby sealing off any possibility of marital resolution. In *Shilpi* the male protagonist falls dead immediately after the remorseful patriarch enters the house courtyard to seek forgiveness and legitimize the couple's relation. On the other hand, some films of the series display a tendency to displace the couple outside urban public domains that appear to hinder a stable bonding, often to unspecified spaces beyond the concrete sphere of patriarchal influence. The space takes up symbolic dimensions of a blissful province where the attendant psychological traumas can recede to facilitate

negotiation of an intimate future on uncharted social grounds. In *Indrani* the couple's disrupted conjugal life, forces the male protagonist to move out from the social scenario and engage in collective community work in a strangely indeterminate geographical region. The anxious wife follows him and offers a cooperative hand within this new order of chosen existence. Strangely the formulation of new social identifications facilitate the reconstruction of their bonding which had not survived social and professional turmoil of mainstream civic existence within or without the extended family circuit. These climactic variations would most often be coupled with the symbolic embrace or a walk away from the camera.(eg. *Pathe Holo Deri, Indrani*).

To read the symbolic embraces in *Sagarika* or *Harano Sur* as indicative of a promise of marriage and restoration of patriarchal order would be an interpretation that restricts itself to the level of the intended script thereby missing out on the 'cultural work' that is the very stuff of these film texts. While the narratives concerned do indeed work within certain established patriarchal frameworks, they also invoke symbolic articulations that signify a desire to reformulate certain aspects of the same framework. As we have been observing the narratives involve journeys into the urban space, which commences into a romance that eventually finds a problem in being located vis-à-vis the available patriarchal mandates. However it is also observed that the representation of a secure location to house such a longing requires the couple to displace themselves from concrete domain or urban existence. One can perhaps ponder on the significance of such curious narrative preoccupations given that the explicit urge of the plot is to depict

a distinctively urban romance. In fact one could consider whether it is possible to read the cultural connotations emanating from the representational order of film romances as chalking out of apprehensive speculations on the question belonging in the modern conjugal domain, in ways that might not be coextensive with any simple desire for modernity. It is perhaps this very desire to form a passionate bonding that forecloses the couple's domain from the gaze of traditional patriarchy as well as the normative mandates of modern socialization. If this is indeed the case then the distinctiveness of the new melodrama would lie in narrative techniques that give a cinematic form to such a complex longing.

As has been widely commented upon, Uttam Kumar's dress codes and body language often display a comfortable acquaintance with the modern social and conjugal aspirations of the middle class flocking into the city in the post-independence period (Biswas 2002; Ghosh 2006). However it is to be noted that a similar level of comfort is lacking in the male protagonist's attempt at romantic liaison thereby necessitating an articulate urban female counterpart to take up active initiatives quite uncharacteristic as per conventions in film *socials* of the earlier period. Throughout *Chaoa Paoa*, as in many other films of the series it is the woman who takes the initiative to formulate the romantic destination and motivate the male counterpart to comply with her wishes. The narratives in fact display a range of symbolic manifestations, which can be traced back to anxieties regarding problem of conjugality. The theme of separation and longing that happens to be a standard narrative stage of romantic liaison, takes certain definite forms in the 50' *socials*. Over and above being an excuse for romantic laments and

incorporation of pathos laden romantic songs to signify passionate despair, some of the films play with the trope of psychic disturbance, which takes up neurotic proportions in the context of the given plot. The most significant manifestation is the physical frailty of the male protagonist that starts taking up psychic proportions as problems related to conjugality start appearing in the text. In some cases as in *Sabar Upare* and *Bipasha* the psychological trauma is at first related to the problem of identity but is consequently displaced onto the romantic plane through further developments of events. A large section of *Sabar Upare* shows Uttam Kumar roving around the town virtually like a madman in search for his lost father. The search which sets off the plot involving events like murder and disappearance soon gets entangled with a romantic liaison between the protagonist and a local teacher offering a helping hand in his frantic search. However the lack of passionate enterprise of the hero is gradually accompanied by his deteriorating health and psychic trauma that overrides the explicit concerns of the plot. An organized investigation is soon taken over by a frantically desperate search around the small town making the protagonist lose his belongings, leading to starvation and emergence of neurotic symptoms which are finally relieved by the woman's affectionate nursing thereby concretizing the conjugal bond.

It is to be noted that in most films of the series instead of the usual romantic song sequence the representation of separation is often signified as an accumulating psychological disturbance in either or both of the protagonists. A classical example occurs in *Shilpi* when the couple is forced to separate due to the violent reaction from the patriarch who refuses to overlook the class and caste

barriers demarcating the lovers. Uttam resorts back to his childhood shelter beyond the outward fringes of the city while the heroine falls irreversibly ill which the doctors confirm as a psychological disorder rather than a physical trauma. As the attempts to restore health through nursing, socialization and vacation breaks fail to produce any positive effect a rather strange depiction of romantic longing erupts into the narrative. The docile but ignorant suitor's interrogative attempt to locate the cause of trauma suddenly leads to a disruption in the narrative through a series of parallel cuts which depict the romantic leads in their respective states of trauma. It appears that the artist has not only taken to bed due to extreme ill health but his art works now reflect a growing concern with poverty and urban exploitation rather than the earlier frivolous depictions. The parallel shots which proceed to demonstrate the erupting trauma also draws attention to the fact that the facial expressions of both start mimicking each other in their constitutive ordeal. A similar transformative condition also erupts in *Pathe Holo Deri* where a suspicion of infidelity and premonition of separation drowns the heroine into illness which leads to a progressively deteriorating psychological trauma. It is to be noted that the forms of apathy and self destruction concerned are quite distinct from the reactions which are more consonant with the theme of sacrificial honour in earlier melodramas. The drive of such sequences in Uttam Suchitra romances is towards formulating a psychic connection between the couple to which other overseeing forces have no direct access. Not only is the psychic trauma shown to be medically inaccessible, it is neither amenable to a kind of reformist modulation often enacted in the form of symbolic sanction of the romantic bonding nor the trope of sacrificial suffering leading to self realization within a traditional order.

Thus the narrative enactments of trauma here effectively delineate more than the romantic longing that it seeks to represent. On the one hand the onset and climactic moment of trauma defines and concretizes the romantic endeavor at a conjugal plane inaccessible by dominant social and scientific discourses.³⁵ On the other hand the narrative excesses produced by the eruption of neuroses symbolize the very problem of articulating such a poorly codified romantic discourse within the given representational parameters. The trauma representing the problem of identity and belonging in the social order gives way to yet another complex dilemma of representing a new order of desire within the limits of older frameworks. As pointed out above, the curious problem of closure in the series of romantic hits leading to suspension, narrative stasis or doubling up testifies to this strange predicament of romantic desire. The narrative problems represent a broader dilemma regarding formulation a new ideas of community formation based on intimate bonding and a new figuration of desire. The romantic drama therefore concerns the very problem of charting the socio psychological contours of such a discourse rather than translating the dilemma onto a familiar thematic conflict of tradition and modernity. It is indeed this problem of translation that partly regulated the attempted reworking of the melodramatic structure and simultaneous eruption of neurotic trauma into the diegetic space so as to symbolize the representational excess.

³⁵ The play of blindness and its relation to anxiety regarding the status of romantic longing in *Sagarika*, which has been extensively discussed above, is a case in point.

The Moment of Break Down

Before coming back to my broader conclusions regarding the symbolic significance of such articulations of desire let us note the fateful trajectory of the screen romance as it approaches the moment of decline. The narrative tendencies and the symbolic imports charted so far would consequently spell out their own limitations which signaled the end of the most enigmatic and popular phase Uttam Suchitra era. The disruptions in the network of romance would be depicted through narratives displaying failures of urban coupling, a theme prevalent in representational media other than cinema, where the 'city' often embodies the idea of intrusion into the conjugal space. In such narrative instances the 'city' is not merely situated as a backdrop or symbolic entity but as a constraining condition that regulates the middle class couples' aspirations of 'settling down' in the modern domain. I shall detour a bit into literary representations in order to clarify the implications of this rupture as Bengali literature has a number of significant examples particularly in the short story format, which effectively articulate such a cultural experience of the city. To cite some random examples, let us concentrate on a few short stories by popular writers from 60's such as Dwipen Bandopadhyay or Sunil Gangopadhyay.

Dipen Bandopadhyaya's '*Ashawamedher Ghora*' (The Horse of Ashwamedha), exemplifies a contemporary, modernist mode of storytelling that attempts to incorporate a thoroughly urban sensibility through its use of language and narrative structuring. The story begins with a couple 'walking' in the city, an

activity that remains intimately associated with romance within the urban Bengali middle class. The couple, Kanchan and Rekha not being able to acquire social sanction from the woman's family due to low economic status of the aspiring groom and caste differences, have secretly acquired legal registration as a married couple. Evidently they are publicly denied a married life and a private space of their own. Thus the couple has to meet in secret as was common in their earlier courtship days until Kanchan is able to acquire the social status that would make him acceptable to the girl's family. But their courtship is now restricted to public spaces, engaging in the prevalent form of romantic liaison involving walks, conversations, eating at restaurants and bus and taxi rides. On one such outing at Central Calcutta the couple decides to go for a ride in a horse drawn carriage from Esplanade to Kidderpore. They get into the carriage after much bargaining and amidst the journey the driver pulls down the side curtain thereby creating a temporary private space rarely accessible to the couple in social situations. While the couple engages in contemplating their privacy and attempt to play around imaginatively with their erotic impulses, the ride comes to an end. As they get down and offer the negotiated fare the carriage driver demands for more money. On being asked the reason he sneers caustically, "you have fun but not pay the hotel charges!" (Bandopadhyay D. 1994, 332). Such transformation of public places and transport mediums like taxis into symbolic 'hotels' is a common phenomena in many cities where restaurants have curtained cabins or boat rides across rivers serve as a refuge secluded from the public gaze. However narrative treatment of such spaces often bring into play the other constraining dimensions related to social regulation in the form of exposure to verbal and gestural

harassment from legal and extra legal sources.³⁶ But my intention here is to extract the more abstract connotations of the romantic predicament implied by the literary representation that consequently spills over into cinematic discourse as well.

The story alternates between an objective narratorial voice and the first person narration of Kanchan often fusing the two smoothly to complicate the source of enunciation. Thus the narrator's voice often unsuspectingly gives way to Kanchan's subjective musings about the intimate situation and his failure to assume social responsibility. It is quite interesting that his despair and anxiety instead of being directed at social institutions, is continually expressed through a developing discomfort and hatred towards the city itself, which his imagination depicts as a hostile and claustrophobic entity. At one point during the walk Kanchan muses:

...because of some fear I started walking fast. It was as if some fear was pursuing me. I was reminded of the registrar's chamber – tiny and congested, I was reminded of the restaurant cabin --- tiny and congested; I was reminded of the stairs of the double-decker bus--- tiny and congested; remembered the bedroom --- tiny and congested. I felt choked (Bandopadhyay D. 1994, 326).

Just after the curtains are put down in the horse carriage detaching them from the world, the narrator describes the situation in a manner reminiscent of psychic disorientation:

³⁶ The sociological phenomena of using public space for amorous purposes actually surpasses its descriptive dimension in the story and emerges as the cultural landscape that facilitates and constraints forms of intimacy. The attendant violence can take up various forms as lewd whistles, sarcastic comments by passerby strangers or threatening of under tipped waiters or vehicle drivers or more concrete socio-legal harassment from local hoodlums or representatives of law themselves.

The two sat side-by-side, silent. Neither of them is able to look at the other. What a strange situation! We used to search for uncrowded spaces, spaces where one could be intimate. There isn't any uncrowded space in Calcutta. We used to search for moments of repose, in which we could come close to each other. In our lives we do not get any respite. We used to look for a space of which we could be sovereign. Our times do not provide such spaces. Yet today, yet this, yet in this manner---the car moving with windows turned down and raining outside, and today it is our first marriage anniversary. My wife Rekha, with God as witness—my woman (Bandopadhyay D. 1994 , 330).

Such anxieties regarding the social status of the relation keeps on spilling over to Kanchan's perception of people in general owing to his progressive disillusionment with urban experience:

At the same moment it seemed to him that the twinkle in the bloodshot eyes of the carriage driver was obscene and uncalled for. Yet the picture of Calcutta horse carriages that he had in mind due to the influence of foreign novels and the history of Calcutta written by Madhusudan Datta' was quite, quite different! (Bandopadhyay D. 1994, 328).

Sunil Gangopadhyay's '*Kokil o Lorrywallah*' (The Cuckoo and the Lorry Driver) enacts a very similar move through a story that revolves around the subject's cynical encounter with constraints imposed by the urban conditions. However, here the narrative drives its realist elements towards the staging of an absurdity implied by such an encounter. Here the protagonist happens to be an upwardly mobile citizen whose everyday routine is disrupted when his shirtsleeve gets torn by a hook hanging from a lorry while he is on his way to work through

the streets of Central Kolkata. The narration solely consists of interior monologues where the victim in the process of coming to terms with the random event, starts progressively displaying the excesses of his ensuing neuroses leading to the eventual performance of a radical symbolic act. The monologue start off with attempts to ascribe contingencies and the drudgery of everyday urban life to various agencies, beginning with the allegedly guilty lorry driver and the cuckoo who distracted his attention leading to the mishap. The protagonist voices his abstract accusation:

Holding the balustrade of Curzon Park for a couple of minutes or so! Thin vapours of injured vanity deep within. This feeling of being injured--- but who is the offender? Lorrywallah? Someone who does not know me and I do not know. Is it possible to have a love-hate relationship with an unknown quantity? (Gangopadhyay 2000, 149).

Consequently when the random accident kicks off a spree of unconnected thoughts, the protagonist tries to put his situation in context, “I have lots to do, I have got to go to many places. I have my own dame, I have friend circles. I have specific meeting places; I have a home in a specific house. That apart I have insurmountable discontent. Greed” (Gangopadhyay 2000, 152). However almost simultaneously the critical focus shifts and lapses into a discourse on the city and his relationship to it as he confesses:

I have lots to do, I have got to go to many places. That resplended lethargy of a decade ago, that ability to lean against the balustrade of Curzon Park as long as one desired. The torn shirt, the unshaved mutt, anytime, anywhere at will. The world has altered him (Gangopadhyay 2000, 149).

As his erratic thoughts move on he intentionally starts tearing off bits of his torn shirt, all the while contemplating on his concrete situation and his own functioning within the social machinery: “I have to go to a lot of places... first film company office, then the newspaper office, then to the German Consulate to meet a formal invitation. There is a rat race and I am seriously implicated in that” (Gangopadhyay 2000, 153). Questions pertaining to the history of belonging to concretely shifting social configurations are invoked time and again through his utterances, “Perhaps people wearing the casual waistcoats(*fatua*) are happier than those people with formal, sleeved shirts. My grandfather used to wear the casual one and there is no reason to doubt that he was far happier than my father” (Gangopadhyay 2000, 153). Thus gradually the concrete accusations finally give way to a more abstract level of irritation with the very codes that constitute the mandates for ‘settling’ down in an urban space as a citizen. In a while he exclaims to himself:

You cannot tear your clothes as you wish while you stand on the roads. You cannot strike away all the sticks of a matchbox while you stand on the roads, just for the heck of it. You cannot laugh your head off while you stand alone. At best you can bend and tie your shoelaces. These are rules of the road. Standing on a road, you cannot burn away all of a box of matchsticks one after another. Just like that. You cannot stand alone and laugh to yourself. You can at the most kneel down to tie up your shoelace. Such are rules of the road (Gangopadhyay 2000, 153-54).

Once the cause of anxiety is identified the ensuing irritation slides into neurotic delirium facilitating a rather radical act of tearing off all symbolic identifications that define him as a rational agent within the contemporary social order. The protagonist gradually approximates the figure of a public madman who is free of

constraints as he slowly tears off and sheds all his clothes to lie naked and peacefully amidst one of the busiest part of the city. The final performance is therefore directed at the city itself in the broader sense of the term. No wonder the protagonist has other means to describe the act other than calling it as akin to being psychotic:

In order to be totally free and independent I took of my belt, my trousers, my underwear and pushed them away with my foot. If anyone finds me he will think that this is a raving mad person. No one dares confront then mad. After all 75,000 years back we were all mad (Gangopadhyay 2000, 157).

What is revealed is a history that lied dormant under many manifestations of unrest in urban life:

I will lie down just here. I am a man from the age 75,000 years old, I used to lie just like this, in some pastures or below the sky or below some tree. Surrounding me have emerged walls of bricks and woods, so many tram lines, so many cars and trucks and behind them all hangs the hook. All these costumes are there to suppress my greed and want; I have become free and independent today (Gangopadhyay 2000, 156-57).

He has now become the primeval incomprehensible ‘Thing’, because only in that guise could he have responded to the ‘city as such’ without recourse to concrete manifestations that are negotiable within the order.³⁷

³⁷ In the Lacanian schema the described event could count as an example of an ‘act’ as opposed to action or a performance; a condition where the subject’s relation to the Symbolic Order is radically destabilized. The Subject lapses into an irreversible state of where the Real constitutes its

In some ways such anxieties spill over to the cinematic medium to articulate a set of similar thematic concerns regarding the fate of conjugal domesticity. It is such an abstract invocation of urban mandates as a virulent obstacle to the romantic trajectory of Bengali middle class that also mediates the melodramatic universe of film *socials* from 60's onwards. I would like to argue that an understanding the diminishing popularity and transformation in narratives of coupling from the 60's has to take into account the altering conditions under which the romantic imaginary had to reconstruct its coordinates within a transformed notion of urban belonging. One could perhaps argue that the symbolic violence that characterized realist cinema's encounter with the city in the late 60's had its originary moment in social melodramas that do not ostensibly deal with such issues.³⁸ The symbolic world of 50's romantic films tend to chalk out the contours of a palpable romantic universe which could contain and concretize the couple's journey into the city and consequent development of a sense of conjugal togetherness. The next decade however saw a latent transformation in the melodramatic universe, which now started charting the constituent fragility of such a notion of belonging within the parameters of Bengali modernity. Here the

enunciating point. He attempts to do something almost impossible, to approximate that which excludes itself from the Order and thereby renders the Order as coherent: "Now it's my turn. At the very center of the busiest area in this busy town some person has to necessarily without any reason and absolutely free of doubt. Otherwise there will be a terrible disaster. Suddenly with a monstrous noise everything could just explode (Gangopadhyay 2000, 156). For details see Lacan's writings on the 'ethical act' and psychoses (Lacan 1992,1997; Zupancic 2000).

³⁸ I am referring to the upsurge of 'city films' by artists like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and others as self-conscious, modernist attempts to locate the crisis of the regional subject's encounter with socio-economic exploitation and political turmoil during the 60's.

problem of modernity tends to tie itself up with a certain notion of citizenship pertaining to the urban despite being represented as disruptions within the domestic order. Tapan Sinha's *Jatugriha* (1964) is a film that can hardly be read as having any explicit bearing upon city-cinema that predominated the later part of the decade. However a closer study reveals the deeper symbolic associations that the text weaves around the theme of coupling and urban decadence. The city, here, retains a level of abstraction beyond its concrete visual manifestations and thereby enables a commentary on the fate of romantic coupling in an urban milieu. Here lies the difference between an explicit politics of urban space that the modernist-reformist agenda of realism aimed at working out within its own representational parameters and a deeper metaphorical anxiety underlying all such specific manifestations of violent encounter with the urban. *Jatugriho* primarily deals with various facets of a broken marital relationship and the couple's attempt to negotiate with urban professions and lifestyles. The film text attempts to represent the notion of fragility through a contrast between social units, which seek to negotiate the encounter with the 'urban' from a familial context.

Instead of concentrating on a single family, as is the focus of attention in the original short story by Subodh Ghosh, the film reduplicates the theme of the couple and their different ways of ordering their conjugal existence within the city.³⁹ A psychological reading of the film that focuses on the marital problems of

³⁹ The short story by the same name on which the film is based, deals extensively with a single familial unit and the history of their traumatic separation in the recollective mode when they meet many years afterwards at a station waiting room. The encounter which is the locus of the entire story however covers only one sequence in the film adaptation which otherwise addresses many

the central couple will presumably fail to account for the intricate and somewhat obscure opening sequence. In fact one can argue that the issues at stake are not so much related to psychological estrangement within the family as it is about a more structural estrangement with the 'city' itself. The elaborate opening sequence captures the central protagonist, a senior architect, and his employee, a junior clerk, respectively on their everyday detour through the city. While one perspective is defined by an outward view against a car windshield, the other is defined by a tracking shot that captures a miniscule walking figure as urban architecture of Esplanade looms overhead. The background score systematically shifts across the alternating fragments to stress on the specificities of the two different locations. Not only does the sequence explicitly situate the city in a conflicted maze of economic and social perspectives, it also serves to queue the text's major preoccupation with the theme of familiarization and encounter with the urban as a dramatic discourse operating beyond representations of personal conflicts. The narrative consequently opens up a painful history of being and becoming a citizen under new social parameters and therefore obliquely hints at the issue of displacement, which haunts any such 'process of becoming'. The narrative explicitly juxtaposes three distinct social units: Satadal and Madhuri's seemingly polished, respectable domesticity which is withering away from inside, Nikhilesh's crude, quarrelsome domesticity apparently on the verge of breakdown but tied in a strange string through the couple's obsessive attachment to their mutual discontent and finally Supriyo's humble domesticity; residing in a small house in a small lane

other thematic concerns. The realist agenda is best exemplified by Mrinal Sen's appraisal of the short story as displaying an exemplary narrative restraint and classical unity of time in spite of successfully fleshing out the history of their traumatic history. See Sen's introduction in the anthology of Subdoh Ghosh's stories adapted for the cinema (Ghosh 2000).

(‘where cars cannot enter’), exemplifying an unit that tries to disentangle itself from the obvious professional drive towards upward mobility. What unites and separate the three couples is their respective struggle to be together as a social unit.

It is not an accident that Satadal’s failure in setting up a home is paralleled by his systematic preoccupation with reconstruction and maintenance of buildings bearing cultural heritage. What is lacking in his own context is a proper imaginary coherence that could facilitate the construction of his perspective as a citizen and concurrently his notion of identity within the field of conjugal romance. In fact their conjugal aspirations are linked up to the network of cultural ideas related to notions of settling down, represented concretely by the couple’s exchanges around the ongoing construction of their own dream residence in the city. In one of the flashback sequences Madhuri exclaims, “I never expected that I’ll meet you one day, that we will have a house in Kolkata.” The intimate conversation relates the history of their coupling to the issue of landed property while the dialogue plays around with various connotations of the term ‘home’.⁴⁰ The couple’s evident displacement to an urban location from some *moffussil* town in Bengal is intrinsically tied to the discourse of upward mobility and identity formation that is more complex than the old ‘city/ village’ trope operative in earlier versions of family melodrama. Here belonging to a city symbolizes a struggle to retain

⁴⁰ There are sarcastic interplays at various points between the usage of terms ‘*bari banano*’ (building a house) and ‘*ghar bosano*’ (settling in a home). In Bengali the terms ‘*bari*’ and ‘*ghar*’ (house and home) are often interchangeably used although the latter term is more loaded with symbolic meanings associated with the constitution of legitimate family as a social unit.

psychological coherence despite the threats to a stable formation of identity within the urban order.

It is further interesting to note that in its attempt to trace the background of marital discord the text somehow fails to put forward a sufficiently convincing psychological account of the breakup itself. Madhuri's diagnosed infertility is portrayed as the central issue of conflict and emotional estrangement between the otherwise harmonious working couple. However the attendant psychological derangement that evidently leads to the process of alienation is never consistently developed thereby failing to establish the attributed cause of discord as a significant ground for breakup. One can argue that broader narrative theme is not about psychological estrangement within the family but rather about an estrangement in and with the urban order itself. In fact the film while underplaying on the psychological aspects paralelly develops more symbolic ways of representing the theme of urban estrangement. These thematic problems are not only locatable at the level of narrative content but also figure dominantly in the formal or stylistic aspects as well. In other words the representation of estrangement in the text brings the cityscape into work in quite unusual ways. The most significant facet of such a depiction comes through in an early sequence where Satadal comes to his empty house and sits desolately contemplating in the darkness. What highlights his anxiety at a formal level is the heavy play of light and shadow on his silhouette that hints at the larger city space outside the window frame. The domestic interior is uncannily permeated by the neon signs and groovy music from the nearby bars or restaurants presumably in Park Street, Kolkata's

quintessentially urban center boasting a lively evening atmosphere. Such signifiers of disruption are almost always visible in the sequences where the major verbal confrontations take place between the couple. Madhuri's symbolic move to close off the windows to retain the conflict within the domestic realm underscores the point time and again. However lights and sounds seem to be peeping in from every nook and corner sometimes ludicrously underscoring the vigorous discontent that the couple tries their best to decently negotiate. The city literally haunts their space; bearing testimony to the final collapse of their domesticity. Hence the rather inexplicable ritual of opening and closing of windows that punctuates certain sequences also becomes more meaningful when read bearing such a perspective in mind.

Thus we observe that the urban landscape sometimes bears a symbolic burden in such instances of melodrama often attempting to mark out fissures within the fabric of conjugality in a specific historical context. In some cases the signifying tendencies also attempt to situate the thematic problem by portraying a level of narrative abstraction that produces an obsessive psychic space amidst the narrative of breakdown as compared to earlier instances of melodrama where the various hindrances to conjugal bliss could be mapped out in accordance with the key thematic concerns. A classical example occurs in *Sandhya Dwiper Sikha* also made in 1964, where Suchitra makes a radical departure from her erstwhile romantic incarnation. It is perhaps the only instance where a mainstream heroine in Bengali cinema portrays an alcoholic and near demented woman trying to cope with her love related grief. While war is posed as a concrete historical context of

death and separation from her husband, her progressing alcoholism and paranoiac symptoms are hardly explained by the way the narrative unfolds. The film opens with a drunken heroine roaming about in the city in search of alcohol and consequently landing up sloshed at an old male friend's house. The intermittent flashback sequences try to capture the root of her trauma but the consequent explanation seems quite superfluous to the obsessive focus on the self-destructive drive of the lovelorn protagonist. The outlandish hunt for the dead lover ends in a suicidal act at the battlefield but the search for lost romance itself becomes a symbolic trope instead of being a narrative event. It would not be excessive to treat the text as marking the end of romantic era and dissolution of its representative protagonists. It is this very narrative of reconstruction and consequent breakdown of the romantic imagination that sets apart Uttam-Suchitra romances from all other similar representational attempts at formulating the contours of love within a social field. It is a very specific imagination we are talking about which places itself in an oblique mode with respect to conventional ways of conceiving the romantic utopia.

I am not trying to make a case for any radical or feminist possibilities inherent in such narratives. It is undoubtedly evident that there is an attempt to articulate an order that is none other than a form of patriarchy. However the terms, conditions and social imaginary that such representational work brings into effect would perhaps symbolize specific incarnations and limitations of patriarchal conditions it seeks to operate within. The couple here represents a certain model of community formation rather than a specific unit within the broader social order with which Indian melodrama has been so far concerned. On the other hand this

imagined community clearly steers itself away from traditional notions of community formations, logics of inheritance and social markers that define viability of romantic formations within the feudal domestic order. But neither does it seem to seek explicit legitimation from legal facets overseeing social contracts within a state. It is not legal registration that consequently defines the romantic bond, nor is it staged under the gaze of institutional paraphernalia that would legitimate the matrix of a sustainable social community. It articulates its own logic as an Imaginary alternative, a promise of community building which can only locate itself under the aegis of urban citizenship but refrains from internalizing all of its mandates. In fact one could argue that the psychic space opened out by the representational possibilities stands in for such alternative attempts at community formation. The function of melodramatic conditions in such a context is not merely to chart or resolve a series of conflicts but rather visualizing the contours of this imagined universe of choices. Its texture is perceptual, a drive to perceive a cultural imaginary and the parallel process of making such a universe inhabitable at a representational level.

Conclusion

The Cultural Work of Representations

It is time now to reiterate the opening moment of *Bipasha* where Suchitra Sen is sitting in anticipation of her romantic counterpart to fulfill symbolic aspirations described so far. It is needless to further any more instances of cinematic equivalents for the self-legitimizing procedure that I seek to delineate in these narratives of romance. The fact that the drive is related to a critique of traditional configurations of love under older patriarchal conditions is more or less explicit. The self-legitimizing drive of romance and its explicit invocation of a new sense of community emerging from romantic bonding, voices a distinctive desire that these film *socials* seek to narrativize through various mechanisms. These narrative mechanisms involve charting of new zones of intimacy, which seek to reconfigure itself in face of patriarchal limitations under transformations in social circumstances during the post-colonial era. But additionally, negotiative encounter with the entire paraphernalia of secular socio-legal discourse that is demarcated by representative institutions of the modern nation-state is most often bypassed along with its older traditional form. Therefore the more interesting question would be whether the underlying textures of such romantic aspirations characterize an attempt to refrain from translation of the romance into a modern social discourse legitimized by a new set of patriarchal institutions. It might be possible to argue that the notion of 'love' as recounted in such a trajectory, is represented as a domain of imagination problematically lodged between these two recognizable social spaces but encapsulated entirely by none of those.

What is at stake in the above instances of representation is the very distinctive feature of modernity in and of romance. As has been discussed elaborately in earlier chapters on literary desires and particularly the intervention of Tagore's work, one of the primary features of romantic imagination in the modern era is the inward turn of sensuality. Love had come to be defined less as a product of amorous perception or orientation and more as a mode of internal communication while simultaneously privacy has to reconfigure itself as a value laden psychic category in order to house this particular notion of romance. The emergence of such a category enables the modern individual to carve out a space within which s/he can restrict access of undesirable determinants. Thereafter the zone can become the locus of an exchangeable substance to which only desirable agents can lay their claim. What defines love here is a unique sort of communication, which is comprehensible only to those who have access to its newly formulated codes. On the other hand the discourse of marriage, in its older or renewed incarnation, seeks to render love into a more transparent zone, in principle accessible by the conglomerate of modern and pre-modern power points that dominate the post-colonial situation. The problem appears when a creative move seeks to delegitimize and reconstruct these overseeing conditions to create its own distinctive Imaginary. Needless to point out that a socialization of such discourses requires representational work that facilitates formulation of some of its codes or imposing some others in place of earlier ones so that the new discourse can become publicly accessible. Such a move is by no means an archaic or 'nativist' one, in fact its conditions are marked out by their location in the aegis of modernity. But enunciating itself from that position it seeks to create a

split, a stumbling block of sorts, which transcends the all encompassing gaze of modernity. Its conflicts with elements of 'tradition' are more straightforward and explicit but its critical engagement with the domain of 'modernity' might have more subtle nuances and require further speculation.

I have already argued that some of Rabindranath Tagore's discursive formulations broke down the prevalent cultural split between an earlier articulation of love as an element of socialization and sexuality as a bare element of human condition. Social melodrama, both its literary and cinematic incarnations, operates as a defining point for negotiating such antagonisms within the field of representation. I have further contended that representations produce a certain kind of 'work' pertaining to a broader discursive history that becomes accessible to a series of diverse cultural conditions operating beyond specific contexts of production. It is in such a context that Tagore's move in response to the possible fate of the colonial state has echoes beyond the colonial domain. One such attendant reverberation involves the re-figuration of identity under a condition where the life of a community comes under the aegis of the nation state, which defines the conditions under which its citizens can perform their 'identifications'. Amongst many creative ways of dealing with the problem, a few are concerned with recreation of psychic spaces, which can then be lodged outside the domain of the traditional and modern sectors, both of which lay their conflicting claims on the citizen as a new individual. Thus the most interesting aspect of this symbolic move, as identified in my discussion of both literature and popular cinema, is to de-link the tie between the

discourse of 'love' and the discourse of 'marriage' thereby creating a conceptually autonomous zone which resides at the margins of the new social order, a zone where one fantasizes 'identity' from its fractured location within the Symbolic. Following from such readings, I have also tried to argue that the element of fantasy which is visually conspicuous in Uttam-Suchitra romances should not be wholly interpreted in its illusorily, escapist sense. Here fantasy takes up the function of mapping symbolic spaces in which new forms of desire can be played out. It literally visualizes an Imaginary space, which is absent in concrete material terms. In other words it becomes a visual correlative for elaboration of a new structure of romantic desire and its formal limitations as well. Furthermore I contend that such a discourse not only represents the content of the desire but also foregrounds the 'cultural work' through which it acquires its specific symbolic texture in relation to the established parameters overseeing socio-political registers of the post-colonial society.

One could argue that here representational work literally demonstrates a process akin to the psychoanalytic concept of 'foreclosure'. However I use the term in a sense broader than the strictly psychoanalytic usage. In the Lacanian scheme of subject formation, 'foreclosure' refers to the abolition of the paternal signifier in case of the psychotic structure. The term helps in distinguishing and therefore elaborating on the processes by which neuroses and psychoses occur as psychic phenomena. The idea is to establish that repression cannot be the sole cause of all sorts of resistances to subjectification. Therefore foreclosure was used to pinpoint the process by which the

subject denies and by passes all attempts of the Symbolic to situate it within its matrix. The subject in this case does not register the paternal prohibition and simply refuses to take heed of the basic division inherent in the process of subject and gender formation. As a result the patient becomes psychotic in so far as he refuses to identify with the basic mandates necessary for a preliminary subjectification. In other words ‘foreclosure’ technically speaking defined as an event that occurs conceptually prior to the narrativization of the subject.¹

However the term can be used in a strictly analogical sense, for e.g., to address the ways in which narrative unconscious represents the trajectory and elaboration of the romantic encounter in relation to other constitutive elements in the texts. In such an usage I would not wish to identify the represented subject(s) (of the narrative or of history) as psychotic and nor wish to forward any psychoanalytic interpretation of a particular dramatic elaboration of the romance. Rather what concern me are the possible structural functions of ‘foreclosure’ as a psychic defense mechanism in relation to the Symbolic Order². At a broader level the foreclosure of romantic energy from the network of social

¹ However, Lacan throughout his career had elaborated and revised on his initial thesis to argue about a possible formulation of Symbolic Order, however rudimentary in psychotic subjects. He had argued that one could perhaps integrate a working version of connections so as to enable the subject some basic means to function within a scheme he does not wholly identify with. (Lacan 1997; Laplanche and Pontalis 1973; Fink 1995). I am indebted to Dr. Santanu Biswas for drawing my attention to the technical aspects of ‘foreclosure’ as a psychoanalytic concept and Lacanian revisions on the idea.

² Such articulations refer to the way by which a narrative elaboration of romance, as discussed in context of romantic *socials*, defines its own limits and delineates its own borders from other discourses surrounding it.

institutions also draws attention to the very historical formation of this specific structure of self, which is split into two distinct domains of ‘identifications’ and ‘identity’. By foreclosing certain elements, i.e. by pushing them out of its circuit, the psyche and concurrently the subject in the process of its myriad formations, situates itself within the Symbolic while at the same time retaining a secret access to the foreclosed terms to which the Symbolic itself has no more direct access. Thus the process of foreclosure sets down one of the conditions under which the historical subject enters into negotiation with the discursive elements that defines its limits.

It is by such a structural process of negotiation that the discourse of romance elaborates and retains its self-legitimacy vis-a-vis other determining agencies in the social field. Narrative ‘foreclosure’ as I conceive it, is a phenomenon occurring as a creative intervention to the process of historical narrativization of the subject, a process which limits the Symbolic’s drive to integrate the subject into its mechanism. As the subject enters the conditions that define its private encounters within modernity, it also carves out and separates a space that conceptualizes a new register of privacy and its elaboration through romance or any other means, as an autonomous and self-legitimizing discourse. This is a space that can only be remembered, experienced from within domain of the modern Symbolic, because its psychic preconditions emerge within its aegis. But it can

Thus to put it simply, the narrative mechanisms seek to carve out the discourse of romance in such a way that the overseeing representatives do not have access to the codes defining the central plot of romance. While, on the other hand, the romantic discourse itself can critically inhabit the existing order and imagine itself as being situated elsewhere.

be remembered only as a zone of imagination that is not wholly integrated within it. It represents a part of the subject, which through its process of foreclosure, sticks out beyond and defies incorporation into the legitimate social order, in the context of my discussion ---- the order of post -colonial modernity. The cultural work of representations enable such spaces to appear as more 'real' than social reality---as a domain of one's 'identity', one's memory, one's authentic habitation amidst myriad normative mandates that address the subject. In the context of the history of intimate relations, such cultural imaginations are to be necessarily defined as retroactive phenomena as they attempt to construct spaces that transcend various socio-political planes. It is important to note that such modes of transcendence symbolizes attempts to figure out ways of belonging to a social order rather than wishing away constraints of the order itself, by posing non-material alternatives. I have attempted to illustrate these complex conceptual phenomena through analysis of some of the representative literature and films from various genres and period within the modern period of Bengal's history. The arguments laid out through my discussions of intimacy do not seek to chart any simple changes in the idea of romance in a given social context. Rather they represent an attempt to write an alternative form of 'intimate history', which draws attention to ways in which discourses of romance become the central locus of negotiating conflicts bearing socio-political overtones in certain historical contexts. Thus the history with which I am concerned speaks of a broader history of cultural concepts as conduits for the subject's integration into various politically determined domains.

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