



DILEMMA OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN SUCHITRA BHATTACHARYA'S *DAHAN* (THE BURNING)

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ABSTRACT

Dahan, the story is about the burning of two women Romita and Jhinuk. Newlywed couple Romita and Palash is attacked on the open road. Romita is molested by four men near a crowded Metro station in Kolkata. No one intervenes. Nobody comes forward to help. However, one lone school teacher, Jhinuk rushes to the spot to help. Jhinuk is determined to punish the assailants, and helps the police but it raises a storm in the lives of these two women and unfolds the fragile nature of relationships between Romita and her husband Palash and on the other Jhinuk and her fiancé Tunir.

INTRODUCTION

Suchitra Bhattacharya is a well known name among the Bengali writers today. Her writing focuses on present-day social issues. She is a sensitive spectator of the changing urban milieu and her writing intimately examines the contemporary Bengali middle class.

Romita is a feeble house wife. She suffers but cannot demand her right in her family or even in the life of her husband. She has confined herself in a semi-transparent envelop and suffers alone. She is intelligent, tries to be independent but cannot find out the way. She expresses herself in this way:

How strange are the lives of women- a slight familiarity, a marriage, a few months of living together changed their entire world. Now, every moment, she was conscious of Palash's likes and dislikes, his family's as well. Is this what closeness is all about? Is this how family ties are formed? (*Dahan* 20-21)

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1P a g e



Romita is humiliated, cheated by her own. She has wept uncontrollably. The faces of those four men haunt Romita night and day but at the same the feeling of injustice, deceit done by the faces with whom she is living, torture her more. When she insists to speak the truth before all, her husband suppresses her speech by saying, "This means whether you had...some sort of an affair with those men before marriage. There were other women at the station as well. Why didn't they target them? Why did they go for you? in particular?" (72) When a lady is in tremendous stress, her husband instead of bestowing support, accuses her pointing as the root of the dishonor, is really mortifying. Palash's rage, aggravation and male ego reveal in a brutal way.

Women's physical purity is valuable when males want and it has no value when men do not. Perhaps, Romita can catch the actual cord of her husband's psyche. Probably Palash feels troubled in the presence of Jhinuk. He cannot bear the very truth that he failed to protect his wife and a girl had saved his wife's life. This feeling hurts his ego. One of Romita's aunts-in-law advises her that the honour of women lies in the hands of their own. So going to court and publically accepts shame does not increase Romita's self-respect. She needs *diksha* from Gurudev because it will free her entirely of all feelings of shame. "Draupadi had some holy feelings still left in herself; Sri Krishna came and saved her." (Dahan 204) It means Draupadi was pure by heart, that's why God had come for her rescue, Romita was molested, no God descended to help her because she is not untainted and so she needs *diksha* to purify herself so that when, again she will be in trouble, she will be protected by some super natural potency.

Jhinuk is the voice women. She prefers a whole sky of freedom. She wants open sky to fly high. No one can stop her against protesting wrong; she does not have power to stop herself and turn away anymore because to her remaining honest to one's self is actually called 'chastity'. It is the same for men or women. She complains against her father when he tries to stop her going to the court because of the fear for her future, saying, "After all, you're a girl" (126), Jhinuk is hurt. She questions, "You didn't say so all these years. Even when I was a child, you kept saying that a girl and a boy were the same. Why do you say different things now?" (126) The reply is given by her mother and Jhinuk is stung to hear it when Sujata, her mother reminds her, "We let you study and we let you work. But does that you're man's equal?" (126-7) When we are talking about or re-orientation of women isn't it strange to hear such reminder from a partaker? There are so many Sujatas around us who constantly make the process of reminding her daughter or daughter-in-law that women can't be equal with men but these mothers never teach that women never wish to be equal with men, they only want to be complete human being.



Tunir's endeavour to stop Jhinuk saying anything against those four criminals is not because of Jhinuk's sake, there is another reason behind it. The father of one of those boys Radheshyam Gupta is a very close friend of his finance director Rajat. Tunir dreams to be reallocated in California, he is ambitious. Jhinuk's speaking truth in the court against the friend's son of his finance director may stop his flight. Jhinuk's social duty can't be more important than his going abroad. He convinces Jhinuk, "The finance director and the finance manager will do anything to send me abroad. Can't I keep a small request in return for their interest in me?" (223) Tunir applies all his strength to stop her. He even feels no shame to frighten her saying: "Rajat was telling me the other day that those men could even pick you up from the road and rape you. They have the muscle power and the right connections. They will definitely not let you go, if they land up in jail because of you." (225)

Jhinuk's responsibility to fight against social wrong and Tunir's personal interest built an iron wall between the two. Jhinuk is a little inflexible, firebrand rebel. She cannot take the insult for a woman in an open road easily. For her it is not the personal issue of Romita now. The issue has acquired a wider dimension and significance now because it has raised the question of a woman's right to fight for a cause in the present social environment. She expects from Tunir the same dignity but Tunir declares, "Perhaps I shall have to step out of this relationship then. I can't possibly tolerate so much insolence and arrogance even before I begin my life with a woman." (226) It seems the scratches of his unrefined male ego have come out; the primitive male stands naked bared to the skin. She has to put her signature on an unwritten agreement if she has to hold Tunir's love for her. She realizes that men may become Duhshasan or Ramchandra any time when they try to handle the personal conflicts and tensions.

Some try stripping women in public; others ask their beloved to walk through fire. As though a woman was a mere commodity, solely a possession. A woman was expected to be modest and servile if she wanted to be loved forever. Only then would the deep bond between man and woman remain unbroken. (230)

Those faces haunted her night and day. She could not even bear Palash's touch. She prayed repeatedly, "When I pass through the shadowy Valley of Death, let my mind be without fear, O Lord...you are with me...always." (64) Why didn't she speak the truth? She did this only to compromise with her family, husband and circumstances. She cannot forget that stormy night when she was molested by some unknown openly and she never wants to forget that dark night when she was raped by her husband secretly. Romita's father Tapan repents:



My daughter is such a coward! It's my fault perhaps. I have failed to install a sense of self-respect in her, I haven't taught her how to take a firm stand against any wrong. My daughter does not possess the strength of character to protest against injustice. (241-42)

Romita cannot speak the truth because of the new life she is carrying in her womb. But when she treads away from her duty, she feels ashamed for being a daughter, a mother and more a human being. Her anguish reveals, "Did the child in her womb move too? Did it hope to hear something different from its mother?" (229) Jhinuk protests because she believes that there is nothing to stop her from saying the truth if she wishes but her speech is disrupted by labeling her 'fallen' woman who wanders about the Metro station complex alone at night. She does not give justice to Romita; in other way to herself too. She has been defeated.

Now the question is what a woman should do then? Should she speak or make compromise? Is Romita right to accept Palash who raped her legally? Is Jhinuk right to accept Tunir with all his deal? Will Romita be happy with her husband anymore? Or will Jhinuk give her relation with Tunir the apt respect?" If not, then what will happen? The answer is given magnificently by Jhinuk's grand- mother Mrinalini. The old lady is truly the exceptional female voice of the novel. She has completed her all responsibilities towards her family and in her old age she does not prefer to be a burden to anyone. So she prefers old home to live freely. She has seen light and shade of life, comprehends it profoundly and has discovered the truth with which the flow of relations or family still is being continued. She accepts: "Life is always like a prison for a woman. The jailor changes- that's all...He is your father first, then your husband. Perhaps your son next. And sometimes the prison is these walls. The shackles that imprison you are packaged in a layer of love and bonding." (245)

Mrinalini's all pent-up passions, humiliations, disenchantments which she is carrying through the long years seems to flood out abruptly. She soothes Jhinuk by saying that her grand-father had taken a large amount of money from Mrinalini's father at the time of marriage. He never thought that his act humiliated Mrinalini. With a tremendous disrespect she had to accept him as her husband. She was allowed to complete her basic education but her higher study was stopped in the name of family responsibility. She explains the reason behind that negligence in this way:

So, why do you think he objected? It was simply because he didn't want me to be equal in life. He couldn't risk the possibility of my exam marks being higher than his. Killing my desire to study was an insult, wasn't it? But did it mean that he never loved me? He did...I still loved your grand- father however. Love is like that... (250-51)



Mrinalini's time has changed, now women are much more at liberty to lead the life. But one simple thing the new women should remember. Men will allow them only that much ground that they decide to forego. Men have granted women 'freedom' step by step over the years along with their needs. Women have always had a capacity to think for themselves and strength to protest.

Then which way should a woman follow? Will she be Romita? or Jhinuk? Life is strange. It is a mysterious arrangement of desperate danger and an insatiable thirst for pleasures. "It is a fatal attraction that life holds for us. We too, live on the edge of life and death, but our thirst for life's cloying sweetness is never quenched." (257) Men have never fathomed the wound they give to women. They have never known the amount of disgrace and pain that women veil within the depth of their hearts to go on loving. It has been like this down the ages. Women have always prevented society from falling apart. It is the inborn capacity of them to forgive and keep life moving forward. And that's how marriages and families are saved. *Dahan*, means 'to burn', it is the unending anguish of every woman who dares to step outside the threshold specified for her by society.

REFERENCES

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