

# DEATH DENIAL IN BENGALI CINEMA: A TERROR MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS OF SRIJIT MUKHERJI'S BAISHE SRABON AND HEMLOCK SOCIETY

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## *Abstract:*

*Everything that human beings do from the time of their birth, is a way for them to deny the inevitability of their death. A person adopts a myriad of ways to transcend the fear of death from their life and consciousness. This paper examines how the artistic medium of Bengali cinema provides insights into this existential issue and offers ways to overcome anxieties associated with human decay. Employing the Terror Management Theory (TMT) and film narratology, the study analyses two of Srijit Mukherji's films, Baishe Srabon (2011) and Hemlock Society (2012), that involve plots where the characters explicitly encounter the fear of death. Both films substantiate TMT's stance that humans seek immortality by establishing a "cultural worldview" and "self-esteem", which provide individuals with an illusion of symbolic existence that will last even after their death.*

**Keywords:** Fear of death, death denial, cultural worldview, self-esteem

## **Introduction**

"... that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death."  
- Ernest Becker, (1973, p.11)

The anxiety of death has probably been excruciating for mankind ever since the consciousness of its inevitability primarily appeared among our early ancestors. A number of archaeological records on cremation and burial rituals, existing prior to the emergence of farming and natural language, prove that death had been

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considered a fundamental concern even then, in a time dating back at least 20,000 years. Examples of this can be seen in cultural artifacts ranging from the ancient mythologies to the world's first literary epic - the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, where the terror of death and human desire to surpass this fear has been delineated. Thus, human beings have incorporated death into their culture and art from multifarious perspectives from the beginning of history. Thereby, the arrival of film language has marked the threat of mortality or annihilation as a salient incident to create suspense in the pursuit of the hero's purpose in film narratives. In the late 1960s, the depictions of mortality underwent significant changes due to the emergence of various "New Waves" in film history. Filmmakers' attempt to move away from studio-based classical filmmaking to a more post-classical production system, diversification in film forms and styles caused aesthetic changes in the cinematic narration of death and violence. In this process, some directors have mastered the depiction of death in their film narratives by presenting it as something more than a preoccupation or human pursuit of seeking immortality on earth. Indian Bengali director, Srijit Mukherji's name can be situated on this list.

Mukherji's cinema abounds with portrayals of human decay, often using it as the central theme or to evoke sadness and tension in the narratives. Although his debut film *Autograph* (2010) was a homage to Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (1966) and the legendary superhero Uttam Kumar, Mukherji's periodic depictions of death in the subsequent films mark his longing to explore human experience towards the threat of death. Among this filmography, his second and third films, *Baishe Srabon* (2011) and *Hemlock Society* (2012), explicitly involved plots where the protagonists must face or overcome the fear of death. This paper will show how the human tendencies to refuse death manifest in these two films and how they offer insights into existential anxiety management strategies. On account of the centrality of demise in these films, any endeavour to comprehend their narratives necessitates a theoretical lens that acknowledges death's importance in human psychology and seeks ways to transcend this anxiety. Terror management theory provides a novel lens for such an explanation

### **Theoretical Framework**

We would like to begin by illustrating how scholars define "Terror Management Theory (TMT)". Stemming from the works of Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), Greenberg et al. (1986, pp.189-212) propose the terror management theory to explain how human deals with the problem of the fear of mortality. For them, culture minimizes the fright generated by the consciousness of our vulnerability and

mortality through offering a shared emblematic vision of actuality that attributes control, predictability, significance, and stability to humans' lives. Thus, cultural drama provides an opportunity to live a meaningful and long life where a person achieves tranquillity or peace by believing that they are a valued performer of this drama. This feeling of being valued is known as self-esteem, which works as the assurance of security for the people. In simple terms, according to Greenberg and Arndt (2012: pp. 398-403), Terror Management Theory is concerned with people's awareness of death and how it affects their mental health. Therefore, TMT explores the role of humans' unconscious fear or terror of death in almost everything they do as humans. For effective terror management, the researchers yield that we need to believe in a cultural worldview which provides meaning and the feeling that one is a significant contributor to that meaningful world.

According to Schimel *et al.* (2018, p. 2), knowing that one must die sooner or later generates a feeling of existential terror because it goes against the human instinct to stay alive. If people recurrently have to deal with existential anxiety, it would disrupt their regular activities. To avoid death anxiety, researchers claim that humans develop a defensive psychological system aimed at keeping thoughts and anxieties about death out of their consciousness.

The TMT researchers affirm that, humans deal with their fear of mortality primarily through "cultural worldviews" and "self-esteem". "Cultural worldviews", as they define, are man-made symbolic and shared ideas of reality that give meaning, order, and durability to human existence. In the context of the cultural meaning system, "self-esteem" is the overall feeling that a person is a hero. The researchers believe that "self-esteem" and belief in a "cultural worldview" help lessen the fear of death by giving people a sense of "literal or symbolic immortality". Literal immortality denotes the belief in the idea of an afterlife. In contrast, symbolic immortality refers to leaving behind something that will uphold one's name or virtue even after physical death, like a work of art or family lineage.

There are three critical hypotheses of Terror Management Theory (Schimel *et al.*, 2018, pp. 1-17): *the Mortality Salience (MS) hypothesis*, *the Death-Thought Accessibility (DTA) hypothesis*, and *the Anxiety-Buffer hypothesis*. *MS hypothesis* refers that, individuals who are reminded of their demise are more likely to engage in worldview defense and engage in activities that have the potential to boost their "self-esteem". Standing at the polar opposite of the *MS hypothesis*, *the DTA hypothesis* claims that if "cultural worldviews" and "self-esteem" operate to buffer individuals from death-related thoughts and concerns, then threatening or

weakening these psychological structures should enhance the accessibility of DTA. Finally, the *anxiety-buffer hypothesis* posits that individuals' self-esteem should serve as a barrier against anxiety in general and also against thoughts and fears about mortality. Thus, considering TMT as the theoretical framework, this study will explore the selected movies to investigate how these films are concerned about the roles of "cultural worldviews" and "self-esteem" in the human endeavour to transcend death.

In order to shed light on the legitimacy of "Terror Management theory" in Mukherji's films, this study employs film narratology as the theory of textual analysis of the films. Film narratology helps viewers study the narrative and narrative structure of films and the ways these influence our understanding, discernment, and feeling about the world around us (Cutting, 2016). Derived from the works of late formalists and structuralists of the 1920s, and Vladimir Propp's essay on Russian folk tales, narratology could simultaneously be applied as a theory and research technique for examining texts. In this approach, a film narrative can be considered as a sum of incidents that are arranged into a sequence (Metz, 1991, p. 24) and "a way of understanding data under the illusion of occurrence" (Branigan, 1992, p. 115). In order to synchronize images and sound in a certain format, according to the researchers, every film narrative must have a structure that makes the narrative meaningful upon analysis. That is why the study of narratology as a theory and research technique is essential to make sense of how the anxiety of death is presented in the narration of the selected films of Mukherji.

Before turning to the analysis of Baishe Srabon (2011) and Hemlock Society (2012), in the next section, this paper will look at some of the scholarly literature that employed TMT in film narratives since such review can recapitulate our perception of how and why people respond to and create various forms of artistry.

### **Literature review**

Over the past two decades, many scholars have attempted to analyse the notions of mortality and immortality with respect to film's plot and aesthetic form. Scholars like Young, Sullivan, and Palitsky (2019) categorize this research trend into a few subtypes where one set of studies focuses on the portrayal of death in fiction films. Citing Schultz and Huet (2000) they show that death has been depicted at an alarmingly high rate, for instance – "1 per every 8 min in the Hollywood popular films" (Young, Sullivan, and Palitsky, 2019, pp. 537-539). However, in seeking an answer about how spectators psychologically respond to these mortality reminders,

the researchers assert that the terror management theory provides exciting insights into looking at the film texts.

Sullivan, Greenberg, and Landau's (2009) essay was one of the earliest ambitious attempts to address this question. Based on the TMT the scholars explore various themes of demise, immorality, and ambivalence over the physical body in two dark Hollywood films *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Straw Dogs* (1971). They depict that, humans react to death reminders by embracing a sex-roles identity that is culturally prescribed. In both films, while the male subject seek immortality through social achievements, the female subject invests in the idealized notion of reproduction or physical attractiveness and sexual prowess. Besides, institutionalized sacred beliefs and practices serve as defense mechanisms that keep death anxiety at bay. The researchers sum up by claiming that the application of TMT in these kinds of existential films' narratives reveals "clashes of cultures, alienation, cultism, heroism, and sacrifice".

The perspectives of TMT for artistic film narratives were further investigated in Bassett's (2009) essay on *Lord of Illusions* (1995). Entering the world of horror and film noir genres, the scholar demonstrates how death anxiety plays a salient role in human psychology. According to him, the film is a commentary on strong psychological abhorrence as a reminder of death and physicality. By maintaining a sense of concern about whether magic can transcend or reveal death, the film offers spectators the opportunity to come into contact with their suppressed tension with the inevitability of human decay. Thus, it substantiates the stance of TMT which states that the quest for immortality as the prime concern for humankind is to thwart fear of death.

Relying on some of these early scholarly investigations, in 2013, Sullivan and Greenberg compiled an 'interdisciplinary anthology' on the construction of death in film - *Death in Classic and Contemporary Film: Fade to Black*, in which contributors from psychology, philosophy, literature, and film studies utilized approaches of TMT to open a dialogue between TMT analysis and film studies. The work is taken up by researchers as the most competently theorized new writings since it established a relationship between TMT scholars with other scholars who employed Ernest Becker's concepts to examine trends and motifs in film and literature separately (Young et al., 2019, p. 542). For instance, Greenberg and Ayars (2013) applied TMT in their analysis of four different films of four genres to comprehend the ways films work in enlightening *the psychological ramification of the human awareness of death* (p. 34). They find that *The Matrix* (1999), *Life*

is *Beautiful* (1997), *Iron Man 2* (2010), and *Ikiru* (1952), all the four films glorify the ways that make one feel as if they are surpassing death through legacies. Additionally, the protagonists in the films become able to see outside the “cultural worldview” they are embedded in. Moreover, they create new culturally accepted paths to “symbolic immortality” due to their broadened perspective towards death.

Researchers Lieberman and Fergus (2013) were interested in examining the psychological implications of mortality salience in the apocalyptic film genre. They reviewed several apocalyptic movie plots with special emphasis on the *Children of Man* (2006). The characters of these films inevitably face their decay and the annihilation of the planet earth. On the contrary, the protagonists in such films often achieve a heroic position and “symbolic immortality” by weighing their own life against the potential loss of humankind. Thus, the application of TMT reveals that the maintenance and defense of culture are regarded as essential tools for coping with existential concerns.

Likewise, while searching for some psychologically valid reasons behind the vast and enduring popular appeal of superhero movies, citing Becker (1973) Koole *et al.* (2013) contend that the cultural concept of a hero is built on the hope and confidence that one’s cultural accomplishments will be remembered and valued in the future (pp. 139-140). Death serves as a motivator for people to strive for heroism, which TMT proponents define as self-esteem. Heroic achievements refer to either literal or symbolic triumph over death. If the cultural hero system works as a buffer to the fright of demise, then reminding people of this anxiety should motivate them to boost up their own culture’s hero systems. This concept stands parallel to findings of different TMT experiments which show that people defend their “cultural worldviews” more vehemently when they are reminded of mortality.

By embodying different TMT perspectives, Sullivan (2013) further examined a recent American epic period drama film, *There Will Be Blood* (2007), adopted from the 1927 novel *Oil!* The film is a striking example of the depiction of a modern capitalist era, in which reminders of death accelerate human desire to earn power, fame, wealth, and the inability to acknowledge guilt. Thus, draping itself in the mantle of modernity, the film depicts how capitalism as a form of ideology constructs a sense of immortality and self-esteem, changing our past cultural worldviews and reshaping individual psychology.

More recently, Rieger and Hofer (2017) initiated an experimental study on 130 undergraduate students incorporating the film *One Week* (2008) to fathom how films can help deal with the anxiety of annihilation in the spectators. In light of

the terror management theory, they propose that when a person is confronted with ideas of their death, meaningful films can help alleviate anxiety. Besides, meaningful films include features that act as an inner shield, allowing viewers to manage mortality related distresses (p. 728).

Although these bulks of works offer valuable knowledge into the application of TMT on film, hereto, these have solely taken into account the well-known production of Hollywood and western movies. As a result, still, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on films produced in other industries. This essay is an initial attempt to redress that gap for Bengali films.

### **Methodology**

Keeping the objective in mind, the study employs film narratology as a research technique to analyse the selected film narratives. David Bordwell (1985), in his seminal study of fiction story, *Narration in Fiction Film*, proposes three distinguishing elements to comprehend a narrative structure: *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and *style*. The *fabula* can be defined as a story that encompasses the action as a chronological cause and outcomes of incidents that eventuate within a specific time and place. The *syuzhet*, a dramaturgical process usually known as plot, is the setting and formation of the *fabula* in the film. In order to depict a story, it embodies “actions, scenes, turning points, and plot twists”. *Style*, the third element, refers to the technical aspects (such as cinematography, composition, sound, and editing) required for filmmaking. Therefore, Bordwell (1985) argues that narration takes place while style and syuzhet coexist, providing viewers with an array of cues for the formation of a story (pp. 49-51). Depending upon the elements of narratology, this paper critically examines the mortality salience presented in *Baishe Srabon*'s (2011) and *Hemlock Society*'s (2012) narratives and adds analytical remarks in the light of terror management theory.

### **Analysis**

#### ***Death and quest for self-esteem: Baishe Srabon (2011)***

Mukherji's film *Baishe Srabon* (2011) has earned awards both nationally and internationally for its direction, screenplay, technical execution, music and award-winning acting of its main protagonist, Prosenjit Chatterjee and other supporting actors. Critics have also praised it for resuscitating the psychological noir-thriller genre in Bengali film after a long time. While these technical facets of the film are deserving of analysis, the film's core narrative, as inspired by 1995 crime-thriller

*Seven* and 2008 drama-thriller *Righteous Kill*, is also impressive and worthy of study. The story centres on nabbing a mysterious serial killer leaving couplets from famous Bengali poems as a hint next to the dead body and wreaking havoc on the streets of Kolkata. Its core theme is focused on the immortality projects rooted in self-esteem, victory, and heroism, that can often push human life to death.

*Baishe Srabon* (2011) is set amidst the lonely urban night scape of Kolkata, coupled with a murder of a prostitute, which follows the same footprint of the previous serial killing. The murderer wounds the victim in accordance with the couplets of Bengali poetry written by prominent personalities. This opening murder scene is precluded by the number of dark medium and close-ups shots marked by low-key and the top-lighting can be defined as the early narrative existence of decay in the film. Therefore, according to the terror management theory (TMT), Mukherji's attempt to make death prominent at the onset of the film affirms the significance of human consciousness of annihilation as an impetus behind every character's action in their pursuit of self-value and success. As the narrative develops, this becomes evident when the viewers are introduced to Abhijit Pakrashi (Parambrata Chatterjee), a brilliant assistant commissioner of police, who fails to unravel the mystery despite adopting various tactics. Pakrashi's strong desire to succeed in his career and his longing for love makes him a significant character in the narrative. However, being thwarted in this way causes bitterness in his relationship with his fiancée, journalist Amrita Mukherjee (Raima Sen), and creates an atmosphere of doubt about Pakrashi's efficiency among his colleagues. Becker (1971) contends that people gain self-value from four sources: among them, one source is derived from one's connection to family and friends and another one is defined by one's larger identifications with, "the corporation, the party, the nation, science, history, humanity" (Becker, 1971, p. 186). Each of these perspectives assumes an underlying motivation to achieve immortality. However, any obstacle toward these sources can increase our impending sense of mortality. In this context, a TMT analysis highlights two perspectives of Pakrashi's persona that heighten mortality salience in him: the threat posed by his colleagues to his fame and existent meaning systems as well as the threat of loneliness associated with his personal life. In order to clarify Pakrashi's increased mortality salience, at one point of the narrative, Mukherji shows Pakrashi as a lonely, jealous, and drunk person who is indifferent to life and hallucinates that he has lost everything. Later, viewers witness his efforts to solve the case and reconcile with Amrita. Thus, Pakrashi's later endeavours can be considered a defensive strategy aimed at defusing the threats to maintain his anxiety buffer provided by self-esteem.



Because of Pakrashi's failure, in the next section of the narrative, Pakrashi's superior decides to bring back an ex-officer Probir Roy Chowdhury (Prosenjit Chatterjee), to assist Pakrashi in investigating the case. Despite being hideously talented in solving serial killing cases, due to his ill-temperament, foul-mouth, and violent investigative tactics Probir had been suspended from the police force earlier. His character appears to be obsessed with the pursuit of recapturing self-esteem and personal value. This is illustrated from the very first meeting of the two police officers in Probir's zamindar house, which is shown to be on the verge of ruin. The film narrative includes numerous *mise-en-scène*, delineating Probir's lost zamindari and superior mentality in all aspects of life. Dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans along with a peg of whisky in one hand and a cigarette placed on the side table, Probir is playing chess with himself while Pakrashi enters his room. The room was full of old clocks and human masks hanging on the wall, and old shabby furniture with piles of things. While Pakrashi introduces himself first, he is asked to address Probir as "sir" out of respect and is reproached for being 12 minutes late since, *as per the report, half a dozen rapes have occurred in India within the last 12 minutes* (Mukherji, 2011, 0:28:37). In this way, Probir proclaims his superiority and Pakrashi's incompetence as a police officer from the beginning. There is an ironic tone in Probir's voice that no viewer could have missed, and his eyes are full of mockery for the police force and this young talent that is Pakrashi. As the conversation progresses, Probir starts speaking dispassionately, as though the misfortune of the police force is of no concern of his. Bearing a look of sardonic hauteur, Probir does not spare any effort to prove to Pakrashi, and even the entire police force, that they are amateurs in dealing with serial killing cases. He states that he will talk only if Pakrashi's superior police commissioner Amit Kumar (Rajesh Sharma) comes to plead with him. In the next meeting between these three officers, Probir wears his old uniform, asking his old friend commissioner Amit to help him wear the epaulet as a symbol of Probir's necessity in the police force, by which he indirectly insults the police force. Placing four rules before them that make him the ultimate authority for every action taken in the case, Probir agrees to re-join as a special member of the police task force. This aligns with the argument of terror management theory which yields that, humans want to establish a significant self-identity that will endure even after their physical death. This psychological problem of death awareness can transcend if they succeed in achieving forms of "literal or symbolic immortality" (self-identity) through their contributions to society to which they subscribe (Rothschild *et al.*, 2018, pp. 180-182). In Probir's case, the film unfolds that his earlier suspension from the police force was the biggest threat towards Probir to achieve immortality in the world.

Consequently, the present offer provides Probir with an immense opportunity to re-establish his name and fame. Therefore, by highlighting his intelligence and undeniable necessity in the police force, Probir once again tries to recover his self-value. Thus, Probir's quest for regaining self-esteem can be viewed as his desire to establish "symbolic immortality" as an existential buffer.

Parallel to Probir and Pakrashi, the presence of an immortality project in *Baishe Srabon* (2011) can be witnessed through another character, an eccentric poet Nibaron Chakraborty (Gautam Ghose) who was imprisoned due to suspected involvement in an event of arson at a book-fair years ago. He considers himself a part of the 1960's controversial Hungry Generation movement that shook the roots of literary and cultural establishments in Bengal. Throughout the film, Nibaron strives to establish his self-esteem by rambling around Kolkata at night, reciting poems and fixing a meeting with Rabindranath to publish his poetry. His insanity is confirmed by Amrita and her colleague Surya while researching serial killers for a TV show. Meanwhile, Pakrashi and Probir are informed about Nibaron's nightly walks from two different sources: Amrita's investigation and Nibaron's servant Swapan's statement, which convinces them Nibaron is the killer they are looking for. In an attempt to discover Nibaron's stance on the Hungry Movement, the duo goes to his house in the guise of journalists. The dialogues between them make it more apparent that Nibaron never considered the movement a failure. Besides, his attempted arson at the book fair was a protest against shutting down the movement since the movement was a way for the Hungryalists to pursue "symbolic immortality" through their literary works. Thus, the narrative suggests that for Nibaron, the quest to gain a sense of immortality in the world means keeping the movement alive through his revolutionary poetry.

The final major arc of the plot is the revelation of the original murderer, which offers viewers the opportunity to come into contact with their suppressed awareness of the inevitability of their demise. On the night of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's death anniversary, while observing Nibaron's house, the duo encounters a hooded silhouette fleeing from the residence; the figure is Swapan. With a crying voice he tells that Nibaron has been burning all his artistry out of depression. Nibaron commits suicide, and inside the house, they find another verse beside his body. They realize that this was the last murder. Probir is congratulated profusely by the police department for solving the mystery. Thus, Probir restores his stardom. A month later, on Rabindranath Tagore's death anniversary, Probir invites Pakrashi to his house to discuss some matters. To his astonishment, Pakrashi confronts Swapan as the servant of Probir. While the narrative begins, Probir mentions the name of his attendant,

Kanai, to Pakrashi. At this stage, Pakrashi as well as the viewers come to know that Probir's attendant is no one else, Nibaron's servant Swapan. By the end of the film, the narrative reveals Probir as the mastermind behind the murders and Kanai, an ex-criminal, as the executor of the murders. Probir is fulfilling his vengeance against the police department for his suspension, which he viewed as a disgrace to his ingenious work despite the tragic death of his wife and son. It ends with the suicide of Probir since he can go to any extent to obliterate murderers. Terror management research demonstrates that humans (the participants) assign severe punishment or harsh evaluation to a person who violates cultural standards of value, such as a lawbreaker or moral transgressor, as a defense of the "cultural worldview" (Schimmel, Hayes & Sharp, 2018 p.4). From this perspective, the film seeks to assure viewers that Probir's suicide is ultimately a heroic act to protect humanity from annihilation. Heroic conducts are highly praised by society/culture since they allow society to be "delivered... from the evil of the termination of life" (Becker, 1975, p.150). In return, society bestows "symbolic immortality" to those who exhibit the highest levels of heroism. In this process, Probir's "symbolic immortality" has been assured through his death.

Although Probir's relentless pursuit of personal achievement and self-esteem led to the death of multiple characters in the film, the visuals and reminders of mortality thus implicitly inform viewers that the anxiety of death ultimately drives the character's action.

### ***When death reminder is good for life: Hemlock Society (2012)***

Mukherji's third film *Hemlock Society* (2012), deals with death in a way that works to uphold the virtues of life. Hemlock is known to be a poisonous plant that was used to force the great Greek philosopher Socrates to take his own life (Humphry, 2005). The film adopts the name from a USA based association, the Hemlock Society, that supported the idea of assisted euthanasia for terminally ill patients, which is defined as a person's right to terminate their life through assisted suicide if they are suffering from an unbearable illness from which they can never recover (Duckett, 1991). The film's main protagonist, Ananda Kar (Parambrata Chattopadhyay), operates an organization that provides proper knowledge, guidance, and mental support for suicidal individuals. Unlike the USA based organization that worked to legalize physician-assisted death for terminally ill people (Girsh, 1997, p. 690), Ananda's Hemlock Society runs to help any person seeking to die for any reason.

The fright of death appears at the beginning of the narrative. On a typical night, Meghna (Koel Mallick), a beautiful young girl, buys sleeping pills from a pharmacy

to commit suicide after being cheated on by her boyfriend Shantanu (Shaheb Chatterjee). Ananda follows her home from the medicine store and prevents Meghna from swallowing the pills. The next day, he convinces her to join a three-day workshop at the Hemlock Society. Being enrolled in the course, Meghna gets an opportunity to experience the horror of death from close proximity. Gradually she discovers more reasons to live compared to her few reasons to die. The different techniques the Society applies to convince her of the value of life make Meghna change her mind, and she admits to Ananda that, along with so many other reasons, now she wants to live as she has fallen in love with him. But Ananda tells her that doctors are not expecting him to live more than two years since he suffers from lymphocytopenia. He reveals Hemlock Society's objective, which is to convince individuals that suicide cannot be a viable solution to any problem. By exposing them to death, the Society helps distressed people understand that other people are still alive although being in greater distress. Meghna leaves Hemlock Society freed from her suicidal condition, and later she is shown having a good time with an improved relationship with her family. On the contrary, Ananda's health condition deteriorates, but he continues running his anti-suicide mission. He rescues Meghna's ex-boyfriend, Shantanu, who was about to kill himself by jumping off a bridge after being neglected by his recent girlfriend Shreya and drives him to the Hemlock Society.

The film highlights two perspectives to comprehend the terror of death: one is Ananda's, who wants to live longer despite being aware of the certainty of his death; another is Meghna or Shantanu, who has lost the desire for life and wants to embrace death. As TMT states, death reminders drive people to retain "cultural worldview" beliefs and strive for "self-esteem" (Schimel *et al.*, 2018, p. 4); from this perspective, Ananda's activities can be defined as his pursuit of establishing symbolic existence, where his social work will sustain his name beyond Ananda's physical decay. It becomes evident when Meghna asks Ananda what inspired him to establish such an organization. Ananda replies that the moment he came to know he only had a couple of years left to live, the significance of life suddenly increased. The incident evoked him to encourage distressed people so that they understand the value of life.

On the contrary, Meghna's suicide attempt triggered by her troubled relationship with her father Dr Chittaranjan and Shantanu can be understood by the TMT's DTA hypothesis, as it argues that when individuals' psychological structures are weakened or threatened, they become more exposed to death-related thoughts (Schimel *et al.* 2018, p. 10). Dr Chittaranjan's second marriage after the demise

of his first wife and Meghna's disapproval and impassive attitude towards her father and stepmom created a distance in their father-daughter relationship. The situation made Shantanu the only person from whom Meghna could seek emotional support. As Chittaranjan tells Shantanu's new girlfriend, *Since Meghna had a pathetic father like me, Shantanu meant everything to her... lover, friend, father* (Mukherji, 2012, 01:28:15). When Meghna discovers Shantanu cheating on her, she completely breaks down. Being neglected and deceived by her close ones, Meghna finds herself a worthless member of the society. Furthermore, her dismissal from her workplace increases Meghna's desire to commit suicide. As she says, *I can't find a reason to live, Mr Kar* (Mukherji, 2012, 00:29:47), the movie provides a scope to confirm the TMT argument that a sense of threatened "self-esteem" and individual relationships with the close ones work to enhance death-related thoughts. The narrative portrays a similar incident in Shantanu's case. A threat to his relationship occurs when he finds that his new girlfriend is avoiding him, which leads Shantanu to make a suicide attempt by jumping off a bridge.

However, it can be said that *Hemlock Society* (2012) demonstrates a core insight of TMT: that life could be charming if humans contrive through their efforts to make it so. It shows how the experience of death can restore human belief in "cultural worldviews" and self-esteem. The three-day workshop in which Meghna enrolls is designed with a myriad of suicide tactics such as wrist slashing, hanging, immolation, being run over by a train, jumping off a bridge, being shot by guns etc., to let a person experience death from an uncomfortable proximity. By doing so, they provide the participants' minds with a register of words to articulate the fears of demise and stimulate affection and desire for life. Besides, if a person realizes that many people worldwide are living in even more miserable situations, the feeling can eliminate death-related thoughts from their consciousness. When Meghna meets Hiya, a girl working in a brothel, who was sold into prostitution by her uncle, and Colonel Samaresh Bagchi, a valiant soldier who cannot move by himself at present, Meghna's sufferings alter into tranquillity. She finds reasons to live again. Moreover, Ananda's approach toward Meghna makes her believe to be a valuable person in the cultural meaning system. Later, Ananda admits that the workshop was all a part of Hemlock Society's pro-life treatment, teaching people to fall in love and believe in life again.

Thus, putting forward the terror management theory's conceptualization, *Hemlock Society* (2012) conveys the significance of meaningful worldviews to restore our self-esteem and belief system that leads to the transcendence of the fright of death and makes life beautiful.

## Conclusion

Death has undoubtedly featured as the salient visual component in Mukherji's *Baishe Srabon* (2011) and *Hemlock Society* (2012). The film narratives reveal human beings' fear of annihilation despite acknowledging the universal truth of our death. Both films manifest the role of "self-esteem" and belief system in "cultural worldview", committed to providing psychological security of human existence even after their demise. In *Baishe Srabon* (2011), the most successful ex-police officer Probir transforms into a serial killer to regain self-esteem by demonstrating his intelligence to the police department. Even his suicide intends to uphold heroism, a sacrifice for the greater good, which is, according to TMT, a venture to achieve emblematic divinity. Contrariwise, in *Hemlock Society* (2012), Ananda Kar's anti-suicide mission is a pro-life venture and an initiative to seek immortality, which will keep his name alive after his physical death. Besides, the Society tended to solve the crisis of decay by imbuing significance and affection for life in participants' minds with the application of various self-destruction techniques that employ reverse psychology. Therefore, it restores "cultural worldviews" and self-worth within individuals by endorsing TMT's assertion that cultures "must ultimately solve the ...existential problems" (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2000, p. 210). Thus, the analysis of these two Bengali films once again provides a basis and meaning for mankind's endless effort to escape the fear of death and their engagement with "self-esteem" and "cultural worldviews system".

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