

**DISCOVERING 'NORA' AND 'ROMITA'S ENTITY AND IDENTITY IN THEIR  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES IN THE LIGHT OF FEMINISM: A COMPARATIVE  
STUDY BETWEEN IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE AND SUCHITRA'S DAHAN**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article investigates both the texts in the eyes of feminism, here, one is a Norwegian play “A Doll's House” by Henrik Ibsen and the other one is an Indian novel “Dahan” by Suchitra Bhattacharya. It aims to explore the deteriorating social and economic conditions of women and lastly their searches for individual entity and identity. Ibsen wrote “A Doll's House” (1879) whereas more than 100 years later Suchitra wrote “Dahan” (1998) but the depiction of women in our society remains standstill. They are still undergoing exploitation, negligence, injustice, disrespect, patriarchal domination etc. These two literary pieces focus on these issues against women and make a comparative study between them. Both the women are delineated as a stereotypical one with the beginning of the texts. But as the story moves forward, they break the conventional norms and strictures of their society. They start to discover and reshape themselves after realizing the facts they are facing for a long time. The study compares the feminist views of two prominent writers. Both the authors are conscious of the condition of women in their own times and try to break the prevailing progressive thoughts into their writings. This paper also persuades the readers to understand the concept of feminism in terms of literature.*

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, revolt, disillusionment, self- realization, emancipation, comparative study.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Richards (2015) writes in an essay published in 1990 where James Joyce wrote admiringly of the way Henrik Ibsen demonstrated an "extraordinary knowledge of women" in his plays. His female characters are radical and unparalleled. In his notes to *A Doll's House*, he wrote that "a woman cannot be herself in modern society" since it is "an exclusively male society with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint". Ibsen had far more empathy for his female characters than his male ones, who are often savagely unsympathetic. Most of his women did existential struggle for inventing selfhood.

The story of *A Doll's House* and *Dahan* starts with, Nora and Romita both are very attentive and self-sacrificing to their own families. The two love and respect their husbands very much. Nora has been portrayed as an obedient wife and a caring as well as a hard working mother. She is quite a dedicated woman to her family. She herself wears torn and old clothes and saves money to pay the loan which she took during her husband Torvald's illness. After that she continuously hides it and tries to save little money from daily expenditures. But her husband, Torvald Helmer fails to read her. He rather thinks Nora as an extravagant. As the story begins with Nora's arrival at home after Christmas shopping, Torvald replies, "Has my little spend-thrift been making the money fly again?" (Act I: 3).

*Dahan* (1998) is published by an Indian female writer Suchitra Bhattacharya. Her writings unveil the social irrelevance, unjust against women and some other contemporary social issues. She is a vigilant observer of the metamorphosing urban atmosphere and her writing exquisitely explores the contemporary Bengali middle class goings on. She focuses on the crisis in human relationship, exploitation and sufferings of women both socially and economically and the transforming values of the recent era along with the downfall of the society.

The story of *Dahan* revolves around an educated newly married woman Romita Chowdhury's being molested at the Tollygunge Metro Station by some goons and its aftereffects. Romi is a woman of 20th century who is much educated, intelligent, beautiful, obedient, elegant got married with Palash Chowdhury, an engineer.

### **Feminism: A Glimpse**

The word 'feminism' originates from the Latin word 'femina' that describes women's issues. It is concerned with females not just as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category. It is a fight by women to earn a respectable position in the world of men. This struggle originates gradually as a result of the accumulating discontent among women against their exploitation and unfair treatment by society and also their own family members. The term 'feminism' appeared in France in the late of 1880s by Hunburtine Auclert in her journal 'La Citoyenne as La Feminite' where she tried to criticize male domination and to claim for women's rights in addition to the emancipation promised by the French Revolution. The Enlightenment and the revolution influenced women in France and elsewhere in Europe with the prospect of liberty and equality.

Drucker (2018) writes that feminist history can be divided into three waves. First wave of feminism (1830-1930) promoted legal and political rights. Mary Wollstonecraft an early feminist writer, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (2004) opines that women should have the equal rights as men. She believes that education is the best way to make woman reach her position in society in equivalent with men. The second wave in the 1960s and 1970s focused on personal and relationship issues. In this wave, Virginia Woolf wrote a famous book about women rights *A Room of One's Own* (2004) in which she helped Mary Wollstonecraft and others to build a new

path for women to transform their life. Betty Frieden was a key player in second-wave feminism. In 1963, her book *The Feminine Mystique* criticized the idea that women could find fulfillment only through childbearing and homemaking. With the failure of second wave feminism by the 1990s, third wave feminism emerged. This wave focused less on laws and the political process and more on individual identity. It sees women's lives as intersectional, demonstrating how race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality are all significant factors when discussing feminism.

### **Feminist literature**

Feminist literature delineates characters or ideas that attempts to make question, argue and change gender norms, express injustice and a need for change. It addresses relevant political issues, current attitudes towards women in society, or attempts to break down gender-specific misconceptions. Zembat (2017) mentions the emergence of feminism with many types as time passes like liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, cultural feminism, eco-feminism, conservative feminism. Many conservative feminists argue that too much feminist theory attacks the vital role of women in child rearing and home making. Many women want to be family attached and find real satisfaction there rather than career in the public sector. 'Nora' and 'Romita' as they have been seen at the beginning of the story behave as the conservative feminist. But as the story unfolds and reaches in conclusion, they are seen somewhat radical feminist as they decide to leave their husband's house. Radical feminists believe that the male psychology or biology is the source of women's oppression from men. This is why they call for separatism and independence from men.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objective of this paper is to critically interpret the elements of feminism of these texts. The paper also attempts to find out the vulnerability of women on the basis of social, financial, spiritual and psychological condition in their families and societies. It also pokes the frangible nature of marriage-relationship and raises questions against it. This paper tries to investigate the patriarchal domination imposed on women, their revolts and ultimate discovery of self-worth.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative method has been used for conducting the research paper. Two texts have been used for primary sources and other books and articles have been preferred as secondary sources. To accomplish the study, textual analysis is a technique which researcher uses to communicate or interpret the text. Comparative study is an effective method to use in order to know the attitude and knowledge of two authors or two works simultaneously.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### Gender Roles and stereotypes of patriarchy

Nora-Helmer relationship shows the readers as a master-doll nature. Nora behaves very submissive. The way of Torvald's addressing to Nora is like: "my lark", "my squirrel", "my feather-head", "my little spendthrift". It seems Nora's husband takes her as a pet and does not have any intelligence, possesses a little brain like a bird, and spends money lavishly. As the story progresses, Nora proves that she is not a thick-skull person what Torvald thinks of her. She is much intelligent to understand the business details related to the debt which she took to preserve Torvald's health. The way of saving money to pay the loan and her continuous secret labour indicates her strong determination. Finally her intending to transgress the law in order to ensure her husband's health says her extreme courage. Blackmail and trauma imposed by the trickster Krogstad could not vacillate Nora's firm nature. Nora's strongest quality is her amalgamation of wisdom and childishness.

In *Dahan*, the couple of Palash-Romi is seen where Palash works as an engineer. On the other side Romita is a modern educated housewife. She is also found as submissive like Nora. Romi has not been seen to protest. She rather searches for the likings of her husband and his family too. One day the couple goes to new market for some shopping and Romi chooses a skirt for her but within a few moments she thinks that she is now married off. And this outfit may cause her in laws' dislikings. She thinks silently,

"রমিতার মাঝে মাঝে নিজেরই কেমন অবাক লাগে। এই যে পুরুষটা তার সঙ্গে হাঁটছে, এই আলোময় সুদৃশ্য বাজারের মাঝখান দিয়ে, একে তো সে চিনতও না ছ'মাস আগে। পলাশের মা বাবা দাদা বৌদিদের সঙ্গে যে এত ঘনিষ্ঠ সম্পর্ক গড়ে উঠতে পারে তার সম্ভাবনাও মনের কোণে উঁকি দেয়নি কখনও। কোথা থেকে কোথায় যে চলে যায় মেয়েদের জীবন! দু একটা ছোটখাটো যোগাযোগ, একটা সামাজিক অনুষ্ঠান, মাত্র কয়েক মাস একত্রে বাস করার অভ্যাস, তাতেই কত চিন্তা ভাবনার বদল ঘটে যায়! পলাশের ভালো লাগা মন্দ লাগা, পলাশের পরিবারের প্রত্যেকের পছন্দ অপছন্দ অনিবার্যভাবে প্রতি মুহূর্তে স্মরণে আসে আজকাল। এই কি বন্ধন!" (পৃ. ১৯)

Balaky & Sulaiman (2016) quote Code's (2000: 342) statement that it is the women's disproportionate confinement in the private sphere that correlates with women's subordinate status in their family. Nora's non-existence from public arena implies her financial servitude on Torvald and even the household sphere does not belong to her singly. As a man Torvald has control over both public and private affairs. He scolds Nora not to spend extra money for purchasing Christmas gifts and other things. But at the time of Torvald's illness, Nora is obliged

to borrow money and she continues to give back those by doing needlework, embroidery or she started copying down papers. Another female character Mrs. Linda marries a rich man in order to support her two brothers and poor mother. She proposes a marriage relationship to Krogstad and sacrifices her own choice, happiness and potentialities. All she wants is a shelter for her family's convenience. Mrs. Linda's statement:

“My mother alive and she were helpless and disable. I have to support my two brothers, so I don't deliberate about me and to reject his proposal” (Act II: 42).

As the story commences with a woman of gullible, impetuous, immature and submissive character, it draws its conclusion by depicting Nora's transition from a doll to an individual human being. Lack of understanding and treating Nora inferior shatter their eight years married life into pieces within a moment.

### **Self -discovery of 'Nora' and 'Romita'**

During her climactic encounter, Nora admits of everything and says Torvald, "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald" (Act III: 114). But poor Torvald misunderstands his devoted wife. This behaviour of Torvald scatters Nora's thought. She attempts to think of her married life and her vulnerable position in her family. All she finds is only negligence and ultimately proves her as a lifeless doll. As they argue:

HELMER. Why, Nora, how unreasonable and ungrateful you are. Haven't you been happy here?

NORA. No, never; I thought I was, but I never was.

HELMER. Not\_\_\_ not happy?

NORA. No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll child. And the children in their turn have been my dolls. I thought it fun when you played with me, just as the children did when I played with them. That has been our marriage, Torvald (Act III: 114-115).

Finally Torvald's self-seeking reaction after knowing her wife's forgery and lying works as the catalyst for Nora's self-discovering.

In a collateral way, Romita day after day comes to realize that she turns into a cause of embarrassment for Palash and his family. Palash stops to love her as he did before. He throws disgust on Romita why she has gone to court for responding Jhinuk's case. This nature of fragile relationship lastly takes far away both of them.

At last, Nora decides to run away leaving behind her husband and his family to discover her own individual entity and identity. Simultaneously Romita also feels suffocated then takes decision to leave Palash and her in laws house for Canada to study or live where her elder sister lives.

### **Discouragement of society towards women**

*Dahan* is the story of two women's search for justice in a men's world. It interrogates the contemporary society towards women. After shopping Romita and Palash search for a cab meanwhile five goons attack on attractive Romita Chowdhury and try to drive her away on a motor-bike. Nobody steps forward except Jhinuk Sarkar, a radical school teacher, who is the only witness of that rainy night incident. Meanwhile Romita falls on the ground and manages to escape. Injured Jhinuk holds the traumatised Romi and brings her to Palash who lies bleeding on the ground. Jhinuk wishes to file a case against the goons and does this. After that this news of Chowdhury family occupies so many newspapers. This makes them embarrassing day by day. Romita's husband Palash wants Jhinuk to withdraw the case as it fells themselves lack of social prestige. Romita's aunt in law stands:

"রমিতার মাসিশাশুড়ি বলল,--- তোমরা আজকালকার মেয়েরা একটা কথা মানতে চাও না। মেয়েদের নিজেদের সম্মান নিজেদের হাতে। কোর্ট কাছারিতে গিয়ে, একগাদা লোকের সামনে দাঁড়িয়ে নিজের অপমানের কথা ঘোষণা করলে এমন কিছু সম্মান বৃদ্ধি পায় না। নিজেদেরই সামলেসুমলে চলতে হয়। মহাভারতে দ্যাখোনি, দ্রৌপদীকে রাজসভায় এনে দুর্ব্যোধনরা যে কাণ্ডটা করল, অত বড় বীরেরা সব সভায় বসে, কেউ কোনো প্রতিবাদ করতে পেরেছে? করবে কি করে? দ্রৌপদী কর্ণকে অপমান করেনি? দুর্ব্যোধনকে টিজ করেনি? দ্রৌপদীরও অনেক দোষ ছিল" (পৃ. ১৩৫)।

On the other side, fighting for this case, Jhinuk has fallen in a great trouble and humiliation. She is asked so many irrelevant and embarrassing questions in court. She is also kept under pressure from the criminal side as they are very influential. Jhinuk behaves very firm and determined to fight at last for justice. The story picks up prejudices in the urban, middle-class Bengali society through the tribulations faced by the two protagonists, Jhinuk and Romita.

This situation makes Jhinuk-Tunir relationship down. Tunir, her fiancé, forces her to quit this case and says Romita's husband Palash also wants this over. Jhinuk behaves very obstinate and quarrels with Tunir as well as raise questions of his love to her.

Tunir makes force Jhinuk to quit this case:

"ঝিনুক মরা কাঁঠালিচাঁপা গাছটার দিকে তাকালো, --- যদি তোর চুক্তি না মানি?  
--- তাহলে আমাকে অন্য কিছু ভাবতে হবে। তুণীরের মুখের একটি পেশিও কাঁপল না।  
আহত পৌরষ লুকনো থাবা প্রকাশ্যে চাটতে শুরু করেছে, --- হয়তো আমার পক্ষে

আর সম্পর্ক রাখা সম্ভব হবে না। জীবন শুরু করার আগেই এত ঔদ্ধত্য আমার পক্ষে  
স্ট্যান্ড করা সম্ভব নয়।  
আদিম পুরুষ পুরোপুরি নগ্ন।  
ঝিনুক এক পা এক পা করে পিছোচ্ছে সিঁড়ির দিকে। অশ্রুমাখা চোখে তুণীর ঝাপসা  
ক্রমশ, ---তুমি চলে যাও। আর কখনো এসো না আমার কাছে। কখনো এসো না।  
তুণীর তবুও এগোচ্ছে, --- মেয়েদের এত তেজ ভালো নয় ঝিনুক।  
ঝিনুক মিলিয়ে গেল" (পৃ. ১৪৯)।

### COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Both the stories of *A Doll's House* and *Dahan* circumambulate around two couple whereas one couple gets united and the other makes them disintegrated. In *A Doll's House*, Krogstad and Christine rethink about their lost relationship to recover and to be united. On the contrary, communication gap and Torvald's mistreat to Nora make their eight year married life fallen apart. Self- realization starts to grow up in Nora. This conversation would make it more clear:

HELMER. Do you ask me that? Your duties to your husband and your children.

NORA. I have other duties equally sacred.

HELMER. Impossible! What duties do you mean?

NORA. My duties towards myself.

HELMER. Before all else you are a wife and a mother.

NORA. That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are\_\_\_ or, at least, I will try to become one (Act III: 116-117).

At one point, Tunir makes Jhinuk understand that this unknown Palash-Romita couple brings their relationship falling down. It is wise to make an end over this issue immediately. Romita's family also shows disinterest in this happening. *Dahan* is a story of two non-identical women. Both are educated whereas one is married and the other is not. Romita is devoid of getting proper honor from her husband, in laws' house, court, society and everywhere. At the same time, her savior Jhinuk gets disrespect and discourage both from the society and the near ones. She is also asked to pull herself back by her mother and also her fiancé. Both Romita and Jhinuk are asked humiliating questions in the police station and the court and insulted publically despite being victims themselves. They are equally dominated and enslaved by the society where their voices are not paid any value. *Dahan* also narrates about the relationship of two couple. Jhinuk-Tunir couple at last ends their misunderstanding up whereas Palash-Romita falls in confusions and lots of questionings about their future days.

## CONCLUSION

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Suchitra's *Dahan* both are the greatest contributions to the feminist literature. Both the protagonists of these two stories 'Nora' and 'Romita' undergo in a deception, agony and psychological hardships. They continue their struggle with their husbands but fail to understand them. After all, both the authors try to strike on societal misconceptions to women, their psychological, social and financial emancipation, dominance of patriarchal society and so on. These are followed century after century where the condition of women stands unchanged and they are searching for their individual entity and identity still.

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