

# Feminism in *Dahan* and *Palace of Illusions*: A Comparative Study

Bhawana Bajpai<sup>1</sup> and Anjita Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur

<sup>2</sup>A.N.D. College, Kanpur

---

**Abstract**—This research paper is based on the study of two novels, *Dahan* by Suchitra Bhattacharya and *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni from the feminist perspective. Actually, there has been a lot of development in the various fields whether it be social, political, economic or technological but the condition of women in the society can still not be called satisfactory. This urge for an improvement in the status of women has evolved in the due course of time as the Feminist Movement. Feminism, in simple words, may be called the struggle for the assertion of rights of women. It talks about giving equality and liberty to women which they have not received in this patriarchal world as said in the words of Callie Khouri, “To me, feminism is such a simple description: it’s equal rights, economic rights, political rights and social rights.” The feminist ideology has been presented in many literary works written from time to time, whether by male or by female authors. In the present scenario the condition of women and their struggle for identity is one of the most burning issues and demands a lot of attention and discussion. Keeping this fact in mind this research paper presents a detailed study of the two above mentioned novels in the light of feminism. Both the novels have beautifully portrayed the endeavour of the female characters to gain a respectable position in the world dominated by males. The purpose of this paper is to bring forward the real condition of the females in this so called modern world and the distance we still need to travel to achieve what we call equality and liberty.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with two novels, *Dahan*, by Suchitra Bhattacharya and *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Bannerjee. It uses the feminist perspective to examine these novels. The paper has been written in Times New Roman, font size 10, single-spaced type. The basic material has been derived from the primary text i.e. *Dahan* by Suchitra Bhattacharya and *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni. The secondary material has been derived from the various books based on feminism and its spread in the various sections of the society. Some relevant links on the internet have also been explored to enrich the content of the paper with the sayings of the various scholars.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The paper talks about the feminist ideology as depicted in the two novels that have been mentioned earlier. The novels *Dahan* and *Palace of Illusions* have been dealt with from the feminist perspective. The paper explores the ways in which the authors have tried to bring forward the plight of the women in their times in the social, political and economic fields. It tries to highlight the second grade status given to women in the male dominant society. The major concern voiced through the paper is that despite the developments in the various fields of life the conditions of women have not changed in a remarkable way since centuries. To clarify this aspect the two books that have been chosen for study in this paper belong to different time-periods and talk about different sections of the society. *Dahan* is a modern day story of a common girl and her life while *Palace of Illusions* is the saga of Draupadi, the most celebrated queen of the Indian mythology.

## 3. MAIN TEXT

A popular song by John Lennon has for its lyrics the very appropriate words to describe a woman’s

You can shine your shoes and wear a suit

You can comb your hair and look quite cute,

You can hide your face behind a smile

One thing you can’t hide is when you’re crippled inside.

Since time immemorial women have been a victim of the male dominant ideology of the patriarchal society. They have always been deprived of the right to study, right to property, right to have an independent opinion, right to take the decisions of the family or even their own lives. Though the women form a big chunk of the population and play a vital role in the smooth functioning of the families but their contribution has always gone unnoticed and unacknowledged. In some households they have even suffered exploitation, both physical and mental. But with the improvement in the level of

education and awareness the women have slowly but firmly stood up against the age old male dominance and have started asserting their rights. This assertion of their rights by women led to the rise of the feminist approach which gradually turned into a movement and a powerful ideology embracing the whole world slowly but strongly. The women's movement is said to have gained impetus from 1960s but it was not the start of feminism, rather a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society and proposed solutions. Some of these books include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family* (1884), Oliver Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Feminism, in simple words, is a struggle for the rights of women, a struggle for their equality, liberty and freedom from the obsolete beliefs of the patriarchal society. It is a fight by women to earn a respectable position in the world of men.

This struggle did not originate overnight. It raised its head gradually as a result of the accumulating discontent among women against their exploitation and unfair treatment by outsiders and also their own family members. The various feminist movements that cropped up from time to time in various regions of the world have helped in giving impetus to the rising demand for basic civil and human rights among women. This journey of women from being a sufferer to a struggler has been beautifully portrayed in the literary text written from time to time as Peter Barry in his work *Beginning Theory* says, "Women's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature." [116]

Various feminist writers, whether male or female, have used their writings as a strong medium to bring to the forefront the actual condition of the women of their period. J. S. Mill, Virginia Wolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kamala Das, Kamini Roy are some of the national and international names that have earned fame as feminist writers.

Two such authors in India who have established themselves as famous feminist writers are Suchitra Bhattacharya and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni. Bengal has always been the harbinger of all the revolutionary ideas and changes in India and so is the case with feminism. This can easily be seen in the literature of Bengal written by both male and female writers. The works of Suchitra Bhattacharya and Chitra Bannerjee are a wonderful example of how feminism influenced the plot, setting and, above all the female protagonists of their novels. Though none of them has ever accepted to be a feminist writer but a close study of their works reveals how deeply the feminist concepts have left their impact on them. One effective way to prove this point is a comparative study of their most acclaimed works i.e. Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Dahan* and Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*.

Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Dahan* ( translated into English by Mahua Mitra) is a story of two girls Romita Chaudhary and Srobona Sarkar. The former is a housewife; sweet, charming and submissive while the other is an unmarried working lady; independent, brave, courageous and daring. Once while out in the market with her husband, Romita is attacked, molested and harassed by some hooligans on the street. She and her husband are badly injured but no one from the crowd comes to their rescue. Instead people enquire about the types of clothes she was wearing putting the blame on her saying, "How was the woman dressed? Decent enough, or was it provocative?" [40] Only a school teacher Srobona comes to her rescue and starts swinging her bag madly at those boys and despite being wounded herself, saves Romita and also escorts her and her husband Palash to the police station to file the complain. This act of bravery makes its way to the news papers but is read and forgotten by the public. As Mahua Mitra says,

But all that was just news. People gulped it down their morning cups of tea, had discussions and heated arguments on the train, the bus, in office, at home, basking in the heat of the excitement and forgetting all about it in due course. [38]

As for Jhinuk (Srobona), this act makes her famous overnight but this is where troubles start for her. Being a girl she is asked to keep herself away from the police-station and the court as these places are not considered fit for women, Her parents, her fiancée, the police and the lawyers, culprits' rich fathers and even Romita's family members all compel her to withdraw the case but fail. She keeps everything, even her love and marriage at stake but does not compromise anything for her independence of taking her decisions herself. Her decision to continue her struggle against the wrong-doers brings her to a point where she is on the verge of losing her love and also her patience. But her determination rows her through the tough times and though she loses the case but wins the hearts.

Chitra Bannerjee's *Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of the well-known story of Mahabharata but from Draupadi's perspective. The age-old epic that has been told hundreds of times in various ways has been given a completely new and different treatment by her. This version of Mahabharata is unique in the sense that it is the first time it has been presented from the point of view of a lady who played a very important role in the whole epic but her voice was lost somewhere in the noisy chaos of the males. This novel describes the story of Draupadi from her not-so-welcomed birth and her childhood to her becoming the wife of the Pandavas, the queen of Indraprastha, the lady who suffered the greatest of humiliations and then the source which triggered the biggest war fought in the history of mankind.

A detailed reading of these two novels brings to the forefront many similarities between their female protagonists. Romita of *Dahan* is lady who loves her husband and family and is happily living in her house enjoying what she thinks to be the warmth of the love of her family members when the

incident of molestation hurts her deeply and the woman in her wants to fight back against this blasphemy. But this wish of hers leads to the unveiling of the actual mentality of her near and dear ones. Her in-laws are not happy with her decision of approaching the police against her ill-treatment because they consider it unfit for the lady of a respectable family to visit these places. Her relatives even comment, "Death relieves a woman of all suffering. It's more painful to live a life of dishonor." [118] Even her husband Palash, who had been a victim of the violence by those delinquents and had also accompanied her to the police station after the incident, compels her to deny recognizing the boys who had done wrong with her. No one understands the emotional torment she is undergoing through. She also wants to fight back along with Srobona Sarkar and see those boys behind the bars. But instead of helping her achieve this objective of hers her own people are trying to pull her back. While she is suffering from severe agony her husband tries to force himself upon her physically without her will and later she also bears a child of this unwanted relationship. In the words of Mahua Mitra, "Palash forced himself upon her body that lay lifeless like a charred piece of log, flooding it with his virility." [77]

Romita is suffocating under the lack of freedom in her life. She cannot take the decisions of her life independently. The most personal of her acts i.e. her physical relations with her husband are also dominated by her husband's wish not her. As Mrinalini, Srobona's grandma in the story remarks, "A child's mother is the only biological truth. But her wishes and views are seldom considered while bringing a child up. It's always the father who matters." [251]

The other important female character Srobona is the one who was the only one to step forward from the crowd to help the pleading Romita on the road. She stands firm and strong against the wrong done to a lady publically and decides to fight till the culprits are punished. She is also asked to pull herself back by her mother and also her fiancé who remarks, "I can't possibly tolerate so much insolence and arrogance even before I begin my life with a woman." [226] He terms her determination as her haughtiness. But she decides to choose justice over every relationship in her life. Both Romita and Srobona are asked humiliating questions in the police station and the court and insulted publically despite being victims themselves. As Srobona's friend remarks, "The police are generally uncivilized, they can rape you simply with their words alone. Be it ruffians or the police, they all are males, after all. [43] But all the physical and emotional stress she undergoes in the process of her endeavor for justice goes in vain owing to the corruption prevalent in the system and the disinterest shown in the matter by the actual sufferers Romita and Palash.

The next novel *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Bannerjee is also a story of a lady's struggle for justice and identity. The character of Draupadi in this book is a beautiful blend of the essence of both Romita and Srobona for she is herself the

victim and combatant. Since her childhood she had lived the life imposed upon her by her father. She was married in a swayamvara which was based on the conditions decided by her father and, in reality had no scope for her wishes. Then, to follow their mother's orders, the Pandavas forced her to marry all five of them, without even giving a thought to her emotions and aspirations. She was made to spend one year with each husband not according to her wish but as per a code of conduct prescribed by them. She is treated as a property and put on stake by Yudhishtir without her permission. Nobody comes to her rescue when she is humiliated in front of everyone. She was called a whore for having married more than one man because polyandry was considered wrong while polygamy was easily acceptable. Later, after the Great War, she was solely held responsible for the death of innumerable people and the severe loss of property.

Both the stories belong to entirely different time period, different places and different people. While *Dahan* is a tale of two common girls, *Palace of Illusions* is the saga of the life of one of the most celebrated queens of all times. But one thing that is common to both of them is the struggle by women to assert their identity in a man's world, the struggle to live their lives as per their wish, to enjoy the right to take the decisions of their lives themselves, to break free from the constraints choking their feelings and breathe freely in the air that smells of liberty. Both of them deal with breaking the shackles made by man to chain the women as Simone de Beauvoir says in her book *Second Sex*, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The stories in *Dahan* and *Palace of Illusions* talk about women who are continuously fighting against the ill-treatment of women by men, who refuse being bound by the rules made especially for them by males, who want to be accepted by their families and society the way they are, with their merits and shortcomings. The struggle of these women is against their treatment as a symbol of prestige or shame by men. They wish to be treated as beings of flesh and blood, just like men, who have their own strengths and flaws. They want men to realize how the acts of dowry, female foeticide, rape cause intolerable humiliation to them. They want to live in a world that does not have separate set of rules and regulations for men and women, framed in a way where the man is always right and the woman a medium to put the blame on for every wrong doing. In *Dahan*, one of the relatives of Romita tries to put all blame of all wrong-doing on her and quotes the incident of Draupadi to prove her point saying, "When Duryodhan and his men dragged Draupadi to the royal court and disrobed her, all the great heroes were present. But did they protest? How could they? Didn't Draupadi show disrespect to Karna? And didn't she tease Duryodhan? Draupadi had many faults." [204] So does that mean that a fault in a lady authorize the men to shame her publically? Do the clothes worn by a girl give men

the right to molest her? If a lady leaves her house at odd hours, is it a signal for men to try their chance on her? And then accuse the woman for all their sins and offense. Every day the print and the electronic media is full of discussions deciding the code of conduct for the women. The women, their behavior, their freedom is held responsible for the rising toll of the cases against them. The victim is being turned into the accused instead of providing her justice. The discussions on their clothes, their rights, their relations, their freedom and their emancipation is, in itself, an insult to the woman who shares an equally important position with man in creating, nourishing and taking the human race forward. People might say that the times are changing, women are progressing in every walk of life, achieving more and more success day by day. But the reality is quite different and has been expressed by Mahua Mitra in the following words:

It's not just today's women who can think. Women have always had a head on their shoulders and a capacity to think for themselves. And the strength to protest too. Remember Gandhari, the only person to protest at the time of war at Kurukshetra three thousand years ago? And she was the only one who had the courage to protest against Draupadi's dishonor. But the fact is that men will allow you only that much ground that they decide to forgo. Not an inch more. Men don't like their women sitting bundled up at home any longer. So they have allowed you to educate yourself. Men can't handle the burden of being the sole bread-winner of the family any more, so they let you work and earn an extra income. [252]

But women don't want sympathy, women don't want days and years dedicated to their name, women don't want a powwow on their rights and limitations. Freedom resides in the mind. And women want men to accept free mind in women. Women should be treated more than an instrument of giving birth to the children. They want a world where justice is dispensed to men and women equally, without any discrimination. The feminism portrayed by both Suchitra Bhattacharya and Chitra Bannerjee is not just to have equal rights for women. It is not an encroachment into the male territory but a demand to have a free say in the sphere meant for the females. It can better be termed as 'Womanism'. Womanism can be said to be a middle path between male dominance and female rebellion. It does not want males and females to be equal because it accepts that biologically, socially, emotionally they are different beings. But this concept of womanism believes in giving respect to women for the role they are playing in the biological, cultural and ethical advancement of the human race. It celebrates womanhood with its complete beauty, strength and charm and wants it to be accepted whole-heartedly. It is not just a struggle for equality but a fight for acceptance, a strife for identity as Toni Morrison remarks in the book *Sula*, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

## REFERENCES

- [1] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015. Print.
- [2] Bhattacharya, Suchitra. *Dahan*. Trans. Mahua Mitra. New Delhi: Srishti Publishers and Distributors, 2001. Print.
- [3] Divakaruni, Chitra Bannerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. London: Picador, 2009. Paperback.
- [4] Labell, Molly. *Bustle*. [www.bustle.com](http://www.bustle.com), July,7, 2014. Electronic.
- [5] Lennon, John. *Imagine*. U.S.A.:Apple/EMI, Sept.9,1971. Audio.