Feminists have sought to dismantle the feminization of care work within patriarchal cultures in a variety of ways. Responding to a growing interest in men and masculinities, a significant thrust within such initiatives has been to expand the role of the father and husband/partner beyond the patriarchal confines of reproduction and breadwinning, to greater involvement in care and other domestic work. This paper brings into focus three contemporary Bengali films which, through their representation of different forms of men’s care work, make it possible to expand the prevailing understanding of male caregiving practices in a number of ways. The paper tries to complicate the habitual equation of the genitor with fatherhood to show that that role is often played by other (male) persons in the community. It attempts to understand forms of men’s support that undermine patriarchal authority in the family. It explores an ethics of care that can be dislocated from the domain of the private to inform practices of support that are situational and emanate from the kindness of strange men.

Keywords: care, masculinity, fatherhood, South Asia, cinema

Feminists have sought to dismantle the feminization of care work within patriarchal cultures in a variety of ways. Responding to a growing interest in men and masculinities, a significant thrust within such initiatives since the 1980s has been to expand the role of the father and husband/partner beyond the patriarchal confines of reproduction and breadwinning, to greater involvement in care and other domestic work. Equal sharing of both household tasks and the work of childrearing, it was thought, would facilitate women’s increased participation in public life and economic self-sufficiency, while ensuring that they do not find themselves shouldering the double burden of working both within and outside the home.

This paper brings into focus three contemporary Bengali films—Kaalpurush (Memories in the Mist; dir. Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 2008), Khela (Game; dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2008), and The
Japanese Wife (dir. Aparna Sen, 2010)—which, through their representation of different forms of men’s care work, raise a series of important questions about prevailing approaches to men’s supportive practices in sociological writings. These films describe circumstances which make it worthwhile to consider whether a radical feminist politics can afford to curtail men’s caregiving within the boundaries of “fatherhood” and men’s responsibility as sexual partners of women—often within the precincts of reproductive heteronormativity. In what ways, for instance, can certain forms of men’s supportive practices in the home impugn the patriarchal insistence on heterosexual monogamy? Is it important that men’s caregiving extends beyond the unit of the household into the masculine/public world of commercial work, especially those which involve everyday interactions with children and older persons unrelated by ties of blood? Through a close scrutiny of such scenarios represented in these films, this paper expands the understanding of male care work in three ways. Firstly, it complicates the habitual equation of genitor with fatherhood roles to show that the latter are often played by other (male) persons in the community. Second, it sets out to understand forms of men’s support that undermine patriarchal authority in the family. Third, it explores, if tentatively, an ethics of care that may be dislocated from the domain of the private to inform practices of support that are situational and emanate from the kindness of strange men.

In South Asian contexts, men’s caregiving practices often emerge from their subject positions of son, cousin, brother and uncle; yet, among those who perform care work, many are related to whom they care for by community, not family, ties (Chopra, 2003b). While this crucial insight has informed studies of men’s supportive practices in India, their primary focus has been on working-class men. The increasing participation of middle-class women in the industrial work force following the “liberalization” of the Indian economy, and the ensuing male anxiety that now women will take away “their” jobs, make the present moment a pertinent time to expand this arena of inquiry by visualising middle-class men’s care work, as much in the world as in the home.

The three films I have selected are suitable for such a project not only given the situations that they describe but also the audiences that they address. All three films are identifiable as part of a genre within contemporary Bengali cinema that has its roots in the “new cinema” movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Largely focused on the lives of the contemporary urban middle-classes, the films of this genre have drawn back to the theatre a middle-class public that Bengali cinema had in the 1960s (Gooptu, 2010). The Japanese Wife, although set in rural Bengal, speaks to this public.

TIES OF COMMUNITY, RECIPROCITY, AND AN ETHIC OF MALE CARE IN THE JAPANESE WIFE

In The Japanese Wife, Snehmoy is an arithmetic teacher who lives with his aunt in a village near the Sundarbans. After his parents passed away at an early age, it is his aunt who has looked after him. The film narrates the unusual marital relationship between Snehmoy and Miyagi, who exchange wedding vows over letters, live far apart in different countries and never meet in their fifteen-year relationship. Snehmoy’s otherwise regular life is interrupted when his aunt invites a young widow, Sandhya, and her eight-year-old son Poltu, to come and live with them. Gradually, Snehmoy and the little boy develop a deep bond, and even with Sandhya, an unspoken thread of understanding is forged. The coming of Sandhya and...
her young son into Snehmoy and his aunt’s home creates occasion for the expression of a set of values which provide illuminating commentary on some of the contexts which impel men’s supportive practice in South Asia.

When his aunt announces to Snehmoy that Sandhya and Poltu will be living with them, she explains, “I brought you up when you lost your parents, now you must bring up Poltu. You can’t absolve yourself of all responsibilities by simply writing letters.” In his psychoanalytic study of childhood in India, Sudhir Kakar (1981) explains that the preponderance of the joint family system in the region means that uncles, aunts, and grandparents are prominent features in children’s lives. Kakar writes that in a country where the state has few social security programmes, the joint family plays an important supportive role in times of crisis, tiding members over periods of unemployment, illness, and loss of close kin (Ibid.). In such a social setting, if a child’s parents are unavailable for some reason, it is very usual for other members in the family to assume nurturing roles. The situation in The Japanese Wife, I would like to stress, is rather different. Sandhya is not related to them by ties of blood; she is the widowed daughter of Snehmoy’s aunt’s best friend. Moreover, although Snehmoy calls her such, it is unclear whether his aunt is consanguineal kin. The sense of responsibility that the aunt speaks of, then, is not one which emerges from familial ties characteristic of the joint family but from a wider network of interpersonal relations which distinguish social life in South Asia. In Bangla, the words janak and pita have two distinct meanings: while janak is simply the genitor, pita is someone who performs the role of the father and need not be the genitor. It is this distinction between the one who gives birth and the one who tends that underlies Snehmoy’s aunt’s call to duty. On another occasion, in a remark that further disengages fatherhood from mere biological reproduction, she tells him, “If you didn’t marry through letters, even you would have had a child his age. So what if his father is dead? That does not mean he is an orphan.” Snehmoy, whose name significantly means “full of affection,” develops an intimate bond with the young boy, which is noticed appreciatively by the women they live with. Seeing them prepare for the upcoming kite festival, Snehmoy’s aunt comments to Sandhya, “How close they’ve become, have you seen?” Their intimacy grows on the occasion of Vishwakarma Puja, a Hindu religious festival, when the two participate as a team in a kite-flying competition in their village.

In a world that seemed largely hostile to him, it is with his aunt that Snehmoy finds a zone of comfort allowing him to express himself. The ethic of male care that we find in Snehmoy does not emerge from the position of “father,” or from the mandate to provide in a conjugal relation, but from his sense of commitment to continue a practice of support that he has experienced and valued in his own childhood after his parents’ death. I find it useful to refer to the idea of “simulation” that Vrinda Dalmiya (2002) talks about while outlining the specific kind of interpersonal relationship that constitutes “care” in her essay, “Why Should a Knower Care?” Dalmiya explains that care work entails a process of understanding the emotional state of the person being cared for through an act of “imaginative identification” with the person. This involves an effort to fathom the point of view of the person being cared for, an effort that distinguishes care from merely paternalistic attitudes. Dalmiya cautions, however, that

Even well-intentioned simulation, particularly in a highly stratified society, can be notoriously off the mark. Can we ever ensure that in simulation we
do not simply remake the other in accordance with our own personalities. Consequently the more dissimilar we are from the cared-for the more the process of simulatively caring for her is likely to miss the truth. (Ibid., p. 37)

Snehmoy’s simulation of Poltu’s circumstance is able to avoid such a remaking of the other in one’s own image in the act of caring, because of the propinquity between their early lives. Both have childhood experiences of filial bereavement and receiving care from people within a larger community with whom they share an intimate, if not familial, bond. Snehmoy’s ease in fulfilling his aunt’s expectations from him to provide and care for Poltu and Sandhya arises from his immediate identification with the young boy, whose life parallels his own childhood in many ways. The willingness with which he performs this supportive role emerges also from Snehmoy’s sensitivity to the care work that Sandhya does for him—readying his clothes, serving him food, tidying his room. Sandhya and Snehmoy are never sexually intimate, but the presentation of their interactions carefully signposts the nearness of their relationship to a marital one.

A scene in which Snehmoy stares at a photograph of his Japanese wife lying below a meal that has been prepared and served by Sandhya, and the sequence in which he surveys his tidied room in surprise, capture his notice of Sandhya’s care work precisely because he cannot take this for granted. This acknowledgement of Sandhya’s caregiving is crucial in understanding the care that Snehmoy himself extends to Sandhya and her son. We may note that the ideology of women as “natural” care-providers posits women’s care practices as expressions of “love;” this logic is frequently used to justify women’s exclusion from paid employment (Finch & Groves, eds., 1983). Parallel to this construction, men’s provider role and the toil of commercial work are cast as indices of fatherly love. Such a schema does not recognise “care” as a specific set of practices distinct from “love.” Feminist conceptions of care as unpaid work, as “a labour of love,” on the other hand, tend to draw a critical distinction between love and care, one which calls attention to the economy underlying the separation of sex roles. The support that Snehmoy extends to the young widow and her son, because it is impelled, partially, by a felt need for reciprocity toward Sandhya’s caregiving—over which he can claim no moral right—exceeds the patriarchal limits of the male provider role; it includes a form of nurturance that prioritises the affective. Dalmiya writes that “caring begins when people are made valuable in a special way—when someone (the cared-for) is important or matters for someone (the one-caring)” (2002, p. 35). In the film, when Snehmoy discovers Sandhya weeping inconsolably at the prospect of having to go away because of mounting expenditure, he tells her, in a tender moment of physical proximity, that they need not leave this home.

I call attention to another aspect of Snehmoy’s characterization: his sense of alienation from the outside world. He has no friends, and as he tells Miyagi, he has always struggled to converse with anyone apart from her and his aunt. His aunt tells him affectionately that the only person he places all his demands to is her; in the world outside, he is “a mere worm.” As a teacher, Snehmoy does not evoke fear in his students, who think nothing of playing tricks when he momentarily steps out of his class. Having witnessed his care work, this particular characterization of Snehmoy as a man who lacks not just authority but also confidence in the public world, raises the question of what kind of men become sensitive caregivers in cultures that do not make this demand from them. What are their public identities, and
how are they perceived by people whom they interact with, at home and outside it? Many of these questions also come up in the situations that Kaalpurush presents us with. A discussion of the representation of male caregiving in this latter film will help me to identify a few ways in which these questions can be addressed.

**Unmaking Reproductive Heteronormativity—Male Caregiving in Kaalpurush**

Written and directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Kaalpurush tells the story of a young man’s relationship with his estranged father, his wife who despises him, and their two children. Through a non-linear narrative that depicts Sumanta’s childhood and the present, the film explores his complex feelings for a father he had once wanted to kill, his cold and mechanical marital life, and his intense love for his children. Through its twin narratives, the film presents two sets of father-child relationships—Sumanata’s relationship with his father, Ashwini, and Sumanta’s relationship with his two children—that reflect both the cultural factors which inhibit intimacy and care between fathers and their children, and the possible ways in which these difficulties can be overcome.

The film begins by juxtaposing the emotional dynamics of these two relationships. Ashwini’s remark that he has much to tell his son and that he is sure that Sumanta too has much to tell him, expresses the difficulty that men have in speaking intimately with their children. This is followed by a sequence in which Supriya’s (Sumanta’s wife) tremendous excitement at the prospect of visiting New York and her apathy toward her children are contrasted with their great affection for their father. When their mother is asleep, they tip-toe out of her room, and, hugging their pillows, go to their father’s room. They fight over which side of Sumanta’s bed each will take, after which Sumanta sings them to sleep. This narrative of Sumanta’s present day also consistently throws up a contrast between the perception that people in his life have about him, of him being a “failure,” and his close bond with his children, his involvement in their emotional lives.

Thematically, the film’s narrative is built around two sets of affective responses to somewhat similar situations—the feeling of regret that characterises the Ashwini-Sumanta father-son relationship, and the emotional bond that Sumanta has been able to forge with his own children. The relationship between father Ashwini and adolescent Sumanta captures that relationship between father and son which is paradigmatic in patriarchal cultures. The adult Sumanta’s questions to his father, when they first meet after years of not having seen each other—*do you know me? Do I know you?*_—convey the emotional chasm that inhibits real conversation between father and child. I will try to understand the social factors that impede intimacy between men and children when I discuss Khela. Here, I will simply reiterate that because patriarchal cultures construct particular emotions as a feminine attribute, intimacy is often experienced by men as threatening to male identity (Siedler, 2006). To the extent that warmth and intimacy arising out of a simulative understanding of the other is definitive of care work, the contradiction between these affective qualities and the dominant indices of masculinity poses a significant barrier to men’s involvement in caregiving.

Anthropological descriptions of child-rearing practices in non-western cultures have shown that not all patriarchal societies uniformly prohibit emotional intimacy between father and son (Weiner, 1976, as referred to in Chopra, 2001). The father-
as-stranger trope, therefore, does not homogenously apply across all contexts. Yet, it is worth emphasising that cultures that legitimize the nurturing role of fathers, define father love as a set of care practices that are peculiar to men (Chopra, 2001). Such a classification that insists on linking nurturing practices of men to masculinity does not pose a radical affront to sex role divisions. It certainly expands the male sex role but does not seek a transformation at the level of ontology. Radhika Chopra raises a critical question when she asks, “Does the performance of masculinity require a suppression of the institutional recognition of nurture, a refusal to acknowledge any form of feminine nurturing practice, to maintain the boundaries of a male gendered self?” (Ibid., p. 451). Significantly, Sumanta demonstrates a strange unconcern with that mode of masculine identity formation which is premised on a negation of the feminine. In fact, his sense of self seems to successfully override allegations of femininity from those who surround him. Supriya reminds Sumanta with unfailing dedication that he is a complete failure. She had married him thinking he would be successful, a professional achiever; this expectation Sumanta has been unable to meet. Even in his workplace, Sumanta is regarded as a failure by his co-workers and boss. On the one occasion he visits a sex worker, he is unable to have sex with her and is told never to return to that area again. Toward the end of the film, when Supriya decides to leave him and go and live with her lover, and reminds him once more of his failure, he asks her, “What is your idea of being someone? What does becoming someone mean? I’m fine the way I am.”

The oft-elided distinction between care and love that we invoked in the previous section is noteworthy in this context. The understanding of male breadwinning as a sufficient expression of father love, is, as we have seen, an ideological move. The narrative of Kaalpurush subverts this logic. The deliberate juxtaposing of Sumanta’s failure in professional life and his active role in ensuring the emotional wellbeing of their children suggests an ethic of male care that lays far greater emphasis on affective nurturance than on wage earning. An influential argument that some scholars have made when discussing the social factors which impede men’s involvement in childcare bears recall. It has been pointed out that the patriarchal ideology of men as breadwinners implies that masculine identity is produced through men’s engagements in the domain of commercial work, which seldom requires interaction with children (Seidler, 2006). The different demands between “who” men have to be at work and “who” they have to be with small children, set up a tension which threatens male identity, with the result that most men retreat to the domain of the public to perform their familial duties (Ibid.). Seen from within this perspective, Supriya’s allegation of failure is a reference to the failure of masculinity. To the extent that Sumanta has failed to achieve professional success, he has also failed to become a man. Significantly, the film gives us a male character that rejects this patriarchal logic. Sumanta’s words—“I’m fine the way I am”—do not reflect a sense of detachment from worldly minutiae, but a firm refusal to be evaluated in patriarchal terms.

The sequence described above does not end there. As Sumanta walks away, Supriya tells him that there is another item of information that she has not shared with him. The two children—Shanta and Shantanu—are not his. Sumanta turns to face Supriya and tells her that this is not unknown to him. Supriya registers complete shock and asks, “You knew it? And yet?” Sumanta’s response is worth quoting in its entirety:
Supriya, life is of many hues. Your life is like yours and mine is like mine. Who is to say what is right and what is wrong? Shantanu and Shanta could have been mine entirely. Just because they aren’t, didn’t change anything. I still love them. (English subtitle)

Supriya is astonished and demands that the children accompany her wherever she goes. Sumanta replies confidently that if the children want to go with her they certainly will; but how much of them does she really know?

Radhika Chopra has suggested that men’s supportive practices need to be located in relational contexts between men and women, as well as between men and men. In other words, we need to address a dimension of relationships that patriarchal structure often hides or mutes and look more closely at the everyday practices of men. (2003a, p. 1652, emphasis added)

Chopra’s suggestion is likely to strike as rather odd those who are familiar with sociological work on fatherhood in western contexts. Victor Seidler (2006), for instance, writes that fathering has traditionally been a position much more than it has been a relationship. As with work, fatherhood has been a terrain in which men are expected to establish their patriarchal authority. The challenge to the authority of the father is therefore a challenge to male identity, which needs to be dealt with harshly. Maintaining a distance from the everydayness of family life was a modus of retaining the objectivity needed to exercise patriarchal power (Ibid.).

I will argue that while Seidler’s argument is crucial to understanding patriarchal forms of fatherhood, our totalizing assumption that men’s everyday realities conform to this notion of power, may blind one to a range of men’s supportive practices that actually undermine patriarchal authority in significant ways. This is exemplified in Kaalpurush where we see that Sumanta’s involved care for children his wife’s lover has fathered questions patriarchal control of women’s sexuality through monogamous heterosexual marriage. Sumanta’s uncommon reaction to his wife’s affair (in the context of the moral ethos that we have just heard Sumanta describe, it becomes clear why the lover does not physically appear in the film: in this moral milieu there can be no duel between man and man over a woman’s body) is worth considering at some length, also because of his own adolescent experience with his father’s “infidelity.”

Let me dwell for a moment on the circumstances of Sumanta’s relationship with his father, which comprise one aspect of the film’s narrative. The disintegration of Ashwini’s family takes place after his wife finds him in what she thinks is a sexually intimate position with his ex-lover. She shares the details of this episode with their son—an adolescent Sumanta reacts with great anger and tries unsuccessfully to shoot his father—and leaves her marital home, taking the young Sumanta with her. Ashwini is devastated at being misunderstood by his wife and son and becomes a wanderer, roaming empty lanes in the outskirts of the city, until the day he takes his life. Ashwini’s intermittent return in Sumanta’s adult life is impelled by a desire to share what has remained unspoken between father and son. This is repeatedly stressed in the film. At one instance Ashwini tells Sumanta that he regrets not searching him out to convey the things he had wanted to express. Sumanta tells his father that he had hoped to meet him some day and tell him how much he loves him.
Sumanta’s awareness of his wife’s lover having fathered their children, I will argue, does not come in the way of his communion with them and the everyday work of care that he performs for the children because of the emotional distance that he has travelled from wanting to kill his father on suspicions of infidelity to calmly accepting the presence of his wife’s lover on a daily basis. Care theorists have suggested that conflict resolutions should be arrived at through the contextual and inductive thinking characteristic of taking the role of the particular other (Flanagan & Jackson, 1982). As someone who has suffered from a filial relationship that was devoid of emotional ties, Sumanta is able to assume the role of the principal caregiver of his children because of his simulative identification with “the particular other,” in this case, the children. His (Nietzschean) understanding that “life is of many hues and no one can tell which is right and which is wrong” allows him to see through the impulse that drove his adolescent anger toward his father, and experience love for him as an adult. He is therefore able to travel from a complete lack of communication in his own relationship with his father (“Do you know me? Do I know you?”) to a satisfying awareness of his deep involvement in his own children’s lives.

In the essay referred to above, Vrinda Dalmiya argues that the acknowledgement of care reception is an inalienable component of care because it makes the one caring vulnerable to rejection by the cared-for and makes the cared-for an active participant in the sustenance of caring. Such a moment of recognition of care is visualised in Sumanta’s interaction with his children. When Sumanta tells them that their mother may not live with them any more, their only reaction is, “But you will be here right?” The care reasoning that Sumanta expresses, exhibits a form of paternal thinking that expands the boundaries of care beyond the responsibility of the genitor in ways that undermine the patriarchal insistence on monogamous reproductive heteronormativity and the related expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

R.W. Connell (1995) has written that the dismantling of patriarchal forms of masculinity requires a re-embodiment for men, a search for feeling, using, and showing male bodies in radically altered ways. Care work is one terrain in which this re-shaping of patriarchal masculinity can transpire.

Baby work is very tactile, from getting the milk in, to wiping shit up, to rocking a small person to sleep. To engage with this experience is to develop capacities of male bodies other than those developed in war, sport or industrial labour. It is also to experience other pleasures. (Connell, 1995, p. 223)

In Sumanta’s interaction with his children we find such processes of re-embodiment that reshape dominant forms of masculinity. When Shanta and Shantanu come to him after their mother has fallen asleep, Sumanta smells their hair with great relish. A little later, in an uncommon gesture of male passivity, he turns over and lets Shanta draw on his back. Such embodied practices when understood as onto-formative (Ibid.)—by which is meant that body-reflexive practices variously affirm and dismantle power structures—are indicative of how the everyday work of care can displace dominant ways of being male. The clarification that Connell provides in his description of onto-formativity is worth repeating here to explain the wider implication of this visual sequence in understanding men’s care work. Connell urges us to remember that bodily practices which reshape the “ontology” of in-
individual lives simultaneously effect changes in the social world. The idea of particular embodied practices as onto-formative, is, therefore, not reducible to an individual’s idiosyncrasy but has the capacity to “bring new social arrangements into being (however partially)” (Ibid., p. 229). The forms of embodied exchange between Sumanta and his children, then, are not to be read as peculiar unto him; rather, in interaction, they become suggestive of social action that can challenge, if not wholly transform, hegemonic patterns of masculine expression.

In the following section I include the film Khela in this discussion to understand how the field of care work can be expanded beyond the spaces of the private, to arrive at a conception of care that can infuse interactions in the public domain. Khela is suitable for such a project because it presents us with a situation which involves a man’s close interaction with a child in the public world of commercial work. Through a reading of Khela, I will try to argue for a moral transformation that legitimises expectations of care from strangers.

**Care Between Strangers? Instances in Khela**

Responding to Carol Gilligan’s elaboration of a feminist ethic of care, Lawrence Kohlberg argues that such care practices are applicable only to the private realm and cannot be applied in public as an obligation that is owed to others (Flanagan & Jackson, 1982). Kohlberg’s argument makes me think about how the continuous relegation of particular affective practices—love and care, for instance—to the private domain serves to maintain the public/private binary in ways that reinforce gender inequality. In his review of feminist debates on the philosophy of care, Will Kymlicka writes that “the elimination of sexual inequality not only requires the redistribution of domestic labour, but also a breakdown in the sharp distinction between public and domestic. We need to find ways to integrate public life and parenting” (2002, p. 419). This section attempts to understand to what extent the ethic of care, which was initially developed in the context of private relationships, can infuse ways of being in the public realm.

The plot of Khela centres on the evolving relationship between Raja, a filmmaker, and Abhirup, a ten-year-old child Raja casts in his film. After more than three years of marriage, Raja’s wife, Sheela, desperately wants a child. Raja feels that he neither earns enough to support a child nor has the time to be involved in parenting. A few days before Raja embarks on his latest film project, Sheela decides to leave him and moves in with a friend. Raja goes through hundreds of boys’ photographs but does not find a face to his liking. One day, he chances upon a young boy on the road and goes with him to his parents to ask for permission to cast him in his film. Abhirup wants to be a part of Raja’s film but logistic concerns make it unfeasible for him to spend six weeks away from school for production work. Raja returns disappointed, but soon receives a call from Abhirup asking Raja to take him away for the shoot without his parents’ knowledge. Raja agrees, picks him up from school the next day and, unknown to the rest of his crew, brings Abhirup to the venue to begin shooting for the film. The film’s plot sets in motion a series of exchanges—between Raja and Abhirup, between Abhirup’s worried parents, and between Abhirup and the film’s crew—that invites an inquiry into public forms of male care work.

Considering the prospect of sending Abhirup away with Raja for six weeks, his mother asks Raja, “Whom will I depend on to take care of him?” To Raja’s reply
that he will take full responsibility of Abhirup’s care, the mother protests, “But you will be immersed in work!” Abhirup’s mother’s concern expresses a perceived opposition between the demands of work and the demands of childcare. This perceived tension between wage labour and the work of care is identifiable as a significant hindrance to the practise of a male ethics of care within the public world of paid work. Significantly, Raja’s characterization in the film casts him as a man who is incapable of even caring for himself. As Anjali, the only woman member in his crew points out, his wife has spoilt him by preparing all his personal work—his food, his laundry, even waking him up in time for shoots. As such he struggles to take care of Abhirup, both during the shoot and at other times, and frequently enlists Anjali’s help. On one occasion, when the boy gets lost and Raja blames Anjali for it, she retorts by saying that it is not her sole responsibility to take care of the child; every member of the crew should be equally responsible for him. In these words, Anjali is therefore arguing for a general ethic of care that must govern every crew member’s interaction with Abhirup. The film helps us identify a set of social factors which inhibit practices of care in public interactions between men and children.

When Abhirup is first approached by Raja outside his school, we see him with his friend eating *phuchka* (a local snack) from a road-side stall. The children’s immediate reaction to the stranger is that they have been told by their parents not to speak to unknown men. The fable of the *chele dhora*, a narrative which is repeatedly used to discipline truant children in *bhadralok* (Bengali middle-class) society, constructs public spaces as always potentially dangerous for children, where they are susceptible to being manipulated, indeed kidnapped, by strange men.

In the sequence which shows Abhirup crying profusely because he has been tonsured for his role in the film, he complains to Raja that this was not part of their deal. Also, he has played this role on stage and no one had taken his hair off then. Raja responds to the situation by explaining the different formats of cinema and theatre. Abhirup cuts him short by saying, “What difference are you talking about? Both are unreal.” This conversation could well be a starting point for an exciting discussion on realism, but the aspect of this interaction to which I wish to draw attention is the adult man’s mode of reasoning and the attendant inability to grasp the child’s emotional need at the moment. As Victor Seidler (2004) points out, since the Enlightenment, masculinity and the public have been identified with a particular conception of reason that has been painstakingly opposed to the child-like, the feminine, and the private. As such, men’s interactions with children frequently become an exercise in rational decision-making that has no space for engaging emotions and feelings (*Ibid.*).

I would like to underscore that to say this is not to repeat Carol Gilligan’s argument that men always speak in the language of justice and rights and women are predisposed to identifying the moral requirements emerging from specific relations and contexts. The difference lies in my focus on the *making* of “reasonable men” in patriarchal cultures and my refusal of the fixity of gendered predispositions to care that seems to be implicit in Gilligan’s work. My argument is that interactions between men and children that follow the route described in the film’s sequence are effects of a cultural training that identifies masculinity with a particular kind of reason. Such patterns of interaction rather than being seen as unchangeable features of male disposition are more fruitfully thought of as “styles of being” (Heinemaa, 1997) which persist so far as men continue to give life to them
by repeatedly assuming them. A different set of performances, then, has the potential to radically displace these styles of being with children and in the process remake the masculine self. Significantly, Khela gives us instances of such transformations.

The initially difficult relationship between Raja and Abhirup gradually eases into a bond of mutual affection as Raja learns to be attentive to the child’s mode of reasoning. When Abhirup mistakenly opens a jar containing butterflies that were to be used in a shoot, his attempt to rectify this costly error by capturing a caterpillar in the hope that in two weeks the caterpillar will metamorphose into a butterfly, speaks to Raja and culminates in Raja’s first physical show of affection for the child. This change in Raja’s pattern of affective response to situations of conflict, from aggression (in an earlier scene, he slaps Abhirup when the boy refuses to listen to him) to care, finds expression in Raja’s decision to let his crew go and himself stay back to look after Abhirup, when, at the end of the six weeks of shooting, the boy gets high fever. In a gesture acknowledging Raja’s caring, Abhirup gladly stays back with him. When his health improves, Raja takes him to Sheela’s house. Even here, Raja refuses to let Sheela take over the work of caring for the ailing child. To his wife’s question, “Do you know how to do this kind of work?,” he responds confidently, “Now I do.”

Andrea Doucet (2006) has argued that although recent research into western families shows that fathers are increasingly spending more time caring for their children, women continue to be seen as “responsible” for them in domestic and community life. The circumstances represented in Khela invite us to consider the beneficial role an ethic of male care in community life can play in children’s lives and also shows how particular situations can evoke this ethic from persons who may not be disposed to it. The film allows us to release the concept of care from the boundaries of the private and imagine how care can be a form of social practice that emerges from the everyday contexts of particular social interactions.

**CONCLUSION**

By briefly focusing on three filmic representations of male caregiving, this paper has tried to highlight feminist images of male care work that are culturally available to a Bengali middle-class audience. I have attempted to complicate feminist calls for fathers to share equally in childcare by arguing that an exclusive focus on “fatherhood” in discussions of male care work obscures a range of men’s supportive practices that emerge from their varied locations in community relations. I have pointed out that such limited a focus inadvertently allows the patriarchal unit of the monogamous heterosexual family to escape critical inquiry, when some forms of men’s care work may actually undermine, or work alongside, the legitimacy of this form of family organization.

A brief clarificatory note, explaining my adjectival use of the term “feminist,” is in order here. Some may argue that although the relationship between Snehmoy and Sandhya is not sexual, they do complete, together with Poltu, the patriarchal unit of the heteronormative bourgeois family. It may also be said that an important concern for a feminist appraisal would be that most of the children in these three films are boys. Sibaji Bandopadhyay (2007) has shown that while in much of Bengali literature for adults the woman has a striking presence, children’s literature in Bangla is marked by a conspicuous absence of the girl child. The Japanese Wife,
Kaalpurush, and Khela, it would seem, continue this tradition of collapsing childhood with boyhood. In light of these anticipated queries, I wish to clarify that the subject of my paper is not childhood, but the different forms of care that middle-class men extend to children. Commercial media, more often than not, affirm rather than question, traditional gender roles. The present paper has sought to counter such dominant modes of portrayal by identifying cinematic images of masculinity, especially in relation to care work, that are consonant with an egalitarian feminist politics. It is in this sense that I have used the term “feminist.” Men who perform the work of care negotiate the oppositions between the demands embedded in the act of caring and the culturally exalted patterns of maleness in ways that open up avenues for transforming patriarchal masculinity. Such transformations are neither complete, nor completely oppositional to the dominant. Following Susie Tharu, my reading of these texts has located resistance in a “theory of struggle within the ideological” (as quoted in Sundar Rajan, 1993, p. 124; emphasis in original). We are well served by the insight that resistance, while it is certainly not to be reduced to the terms of the dominant, is at times structured by it (Ibid).

I will conclude this essay by suggesting that feminist strategies to foster men’s involvement in child care should not naturalise the link between fatherhood and men. The political project of retrieving the father who is absent in feminist discourses on mothering (Chopra, 2001) and that of encouraging men to assume caring roles should resist defining fatherhood as a set of activities that only men can perform. An ideal feminist world is perhaps not one where men and women practise mutually exclusive styles of caregiving but one where they move easily between practices of fatherhood and mothering. Furthermore, there is need to encourage an ethics of care to spill over from private spaces into the public realm to govern interactions between strangers and children. The ideas in this essay are intended to be received as components of an incomplete project inquiring feminist visual representations of men’s caregiving practices in middle-class India.

REFERENCES


