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‘REAL’ AND ‘IMAGINED’ WOMEN: A FEMINIST READING OF RITUPARNO GHOSH’S FILMS

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‘Real’ and ‘Imagined’ Women: A Feminist Reading of Rituparno Ghosh’s Films.

Rituparno Ghosh is one of Bengal’s most successful contemporary directors, having received both national and international acclaim for his films. Ghosh follows in the legacy of Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal, creating art house films, many of which revolve around the status of women in Indian society, as he considers the complexities of relationships, the intricacies of emotion and the often silent struggles that are inherent in everyday family life in India. Surprisingly Ghosh has received very little in the way of critical or anthropological attention and in this respect it is hoped this paper brings his film, and the sentiment within, to a broader audience.

The ‘curious visibility of women’ (Roy 1995:10) in Indian society is the impetus for this investigation of Ghosh’s films. ‘Femininity’ although on the one hand revered and worshipped publically, most notably through cultural emphasis on motherhood, the prevalence of Goddess worship in Hindu religion and the emergence of popular goddess cults such as Ja Santoshi Ma, it is concomitantly narrowly defined in the public media in such a way that continues to position and represent ‘femaleness’ in problematic and contradictory ways. This analysis of a selection of Ghosh’s films draws upon the work of Indian scholars who have aptly explored and criticised this problematic rendering of gender in Indian visual media (Sunder Rajan 1993, Thapan 2004, Munshi 2004, see also Mankekar 1999). In particular Sunder Rajan’s theoretical distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ women forms the foundation for the following exegesis. Sunder Rajan (1993) suggests that more often than not, seamless packaged ‘imaginary’ women that pertain to a socially constructed and deeply mythologized model of idealised feminine identity and behaviour, what I refer to throughout as the ‘female ideal’, form the dominant portrayal of women in the media whereas ‘real’ women are marginalised or completely absent. The emergence of the ‘new woman’ (Sunder Rajan 1993) or the ‘modern-and-Indian’ woman (Munshi 2004), who is modelled on the urban educated middle class career woman, is expected to be both modern and liberated without jeopardising national tradition. Although this may be aesthetically pleasing, it only becomes so by refurbishing the image of tradition so as to “make its values up to date” (ibid: 133) but this is a superficial engagement between the two concepts of tradition and modernity, on and through female bodies, as it only works by conflating tradition and modernity onto women’s bodies so that “there is no longer any essential conflict between the values they present” (Sunder Rajan 1993:133). This is problematic because women are instead presented as objects of historical continuity rather than as conflictual subjects and possible sites of contestation and forms a disjunction with the tensions and struggles that women face in being ‘women’ daily basis (Sunder Rajan 1993, Mankekar 1999, Thapan 2004). Meenakshi Thapan (2004) makes a similar criticism in her analysis of the portrayal of the modern woman in the popular women’s magazine Femina. The simultaneous representation of this woman as “glamorous, independent and conscious of her embodiment yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values” (Thapan 2004: 415-16) is, for Thapan, highly ambivalent and rather than presenting a seamless image, only serves to highlight it’s superficiality. Indeed, Purnima Mankekar (1999) found in her ethnographic study of female

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1 Ghosh has received various awards including the Firresci award for best film (Titli 1994), NETPAC award for most outstanding Asian film at the Berlin International Film Festival (Bariwali 2000) and Best Feature Film at the San Francisco International Film Festival (Bariwali 2000).

2 At the time of writing I found two papers that discuss Ghosh’s films. See Mukherjee (2005) for a discussion of his film Dahan and Chatterji (2000) who briefly mentions Titli whilst reflecting on the nature of mother daughter relations in India.
representation on Indian television that these feminine portrayals are at odds with how women perceive their own individual lifestyles. In reference to this, she quotes one woman’s reaction to the discordance of images in the media. She exclaims: “we are in the middle, we are neither very modernized, nor have we been able to leave behind our old culture…we’re neither here nor there” (ibid: 1999:131). What this statement suggests is that some women do not necessarily identify with the ideal ‘imaginary’ woman in the media and that contemporary life in Indian society perhaps involves constant mediation of social values in trying to know which way to behave and ‘perform’.

Taking this argument as the foundation for the following analysis, this paper sets out to examine the politics of female representation in Ghosh’s films in relation to a more general portrayal of women in Indian art house and commercial cinema. In order to do this, I first consider the social processes that contributed to the formulation of a model of idealised feminine behaviour as any critical appreciation of gender necessitates an examination of the contextual specificity in which identity formation occurs, as it is constructed, contested and re-negotiated (Chaudhri 2004, Narayan 1989, Mohanty 1988, Chitnis 1988). I then draw upon Indian feminist reactions to the ‘female ideal’ and use these criticisms to provide a model for thinking about female subjectivity in Ghosh’s films that starts from the materiality of the ‘lived’ body and strategic bodily practices. Here I develop the working notion of ‘body work’, the bodily practices such as walking, dressing and behaving that are associated with performing the hegemonic norms of gender, as well as forming the site for strategic subversive acts that can express subjectivity. I then go on to examine how the ‘female ideal’ and feminine sexuality has been treated in both commercial and parallel cinema before I turn to explore the body work of the female protagonists in Ghosh’s films, which I ultimately suggest has the effect of representing women within an alternative framework that elides the more problematic framing of popular media and cinema. Finally, it is also necessary to emphasise the widely recognised view that film is a particularly apt medium for the examination of cultural practices and ideologies (Dwyer & Patel 2002, Gokulsing & Dissanayake 1998, Valicha 1988), opening up, what Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998:138) describe as a “window onto the wider cultural world”. Furthermore, feminism has long acknowledged that visuality- “the conditions of how we see and make meaning of what we see” is one of the key ways in which gender is culturally demonstrated (Jones 2003:1). Thus it is hoped this exploration of Ghosh’s cinema speaks to wider anthropological issues concerning gender, culture and the body, the theoretical implications of which I consider towards the end of the paper.

Theorising Womanhood: The social construction of the ‘female ideal’

The female body and feminine identity are a prime concern in the Hindu religious and cultural tradition that places community and familial relations at the core of Hindu sociality. The Vedic texts state a ‘good’ woman “pleases her husband and gives birth to male children” (Battacharji 1990:51) and thus marriage and motherhood are axiomatic in Hindu society (Kakar 1988, Wadley 1988). In a traditional upper caste Hindu family strict ideas of honour and shame, purity and pollution dominate a woman’s life and strict hierarchies of age and gender dictate the ways in which women and men behave towards each other. Women are expected to be dutiful, respectful and submissive wives and al giving self-sacrificing mothers. The honour of a family and preservation of class and caste boundaries is heavily reliant upon women’s behaviour and control of their bodies (cf. Caplan 1988, Das 1988, Dickey 2000, Donner 2002). Once a woman reaches puberty she becomes aware of her body as sexualised and for the rest of her life she experiences oscillations between the periods of bodily purity and pollution, during which time her movements are circumscribed, she may have to perform purdah and observe certain taboos or rituals such as not entering the kitchen during menstruation (Das 1988). This complex rendering of the relations between notions of purity and
pollution, honour, shame, modesty and sin in traditional Hindu cultural ideology has produced a particular and ambiguous idea about feminine sexuality that results in women growing up with a perception of their bodies and sex, as a continuous source of pollution and danger but having internalised the necessity of being sexually active and procreating in the fulfilment of dharma (Das 1988) and further below I consider how this relates to women’s quotidian ‘body work’.

This relationship between femininity and the values of domesticity was intensified during the post-independences nationalist movement (Chatterjee 1993). During this time a nationalist consciousness sought to cultivate only what was ‘modern’ from the contaminating cultural influences of the ‘western’ world and it was believed this differentiation could only be achieved by retaining the strong and distinctive spiritual essences of the national culture through a circumscription of the outer, material world from the spiritual, inner world of the home. Women were re-inscribed within the home as custodians of India’s traditions and inner authenticity and this precipitated a move which involved “the recovery of the ‘traditional’ woman” in which the ‘eternal’ past was adapted “to the needs of the contingent present” (Sangari & Vaid 1989: 10) in a bid to express and reinforce ‘Indian-ness’. In particular nationalists invoked the trope of motherhood as a symbol of unchanging and authentic culture which subsequently re-conceptualised womanhood as the ‘Vedic superwoman’, the “chaste virgin, pure and faithful wife, the all giving mother” (McMillin 2002:20). Mother India was mapped onto the female body and imbued with certain culturally visible spiritual qualities of the goddesses, to form an essential femininity (Chatterjee 1993: 128-129) in which sexual chastity and honourable behaviour became even more crucial to a woman’s realisation of the ‘female ideal’. The woman-as-sign became intertwined with “other symbols of the domestic—most notably well-fed babies and young children” which continued to perpetuate an idealised imaging of successful mothering and blissful domesticity that became coterminous with a heavily nationalist imagining of India (Freitag 2000: 57)

Although strictly speaking there is no definitive parallel between the status of women and that of the female divinities in Hindu tradition (Anderson 2004) the nationalist appropriation of divine motherhood brought new focus to the ways in which mythological ideology impacts upon women’s lives and accordingly, Indian scholars have debated the efficacy of goddesses as ‘good to think with’. Sukumari Battacharji (1990:54), amongst others, states that this appropriation led to a ‘lost identity’ for women because they were completely subsumed under the monolith of motherhood. Jasodharo Bagachi (1990) also identifies the glorification of motherhood as problematic in her discussion of the Bengali tradition of maternity in the late nineteenth century. She suggests that by glorifying motherhood to express national selfhood, an abstract ideal of motherhood was produced which served to disempower real women and instead provide a metaphor for the strength of the nation by mythologizing women’s strength and power. The problem of identifying women and mothers with Hindu mythology is that the Mother Goddess in popular myths represents an abstract ideal and doesn’t provide examples of tangible or realistic mother / child relationships (Ganesh 1990, Battacharji 1990). Moreover, the practicalities of mothering that many women faced on a daily basis are omitted from the divine arena and the physicality of women’s bodies during pregnancy as well as the actual physical birth itself is ultimately excluded (Gedalof 1999). This thus serves to distance female sexuality and physicality from the ideals of motherhood and wifehood.

It is clear that traditional cultural conventions concerning women, sexuality and their place in society, in combination with nationalist appropriations of these conventions, subjected female-ness to processes of “hegemonisation and homogenisation” (Uberoi 1990:43) whereby it became fixed within the ‘pure’ domestic space and in immutable pre-determined categories such as wife and mother. In doing this, patriarchal hegemonic discourses extinguished any other facets of female identity that may have existed outside of social stereotypes and simultaneously erased any
differences that may occur between various women and their own individual experiences of being female in India. Moreover, women lose a sense of control over their bodies as the body is not so much a body of individuality but a ‘body-for-others’ (Thapan 1997b). Indeed, with regards to this problem Meenakshi Thapan has noted that the female body:

“…becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community’s expression of caste, class and communal honour. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community and the nation” (Thapan 1997a: 6)

Thus women’s bodies have been identified as the markers of boundaries for both the community and the nation (Gedalof 1999, Niranjana 1999) and in reference to this Irene Gedalof uses the term ‘body-work’ to refer to this ideological paradigm that I have been considering in which women and their bodies are expected to ‘work’ to uphold social, communal and national identities. I have appropriated this term ‘body work’ to also include and describe how these discourses become materially manifest for women. This move is inspired by Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity (1993), the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 2003: 392) that must be performed in order for gender to be achieved. Specific corporeal acts, which are socially constructed and continuously performed, conform to a morphological ideal that pertains to regulatory cultural models of sex and gender. Through the inculcation of these norms via ‘body-work’ hegemonic gender and cultural conceptions of womanhood as highly idealised are realised and maintained. In the Indian context, the physicality of the body in expressing gender is documented by Veena Das (1988) who describes how a woman’s experience of her gendered identity is massively informed by her body, both as an object- in terms of body image and as a subject, in regards to her experience of her embodiment in relation to those around her in everyday life. She explains that much of a woman’s experience of her body is shrouded by silence and therefore a woman has to learn to communicate through non-verbal gestures, not voice the tensions inherent in patriarchal family structures nor make any emotions explicit. Indeed, women often experience their bodies as shameful (Viswanath 1997), having learned that “there is nothing to be proud of in a woman’s body” and therefore have to try to conduct themselves in a pious and chaste manner, neither being too proud of their beauty nor overtly aware of their bodies by dressing inappropriately (Das 1988: 200) and being quick to pull up any straying pallu that slips from their shoulder, as part of a continuous act that keeps their bodies ‘in check’.

Therefore, as we shall see below, women in India have to continually negotiate the terms of expression of the ‘correct’ body by performing bodily practices- the quotidian modes of walking, talking, dressing, adorning and behaving 3 to produce the chaste, modest and sexually ‘pure’ female body of the nation that is coterminous with the ‘female ideal’. This is most manifestly seen through clothing practices that have long been recognised in anthropology as not only fulfilling a semiotic function in communicating socio-cultural meaning (Banerjee & Miller 2003, Dwyer & Patel 2000, Entwistle & Wilson 2001, Tarlo 1997). The relationship between clothing and social identity is particularly significant in India because the way a woman dresses is directly related to and dependent upon her relationships to others and her social role. For example, the sari, the orthodox form of Hindu dress, is imbued with values of tradition, conventionality and authenticity (Banerjee & Miller 2003, Tarlo 1997) and traditionally once a woman is married she shifts to wearing a sari and particular items of adornment such as bangles to delineate her new identity as an auspicious wife. After marriage clothing can still be problematic, as Banerjee and Miller (2003) demonstrate through the ‘autobiography of sari wearing’ of a young woman named Mina. We find out that Mina,

3 Whenever I use this term ‘bodily practices’ I am referring to all these modes of action that contribute to women’s ‘body work’.
a newly wed, is required by her husband’s family to always wear a sari and keep purdah, by covering her head with the pallu of her sari in front of her husband’s older brother. Moreover she lives in constant fear of embarrassment that she may lose control of her sari and appear immodestly in front of her new family. She describes how at night she is too uncomfortable to sleep because she won’t loosen the petticoat of her sari for fear that someone might come in and happen to see her legs ‘above the knee’ (ibid: 14-15).

However, Banerjee & Miller (2003) do describe the sari as a ‘lived’ garment, claiming it is the main medium operating between a woman’s sense of her body and the external world and claim that the way a woman may manipulate her sari and respond to it’s movements “expresses not only her personal aesthetic and style but also her ideals about what it is to be a woman in contemporary India” (ibid: 1). They comment that the sari is inherently ambiguous in that it has the “flexibility to accentuate, moderate or hide features of the body” (ibid: 75). For example the pallu can be exploited and manipulated by women to present themselves as coy by covering their faces when a lover passes by, as erotic by letting it fall away to reveal and accentuate the curvature of their breast, or using it to keep purdah by covering their heads in traditional domestic contexts as well as becoming an extension of maternal love by being a comforting presence in a woman’s child’s life. Thinking about the body, clothing and identity in this way acknowledges the significant role of clothing as expressing the self and in particular, Entwistle (2001) conceptualises clothing as an embodied “fleshy practice involving the body” (Entwistle & Wilson 2001: 4) lying at the margins of the body, marking the boundary between self and other, individual and society and she believes that clothing actively mediates these boundaries by providing a visual metaphor of individual identity as well as image of social norms. This also falls in line with anthropological and feminist approaches to agency, where an emphasis on the ‘lived’ body, the body grounded in everyday experience, has become a useful means for acknowledging women’s individual position in the world (Moore 1994). By attending to the materiality of the body, bodily practices, notions of embodiment and ‘lived’ experience, female identity can be recast as constituted through subjective experiences, perceptions and desires as well as be socially produced (Niranjana 1997, Thapan 1997a) and in this respect Seemanthini Niranjana (1999:4) claims that “an attentiveness to the body, to how…women’s bodies are lived, imaged, how they are spoken about and perceived…would allow us to trace the various dimensions coalescing on the question of women’s agency”. This thinking transcends limiting constructionist approaches and locates in women’s bodies the possibilities of subjectivity that not only negotiates patriarchal social values but also serves to acknowledge the various differences that exist between women’s experiences of being female in India. Furthermore, if we accept that the ‘lived’ body facilitates the possibilities of subjectivity, as a direct corollary of this and following Niranjana’s (1999, 1997) emphasis on body practices and their possible mediations of agency and Butler’s notion of gender performativity, I suggest that the ‘body work’ that women perform, whilst it expresses and conforms to the ‘female ideal’ can simultaneously forms the site for strategic subversive acts which, I argue in relation to the films, has the effect of negotiating the ‘female ideal’ and allows them to move between a prescriptive normative femininity and their own individual subjective emotions and experiences.

Women on Display: cinema and the performance of women
I want to spend some time discussing commercial cinematic representations because as Sunder Rajan (1993:10) has noted, “our understanding of the problems of ‘real’ women cannot lie outside the ‘imagined’ constructs in and through which women emerge as subjects” and so it is necessary to explore how the ‘female ideal’ has been perpetuated in commercial, before I consider female representation in two quintessential art house films.

In India today films are the most popular form of mass communication and Bollywood has the biggest film industry in the world, producing over nine hundred films annually and attracting over fifteen million viewers daily. Indeed, the Bombay film is alleged to be “the opium of the Indian masses” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 1998:88) and certainly popular Hindi cinema purports to be nothing more than pure entertainment, enjoyed for the lavish spectacles of dance and song, action packed adventures and glamorous actresses. Commercial film caters for a vast heterogeneous audience and therefore lacks generic differentiation as it needs to incorporate visual pleasure into a ‘something for everyone’ project (Kasbekar 2001). During the nationalist project and after Independence, the films produced were standardised to incorporate and communicate nationalist ideals of social morality and tradition. This was expressed through melodramatic formulaic plots centred on traditional feudal family sagas, romanticised communal values and archetypal heroes and stereotyped heroines from popular mythology. Cinema became a site for the nation’s reinvention by offering an occasion for India to differentiate herself from her colonial past and westernised values, becoming more modern but without being any less Indian (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 1998, Thomas 1998). Nationalist ideology mobilised in cinema sought to create the experience of solidarity by publicly demonstrating ‘Indianness’ (Pfleiderer & Lutze 1985:6) and indulging in what Sudhir Kakar has termed ‘collective fantasy’ (Kakar cited in Valicha 1988:34).

As I outlined above, the ‘ideal woman’ played an important role in the nationalist prerogatives and commercial cinema soon became the most significant agent in disseminating this image by indulging in “hyperbole and tumescent rhetoric on the subject of Virtue and Honour” (Kasbekar 2001:293). Thus heroines were always represented as chaste, submissive, modest and self-sacrificing and were stereotyped as either the virtuous all giving mother, or long-suffering wife. These stereotypes were emphasised and affirmed through particular bodily practices and dress. Mothers and wives were always portrayed wearing a sari, as was the heroine, as an “emblem of her chastity and goodness” (Dwyer & Patel 2002:87). In more recent films the heroine’s wardrobe has expanded to incorporate more ‘western’ style clothing but none the less she is still very traditional because the moment she gets married she switches to wearing a sari (Banerjee & Miller 2003).

One other important theme of popular cinema that relates to the ‘female ideal’ is the split between ‘good’ sexuality (dharma) and ‘bad’ sexuality (desire) (Uberoi 1997) that is demonstrated through specific social roles and behaviour. The heroine is the embodiment of ‘good’ sexuality and is opposed to the ‘vamp’ who is the prototypical wanton woman with overt sexual displays of lust. The erotic spectacle of women is notably one of the central pleasures of commercial cinema viewing (Kasbekar 2002, Dwyer & Patel 2002, Prasad 1998) and as Asha Kasbekar (2002) states ‘unofficial’ erotic pleasures had to be achieved by strategically circumscribing female eroticism within the socially acceptable domain of the song and dance sequence. These ‘performances’ when performed by the heroine are tolerated because they occur well within the realms of ‘make believe’ and therefore allow for transgressive voyeuristic enjoyment. Taking place as a ‘public’ exhibition in a theatre, nightclub or bar, the performance is coupled with an “approving audience” who serve to socially sanction the performance (Kasbekar 2002:297). However when this spectacle is performed by the vamp, who is generally allowed more space for sexual promiscuity because of her nature as a ‘bad’ woman, she is “usually disposed off (by the convenient stray bullet) as a fitting punishment for her threatening sexuality” (Kasbekar 2002:299). Clothing is also used strategically in revealing and
emphasising the erotic female body. Various ethnic costumes have been used such as grass skirts or revealing tribal costumes along with the notorious wet sari scene where a sudden downpour happens to drench the unsuspecting heroine and display the curvatures of her sopping body (Kasbekar 2002). Again these scenes are acceptable because they do not transgress the censor’s code on sexual display.

There are several points to be raised here. Laura Mulvey (1975) among many others after her, has critiqued cinema for objectifying the female body, claiming it becomes a passive reciprocal of the pleased active male voyeuristic gaze and this argument is readily applied here. Furthermore by only acknowledging women in terms of their sex, female identity is imagined to be clustered around two polar extremes of sexuality- dharma and desire. There is no other attempt to portray and explore the range of emotional and psychological complexities that may exist in-between these extremes, and in doing this it actively denies that other complex female identities and subjectivities exist. Secondly, all female erotic performances of ‘make believe’ occur in public spaces which continues to demarcate the sexually charged aspect of femininity outside of and distanced from the inner sanctum of the domestic sphere and its associations with chaste wifehood and benevolent motherhood. Moreover, only allowing the expression of sexuality on the terms of either ‘make believe’ or westernised ‘otherness’ nullifies real sexual experiences of everyday women by portraying sex as a forbidden ‘fantasy’, which if indulged in results in social disapproval.

As we have seen, commercial cinema visualises women within a specific structure of representation that pertains to idealised values of womanhood. Women are represented as stereotyped characters, reacting to and participating in conventional social situations in ways that uphold social norms. Patricia Uberoi (1990) has claimed that by portraying women in this way the media serves to make dominant gendered roles and behaviour appear natural and therefore any space for the exploration and demonstration of female subjectivity is rendered redundant.

Parallel cinema on the other hand follows quite a different trajectory. Rather than disseminating a unified picture of utopian Indian culture, parallel film sought to generate some kind of insight into Indian life by capturing the experiences and contradictions of a society in transition by focusing on small segments of Indian reality but explore their complex layers of meaning (Datta 2002, Valicha 1988). In particular a new type of woman emerged that contrasted strongly with the dreamy traditional heroines of popular film as she was placed in many different contexts, confronting a multiplicity of social problems in which all areas of Indian social life were exposed, examined and questioned. Certainly Ghosh’s cinema is not intended as a reaction to the stereotypes of commercial Hindi cinema, as Ghosh claims that he “subscribes to his own tradition of cinema that he has created” and this tradition takes deep root in the study of patriarchy, feminine identity and the complexities of human emotion (personal interview) and follows in the creative foot steps of Satyajit Ray. For example, Ray’s Charulata (1964), a film based upon Tagore’s novel Nashtanir (The Broken Nest, 1901), is a subtle and thoughtful film that guides us through a male dominated world from the eyes of a woman. Ray subverts the idea of domestic bliss and the home as a warm and intimate sanctuary by portraying Charulata as imprisoned within the home and her conventionalised role as a wife. This is exemplified through the use of Charulata’s opera style eye glasses which she uses to peer out from the shutters of her husband’s study. Cooper (2000:84) has claimed that by doing this Ray “shows his heroine obeying her age’s code of Hindu femininity by observing the world as she is expected to- from a distance…through a pair of glasses that articulate and reaffirm that distance”. Dissatisfied with her husband neglect of her for his work, Charulata begins to fall in love with his cousin, because like her, he is artistic and nurtures her gift for writing. Arguably Ray is doing something very bold for his time by showing a traditional Hindu woman as satisfying her forbidden desires rather relegating it to ‘safety’ of fantasy. Although at the end of the film, Charulata
reconciles with her husband, it is her who initiates and controls the situation. She takes stock of her desires and fixes the troubled marital relationship that caused her to stray to a man who seemed to have more to offer her (Cooper 2000). In a later film, Mahangar (1963) (The Big City) Ray uses bodily practices to express a female identity that hints at a transgression of social norms. In Calcutta, Lila’s husband looses his job as a bank manager and it falls upon her to find work and leave her role as housewife. Working as a sales representative for a knitting machine firm, she soon gets promoted to supervisor and her family start to notice changes in her. Draping her sari in a more modern and fashionable way than the more traditional Bengali one, she starts to carry a handbag, wear sunglasses and lipstick (Banerjee & Miller 2003). Moreover she talks more and more about her job and the world outside the home. This transformation is part of her becoming more confident in dealing with the world outside of the home (Banerjee & Miller 2003) and again it invokes a feeling of emancipation from the confines of domesticity and wifehood.

**Film Analysis: Negotiating the Female Ideal**

So far I have discussed the processes and discourses that contributed to the construction of the ‘female ideal’ and particular feminist discussions of this. I then examined the treatment of this ideology in both popular and parallel cinema. Now I turn to the analysis of Ghosh’s films. The majority of Ghosh’s films that I have chosen to discuss revolve around the politics of the home and the struggle of individuals within the domestic space to negotiate the conventions of traditional joint family and work through the everyday intricacies of marital and / or mother – child relationships. Here I will examine both character and narrative in combination with a focus on corporeal acts and bodily practices that are constitutive of women’s ‘body work’. To reiterate, this form of analysis draws upon ideas of (a) privileging the primacy of the ‘lived’ body as a medium of agency and (b) considering clothing as an embodied practice mediating the boundary between the individual and society, to envisage the ‘body work’ that women perform as strategically mediating the boundary between normative social codes and conventions of constructed femininity and individual experiences and subjectivity. Therefore, whilst clothing can communicate and therefore uphold regulatory norms of femininity, through hegemonic morphological ‘body work’, it is also possible that certain acts seem to gesture occasionally towards a transgression of these norms. Thus I suggest that Ghosh draws upon the widely understood and recognised notions of ‘body work’ at strategic moments to represent women within an alternative visual framework. This emphasis on the body also falls in line with notions of the role of bodily appearance in film whereby “showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable” (MacDougall 2006: 5). MacDougall (2006) argues that the body provides a knowledge of being which emphasises the usefulness of the body as a visual communicator in revealing meaning to the audience alongside or in many cases separate from the meaning communicated through dialogue.

**Blurring Boundaries: Chokher Bali, A Passion Play**

*Chokher Bali* (“sand in the eye”) is an adaptation of the novel by Rabindranath Tagore and is based in a colonial setting between 1902 and 1905. Binodini, a young woman who has been widowed after only one year of marriage is taken in by an old lady, a widow herself, and her son Mahendra and his new wife Ashalata. The ensuing story is a complicated web of love and forbidden passions, freedom and confinement, in which Binodini is firmly enmeshed, struggling to make sense of her identity as a beautiful, educated and spirited young woman that is trapped within the confines of widowhood. Binodini forms a close friendship with Ashalata and also Mahendra’s unmarried friend Behari, with whom she falls in love. However, when Mahendra realises that Binodini is better suited to him than Ashalata and expresses his attraction towards her, Binodini gives into forbidden passion and an affair ensues. This is eventually revealed to Ashalata who runs away in despair and Binodini,
ordered out of the house by Mahendra’s mother, goes to see Behari, who having always been her true love, and asks him to marry her. At first Behari refuses and Binodini leaves the village but later Behari changes his mind and after finding her, asks her to marry him. However, the next day when he arrives to take her as his bride, Binodini has disappeared.

The two themes of this film are the constraining nature of social roles assigned to women and the lack of socially sanctioned space for the expression of feminine subjectivity outside of these roles. Binodini is a multilayered character. She is intelligent, witty, confident and educated yet she is also sensitive and longs to be loved. Her personality and struggle are made even more potent and rebellious in contrast to Ashalata’s character, which is uneducated, naïve, immature and girlish. Moreover the audience is in tune with her desires, frustrations and emotional struggles because the whole film is narrated from Binodini’s perspective which is emphasised by the opera-glasses that she uses to peek through a window into Mahendra’s and Ashalata’s bedroom as well as later on when she observes the funeral wake of an elderly widow at the Ganges. Although this harks back to Ray’s Charulata where the glasses were used by Ray to emphasise the way in which women are confined to the home and excluded from the outside world, I think here Ghosh wants Binodini to use them voyeuristically. Unlike commercial cinema, where women are represented in such a way that they become objects of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), Ghosh displaces this gaze by presenting the ‘female’ gaze so that Binodini becomes the voyeur; it is through her eyes and from her gaze that we become involved in her struggle.

When we first meet Binodini she is wearing the mandatory dress of a widow- a plain white cotton sari, with no jewellery except a widow’s rosary with her hair modestly tied back (see figure 1). Her social position is highlighted further through her juxtaposition with Ashalata, who, being a newly wedded bride, wears a beautiful decorative red and gold silk sari (red is an important signifier here because it is traditionally the symbol of fertility in India and therefore an appropriate colour for a new wife’s sari). She is adorned in jewels, her hair ornately styled, bangles cover her wrists and her beauty is enhanced by cosmetics (see figure 2). Binodini, however, in accordance with codes of modesty covers her head with the pallu of her sari and spins her body round away from men when Mahendra’s mother is present as a gesture of humility. By wearing the prescribed social dress and conforming to bodily practices associated with the social conventions of widowhood, Binodini is performing, in the Butler sense of the word, social regulatory norms.
However as the film progresses this representation of Binodini changes. In particular there is a scene in which Binodini is trying on jewellery with Ashalata in the secrecy of Ashalata’s bedroom. Jewellery must not be worn by widows as it has particular connotations at marriage. Women receive jewellery at marriage from their own and their husband’s family and, since a widow is in eternal mourning for her husband it is considered inappropriate to ‘dress up’ in this way. However, Binodini flouts this by dressing and adorning her body. Unknown to Binodini, Ashalata calls for Mahendra and Behari and when they arrive to find Binodini adorned in jewels, an awkward conversation ensues where although Behari states that Binodini looks beautiful, there is an air of discomfort at the forbidden but beautiful image of Binodini still in her widow sari but covered in Ashalata’s marriage jewellery. Significantly, this act conflates sterile widowhood (indicated by the white sari) with the possibilities and passions of marriage and youthful femininity (the jewellery) thus blurring the boundaries between socially demarcated roles. Binodini’s body, the site of her ‘lived’ experience of being a woman grappling with the norms of society, articulates her dissatisfaction with the confines of her social role as a widow and subverts it.
This is seen again when Binodini goes to Behari’s house to ask him to marry her. Binodini, still wearing her widow’s sari but adorned in jewellery which is hidden under her shawl, performs the role of the archetypal seductress dressing up to seduce her lover (Ghosh, personal interview). As Behari closes the door, she unveils herself to him (see figure 3). Again Binodini is crossing the demarcated spaces of social identity via the strategic use of clothing and adornment. In doing this she expresses elements of her own self that is not ruled by social convention. This is emphasised by Binodini’s assertion- “I have three identities- I am a young woman, educated and a widow but all have eclipsed my real identity… I am also flesh and blood”. Although Binodini is a widow she is also a young woman, she has passion for life and lustful desires yet she also desires a family and motherhood and it is this intermingling of all conflicting aspects of femininity that stands to question the ‘purity’ and homogeneity of the female ideal. Through her ‘body work’ Ghosh shows Binodini actually engaging with and challenging the moral and sexual social codes that repress her and thus establishes Binodini as a complex and rebellious character who is struggling to transgress what Ghosh has described as the “shackles of the norm” (personal interview) in her search for freedom and for life. Her body, as we have seen, is not maintaining the ‘correct body’ of society, it is not “in the service of ‘docility’ and gender normalization” (Bordo 1989:28), rather her ‘body work’, her manipulation of her clothing and jewellery allows her to negotiate these values and express herself.

The final point I want to raise with regards to Chokher Bali concerns the ending, which is different from Tagore’s happy ending in which Binodini goes on to lead a life as an ascetic because that was, at the time, the right thing for a widow to do. However at the beginning of Ghosh’s film he quotes Tagore who said: “ever since Chokher Bali has been published I have always regretted the ending”. Rather than have Binodini suddenly return to the structures of social institutions and conform to cultural conventions Ghosh has her completely disappear. This is in fact quite an emancipatory act, a fleeing gesture which suits Binodini’s character- she is a woman who cannot and will not conform to the strictures of patriarchal conventions imposed upon her. Her fight for freedom coincides with the country’s freedom struggle and in her letter to Ashalata, Binodini speaks of her own country, a world “beyond the kitchen, courtyard and shutters and petty rules of home life”. In my conversation with Rituparno, he told me that this ‘country’ that Binodini speaks of is better interpreted and understood as ‘space’. He did not specify what this space signified as he wants to leave this interpretation open for the viewer to decide. For me this space is freedom. A woman like Binodini, questioning herself, her identity, relationships and the nature of her whole existence finds no place in socially sanctioned spaces in which to live. In Tagore’s ending, in order for her to be able to return to social life she must lose her sense of passion and thirst for life, which is perhaps what Tagore soon led to regret. But in having Binodini disappear, Ghosh is making a statement not only about the state of society in the early twentieth century but also commenting on contemporary society. Women can be independent, they can find this ‘space’ but it means breaking free of restrictive and unitary homogenous identities.

Demythologising the Mother: Unishe April and Titli

As outlined earlier, cultural concepts of motherhood were subjected to a process of idealisation and mythologizing to create a metaphor for the nation’s traditions and strength and the resulting image became an iconic sign in the media. However, this idealized maternal identity has never really been questioned or challenged and as Shama Chatterji (2000) has noted, the notion of a ‘monstrous’ or ‘bad’ mother is in many ways an alien concept in Indian society. In terms of visual representation, Rosie Thomas states that one of the “tenacious rules” of commercial cinema is that it is “impossible to make a film in which the protagonists’ real mother is villainous or semi-villainous” (Thomas
However the two films I want to explore here, *Unishe April* and *Titli*, portray motherhood alternatively. In both films Ghosh articulates the complexities of motherhood through the also relatively unexplored relationship between mothers and daughters. Just as Indian feminists have critiqued the idealised and abstracted identification of mothers with goddesses, both C.S.Lakshmi (1990) and Uma Chakravarti (cited in Gedalof 1999) have stated that of the few child—mother relationships that do exist in mythology they only occur between mothers and sons, such as Yasodha and Krishna. Therefore it would seem that Ghosh works with a double move here. On the one hand he tries to demythologise the mother from her iconic social status by portraying motherhood as a complex and problematic role that women must negotiate along with their other identities. Yet he does this by opening up the domestic sphere and exposing the politics of the private by showing the intricate emotional workings of relationships between women as they struggle to find their identity and place within domestic roles of mothers and daughters.

**Unishe April**

*Unishe April* (April 19th) is about Adithi, a doctor whose father (Manish) died when she was a young girl. The film, now many years later, centres on the day of the anniversary of his death, April 19th and Adithi is visiting her mother, a highly successful classical dancer. The film focuses on the troublesome relationship between mother and daughter and is interjected with flashbacks that emphasise the fact that Adithi’s mother was absent on the day of her father’s death and was in fact frequently absent during her upbringing, which serves initially to build up a negative picture of her. When we finally meet her she is extremely beautiful, dressed in an elegant sari which contrasts sharply to Adithi’s baggy t-shirt, flowing ankle length skirt and loosely tied back hair. Adithi and her mother talk to each other in a manner that is curt and irritable and we see that communication between them is very strained, especially as Adithi’s mother has forgotten it’s the anniversary of Manish’s death. To make matters worse, Adithi receives a phone call from her boyfriend in which he states that he cannot marry her because not only is she a doctor and his mother wants a ‘homely’ wife for him but also that she doesn’t approve of her mother’s dancing profession. Adithi’s mother does not understand, nor have the time to ask why her daughter is upset and, after receiving a letter informing her of an award she has won for her dancing, leaves immediately to catch a flight.
Adithi is completely distraught and as a storm breaks out, we see her sitting at her desk as she starts to write what would seem to be a suicide note. Time passes very slowly and there is no dialogue. The camera lingers on her tear stricken face, the pills that she taps on the table top, the drip drip of the bathroom tap and squeaking of her chair as she rocks herself. Here the viewer is completely engulfed by Adithi’s emotions. We are included in her struggle as she laments the social injustice of being an educated woman but not a suitable wife, and being a lonely and grieving daughter excluded from her mother’s life. Then her mother returns home unexpectedly because her flight was cancelled and this marks the beginning of a long and emotional process in which mother and daughter begin to work through their troubled relationship. Challenging her mother about her relationship with her father and her seemingly indifferent attitude towards her, her mother replies that Manish was angry with her, she earned more money than he did and was highly successful which seemed to be a source of tension for him. She offered to leave dancing for the sake of the family but this he refused. She says “he felt small somehow…he would have been happy if he had married an ordinary girl…I should never have married at all”. As the conversation ends, they begin to feel some warmth towards each other and we see the beginning of a possible resolution. The film ends with another possibility. A phone call from her boyfriend indicates that their relationship, like that with her mother, may not be over after all.

There are several points to consider from this brief synopsis with regards to the negotiation of the female ideal. Firstly, we meet the ‘bad’ mother who is portrayed as unfeeling and absent from her daughter’s life. She doesn’t know about her boyfriend, she has forgotten the anniversary of her husband’s death and she seems completely self engrossed with her dancing and her award. As she says herself, motherhood and marriage was not necessarily a natural progression for her. This representation of motherhood thus stands to challenge the idealistic and universalised image of motherhood perpetuated by society and it critiques the ‘one size fits all’ paradigm in which all women are assumed to marry and slip into motherhood with relative ease. Sangeeta Datta (1990) has described this perception of motherhood as an ‘ideological burden’ and I suggest that this is clearly the problem at hand here. Ghosh demonstrates that motherhood is not only something that needs to be worked at but that traditional expectations made of women in modern society are unrealistic in this respect.

Secondly, Ghosh demonstrates the problems that women still face on a daily basis. For example, the conflict between tradition and individual desire is still very much at the fore of these women’s lives as we see Adithi is not considered a ‘proper’ wife because of her profession. Ghosh has claimed (personal interview) that domestic life is about adjustment and compromise in trying to “maintain the status quo”. Good family relations grow from negotiation and discussion and *Unishe April* is a pertinent example of this. Women may be daughters, mothers and wives but they are also individuals who have to integrate their different roles within a society, which is both traditional and modern, where stereotypes conflict with individual needs and desires. As already described, the traditional ideal woman presented in the media is in many ways at odds with the lives of women today because the conflict of tradition and modernity is denied (Sunder Rajan 1993). Rather than represent his protagonist as conforming to these social traditions and thus disavowing this tension, Ghosh portrays women challenging dominant social codes.

*Titli.*

*Titli* is also a story about a relationship between a mother and her daughter. Titli is a teenage girl who is infatuated with a famous (fictional) film star Rohit Roy, and tells her mother, Urmila, how...
much she would like to marry him. The plot gets under way as mother and daughter go to the airport to pick up Titli’s father. During the journey, a car ahead has broken down and, by pure luck, the passenger is Rohit Roy and he hitches a ride with Urmila and Titli to the airport. Titli is ecstatic but her fantasy is soon shattered as it becomes clear that Urmila and Rohit have a secret past. When they make a pit stop in a village for Titli to buy some supplies for the journey, the past relationship between Urmila and Rohit is revealed as they take a walk and reminisce. Urmila was forbidden to marry Rohit by her parents because at that time he was a struggling actor with no prospects or security to offer. Back in the car, Titli notices a flower in her mother’s hair and she realises that they had a romantic past. Once back at home, having met Titli’s father from the airport, relations between Titli and Urmila are strained. Unable to sleep Urmila goes out on the veranda to contemplate the day’s events when she sees Titli’s light on. She goes into her bedroom and once again we see mother and daughter working through the new uneasy territory in their relationship because both mother and daughter love(d) the same man.

What is pertinent about this film is that it subtly proposes the concept of the sexual mother. Social conventions and representations concerning the female ideal have continuously separated procreative sex and dharma associated with marriage and motherhood, from individual sexual passion and lust. In this film Ghosh tries to integrate these themes as we see the two lives of Urmila, her domestic life and role as mother and wife juxtaposed against her flirtatious and loving conversation with Rohit, in which she sings love songs and recites poetry, all things associated with the courting of a betrothed young couple. This concept is further affirmed by one fleeting moment that occurs at the climax of the scene. As a thunder storm rages outside, Urmila deep in conversation with Titli, looks out the window with her shawl covering her shoulders. Suddenly her shawl slips to reveal a silk night dress that is cut away close to the breast. The camera moves to rest on Titli’s shocked face at this exposure of her mother’s sexualised body and then we see Urmila cover herself up quickly. It is at this moment that the two seemingly irreconcilable facets of female sexuality are united. By mobilising sexual connotative meanings associated with the silk night dress, Ghosh strategically uses Urmila’s ‘body work’ to unite sexual desire and motherhood which serves to demythologise the idealised chaste virginal body of the all giving mother, the body of ‘Mother India’, and its concomitant ideal values and norms.

Antarmahal: The sexual heroine
The one scene to be discussed in this film deals with issues of female sexuality in a particularly interesting way and therefore must be mentioned. Set in the colonial era of 1878, the film is about Bhubaneswar, a wealthy yet grotesque man who has an obsessive desire for an heir and a greedy lust for power. Having been unsuccessful in fathering a child with his first wife, Mahamaya, he marries a younger and more vulnerable girl named Jasomati. Having still failed to make Jasomati pregnant, Bhubaneswar enlists the help of a Brahmin priest who is ordered to sit in the bedroom chanting mantras during the act of sex itself because Bhubaneswar believes it will improve the chances of fertilization. Although Jasomati is extremely uncomfortable and unhappy about this situation, Bhubaneswar forces her to have sex with him. In an act of defiance against this Mahamaya sneaks into the bedroom and, sitting in front of the priest, she starts to titillate him. Lifting up the bottom of her sari to quickly flash her knee, she smiles and laughs as the priest starts to stammer over his words. After repeating this a few times and with the priest increasingly distracted, she starts to pull her sari off her shoulder and play with it slowly. The viewer, watching this scene from behind Mahamaya, suddenly sees her pull her sari right down, revealing her bare back to the audience but her bare breasts to the priest. The priest astonished, stops reciting abruptly, but Mahamaya just throws her pallu back round her body, gets up and leaves the room laughing.

The central point of interest here is Mahamaya’s sexual use of her body and sari to challenge male power and dominance. Just as Binodini and Urmila do a type of bodywork in negotiating social values, Mahamaya strategically uses her body and sari in a sexualised manner that ridicules and undermines the domination and exploitation of Jasomati by Bhubaneswar. Furthermore this scene is symptomatic of the issues that pervade society at large. Bhubaneswar and the priest symbolise patriarchal society and religion and Mahamaya’s body, in an ironic move, is transformed into a site of resistance in which she uses the very medium that women are subjugated by, her body, and arguably her sari, the traditional symbol of chastity and virtue, to confront and criticise rigid dominant moral values of society. Viswanath (1997) has stated that the majority of Indian women experience their bodies as shameful. This is not surprising seeing that sexual female desire has become a social taboo in Indian society and has been relegated to the sphere of fantasy in mass media or locked away within the depths of the home in a space that is reserved for the husband and family. However in this scene the relationship between the body, desire and the selfhood is re-figured as Mahamaya’s ‘body work’ becomes empowering as female ‘sex’ is retrieved from patriarchal clutches and re-inscribed to the female body and control.
Antarmahal, although acclaimed by many critics, received much criticism for its explicit portrayal of sex. Ghosh was accused of making a pornographic film and has been wrongly branded as anti-social and polluting. What I think is telling about this is that contemporary society still has a problem with the idea of sex and female subjugation. These reactions may also be due to the fact that the film places female subjugation within a wider framework of oppression, namely the domination of Indian society by colonial rule, and this intensifies the issue of oppression and may explain why many viewers felt uncomfortable with the films explicit portrayal of both female and Indian subjugation. Here we see an apt example of the ‘curious visibility’ of women because this type of female representation is rejected whereas beauty pageants and Miss World competitions are highly successful and publicly supported. I would suggest that the problem with female visibility lies in the fact that beauty pageants and competitions still lie within the realm of fantasy and ‘make believe’ that we have seen in popular cinema whereas in Antarmahal female sexuality and problem of marital sexual abuse is displayed in a ‘real’ life situation with more real life characters.

Searching for ‘real’ women.

Certainly questions of gendered agency and subjectivity are vastly complex and this paper is in no way intended to answers these. Rather, it has, reflected on the nature of the relationship between gender and agency through a discussion of the politics of feminine representation in Indian commercial and art house cinema and I have offered a particular reading of this relationship in Ghosh’s films. The women in Ghosh’s films emerge as multi-faceted persons, negotiating the terms of their dharma and desire and finding a way to live within the complexities of a society in transition. Rather than trying to find alternative representations of women’s subjectivity through a complete rejection of the social structure, motherhood, wifehood and all social and moral values of society, which is an unsatisfactory and unrealistic solution to the problem of subjectivity because women would not be able to function in society at all, Ghosh shows female subjectivity as operating within the social structures and situations that constrain them. The moral and social codes of the ‘female ideal’ exist in varying social processes, practices, situations and contexts and the ways in which women respond to these situations on a day to day basis should also be thought of as suitably complex. What we find in Ghosh’s films is women both submitting to and resisting hegemonic conventions and as Niranjana (1999:14) has rightly suggested, women are constantly involved in “shifting deployments of and engagements with the moral discourses, where women speak from both within the dominant discourse and from outside it”. Therefore one of the strength’s of Ghosh’s films is that he effectively evokes widely recognised notions of ‘body work’ to demonstrate how women can simultaneously symbolise and uphold social values, as well as strategically undermine them. This analysis, is inspired by and simultaneously finds parallels with Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) examination of praise in Hindu India as he tries to show that praise is “ in Bourdieus sense, a regulatory improvisatory practice which depends upon a particular topography of the self that underlies public expression... (involving) the public negotiation of certain gestures and responses”. (ibid: 93-94). To demonstrate this, Appadurai uses an example of how beggars draw upon a repertoire of gestures and expressions which are associated with devotional and praise practices / utterances through which they “deliberately enact the ambiguity of their emotional relations to their potential benefactors” (playing with the fine line between treating benefactors as gods by uttering praise and touching their feet in a manner which evokes a particular transaction between devotee and deity) and thus their performance is better understood as a “publically understood code for the negotiation of expectations and obligations...involving a distinct topography of the self and a related aesthetics of transaction...” in which benefactors feel obliged, coerced even, to give (ibid: 102). Although Appaduari draws upon Bourdieu, and I privilege the perceptive of Butler, the two papers resonate to the extent that the ‘topography of self’ or the ‘body work’ is a means of communicating not only daily cultural values
but is also a productive and creative enterprise that results in individual expression that is articulated through some kind of negotiated, but widely recognised bodily ‘performance’.

This analysis can also be usefully linked to discussions of subjectivity in gender theory. For example, Judith Butler (1993) has claimed that gender is indeed contested and that because of this there can be no closure on gendered categories. She claims that gender is better understood as processual (Butler 1993, 2003) because persons are constantly engaged in making, re-making, negotiating and in some cases challenging their gendered identities along with all other social identities such as class and caste. This is supported by Gedalof (1999), who, recognising the varying and multi layered social categories impacting upon women’s identity, states that Indian women are better understood within a model of impurity. This idea draws heavily from Donna Haraway’s (1991) postulation that gender identity must be re-conceptualised as starting from paradigms of multiplicity and disorder. Haraway’s (1991) myth of the cyborg, is indeed an efficacious metaphor for thinking about gender identity as it promotes theoretical thinking that starts from takes pleasure in the transgression of boundaries and disintegration of binary logic. Perceiving Indian women as ideologically ‘fixed’ within pure and homogenous categories of mother and wife severely compromises women’s status as complex subjects. However, if we start from a model of “mutation, metamorphosis and diaspora” (Haraway cited in Gedalof 1999:146) women can be re-conceptualised as complex agents participating in multiple contexts and evading rigid social categorisation to express their individual subjective voice. The complexity and often improvisatory nature women’s of agency within patriarchal structures have been demonstrated elsewhere by, for example, Raheja & Gold (1993) in their discussion of women’s strategic use of song to express their feelings and opinions and negotiate difficult gender relations through a socially acceptable medium, as well as Niranjana (1999) and Jeffery & Jeffery (1989, 1996) who explore mediations of agency and / or subjectivity through women’s use of gossip and women’s work respectively. This analysis is thus intended to align with the sentiment in these ethnographic examples, as I feel the women characters in Ghosh’s films are placed in socially uncomfortable situations which are embraced, rather than denied, as they openly and directly negotiate their own experiences of personhood with the more rigid identities of the ‘female ideal’ such as wifehood, motherhood and widowhood in viably social ways. ‘Real’ women, it would thus seem, are more resonant with a cyborg, rather than a goddess.

A final word…

It has been noted that commercial cinema is an active instrument of social stability (Prasad 1998, Pfleiderer & Lutze 1985) in which it “mitigates the trauma of the masses’ encounter with the new by preserving the illusion of a persistence of tradition” (Prasad 1988: 106). This insistence on perpetuating traditional values and, as we have seen in this paper, using the ‘female ideal’ as the main tool to achieve this continues to be to at the fore of feminists concerns about valid female representation in the media, issues of which introduced the opening of this paper (Sunder Rajan 1993, Basu 2004, Thapan 2004). However, the genre of parallel cinema, arguably based on epistemophilia and thus distinguishes itself from Bollywood by rooting itself in neo-realism and subscribing to a socially ‘conscious’ canon that appeals to a more intellectually minded audience (Datta 2000), it’s audience, according to Prasad:

“…know that modernity can no longer be defended against, and participate in its expansion with (our) commitment to the western aesthetic standards that make a Satyajit Ray film so appealing- we are not being asked to commit ourselves to a rejection of modernity or to a denial of its arrival”. (Prasad 1998: 106)

Arguably this statement could be extended to the representation of femininity in Rituparno Ghosh’s films. I believe the validity and strength of Ghosh’s representation of women lies in the fact that he
does not deny modernity because his characters confront traditional values and struggle to negotiate the ‘visibility’ and ‘invisibility’ of their positions and roles in society that are only present precisely because a complex interaction exists between the values of tradition and modernity; the very interaction that many, albeit older Bollywood films tend to ignore. Ghosh’s protagonists constantly re-interpret restrictive traditional ideologies and thus challenge the fact that traditional expectations made of women in modern society are unrealistic and in many ways at odds with the modern ‘lifestyle’ that places women into new and contradictory situations.

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Titli (2002) Rituparno Ghosh
Unishe April (1994) Rituparno Ghosh
Charulata (1964) Satyajit Ray
Mahangar (1963) Satyajit Ray

**Pictures taken from the following websites:**

Title page: http://www.flixster.com/photos.do?gallery=moviePhotos17599
Figure 1: http://movies.sulekha.com/hindi/chokher-bali/pictures/5.htm
Figure 2: http://movies.sulekha.com/hindi/choker-bali/pictures/5.htm
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Figure 4: http://bdbazar.com/nshop/default.php/cPath/2_126_51_312
Figure 5: http://bdbazar.com/nshop/product_info.php/products_id/2724
Figure 6: http://in.rediff.com/movies/2005/nov/22ghosh.htm

This paper is a revised version of my undergraduate dissertation submitted to University College London 2007. Still at UCL, I am currently undertaking fieldwork in India for a PhD thesis. This seeks to explore re-evaluations of selfhood in the experience of breast cancer in urban middle to upper-class women, exploring this process in relation to the possible biosocial practices of the wider cultures of activism, charitable organisations and ‘networks of care’ that surround the disease.