

DAHAN AS AN EXPLORATION OF SEXUAL POLITICS

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This paper attempts at a close textual reading of the film *Dahan* [1997 / colour / 140 mins], directed by Rituporno Ghosh, with special emphasis on the female roles figuring sexual politics in it. *Dahan* is based on a novel by Suchitra Bhattacharya, which in turn was based on a real life street incident which took place six years ago on 24th June, 1992 in front of the Rabindra Sarovar Metro Station. At the very outset, I would like to assert that this is primarily a gut response to a film which left an indelible impression because of its startling immediacy.

When a woman by the name of Srobona Sarkar intercepts a group of molesters from raping Romita Chaudhury, she both stops and sets in motion a process of covert victimisation. The latter happens through the family both natal and marital. An order that thrives on the victimisation of women is reluctant to leave Romita half a victim. Thus, when her husband proceeds to rape her the process is complete. Total dominance is established and the woman is seen as both the excuse and victim of action which is essentially male.

Dahan is a study of the woman's eternal dilemma in a world defined by men and social conventions which can erupt into violence any moment. It can be seen as a woman's film- as an insightful exploration of woman's psyche. A film such as this has met with commercial success because a particular kind of audience has been created by television serials and 'mega serials'. *Dahan* employs both at the level of content and visual stylistics, the techniques of the television serial. It knows how to tell a story and is heavily dependent on dialogue; it concentrates on a fixed number of indoor locales with hardly any outdoor locations or shorts. It is primarily confined within a domestic space, has a social—critical content and has scope for exploring an off-beat subject. The film is meant for the urban middle class and its target audience is women.

Five women who embody five different stages or points in the struggle against dominance, form the pivot of this film. Srobona Sarkar, Romita Chaudhury, Srobona's grandmother, Romita's sister-in-law and the fiancée of one of the molesters, Trina, are all distinctly different and complex women. At one end of the spectrum is Romita's sister-in-law who is the submissive house-wife resigned to her fate. The fight has long gone out of her though she is aware of her domestic servitude. She is the stuff on which the family feeds. At the other end is Srobona's grandmother, the lone voice of wisdom, who wonders aloud whether it is indeed heroic to stretch out a helping hand to a fellow being in distress or if it is not the most natural thing to do. Her independent spirit has somewhat been inherited by her granddaughter Srobona, who is the modern woman—liberated, idealistic and having a mind of her own. Between these two polarities resides Romita, who desires the kind of independence Srobona and her grandmother have but is unable to find a way to attain that elusive dream. In time she could so easily become her sister-in-law because at one level very little separates these five women—the narrow divisions between them could collapse at the slightest social pressure.

From the very beginning one notices a gender divide and a play of politics between them. Men and women don't seem to communicate or interact on the same level. They seem almost stubbornly determined to misunderstand each other and this tension is sustained throughout. 'কালো কাঁচের ওপার থেকে কিছু দেখা যায় না' at (roughly 'From the other side of this tinted glass nothing can be seen')—a remark made by one of the men passing by during the molestation—sums up the lack of transparency between the genders. When his co-passenger says he sees a woman calling out for help this man replies that it is only his imagination.

When Romita is molested in front of a helpless husband, his manhood is called into question more than her dignity is. He looks ridiculous, he feels emasculated and his sexual monopoly over his wife's body is threatened. He allows his wife to become a public property who is discussed by him and his colleagues in a public men's toilet—an exclusive male space. By raping her, he not only quells both his doubts about his masculinity and those raised by his colleagues but reinforces male control. One gets the

feeling that these colleagues are unsatisfied with mere molestation and that the marital rape becomes a wish-fulfilment of both these people as well as the molesters. The protector turns predator. The threat of rape and violence comes from within and without. The danger in the public sphere of streets and the Metro Station spills over and penetrates the private space of the home. The threat of violation is internalized. The top-angle shot of the marital rape sequence seemingly asserts the dominant position of the male as if the entire order weighs down on her. Scenes such as this present the danger of voyeurism especially in commercial cinema. To avoid that, the camera maintains a distance, viewing through the veil of a mosquito net. And this also works well as a metaphor because that intimate, safe little haven she hangs up around herself becomes another danger zone.

Just as Romita has Palash as a constant reminder of domination, Srobona has Tunir who I believe is the more dangerous face of Order because he is insidious. He appears to be a sympathizer, if not a supporter but one never knows which side he is on. Tunir is shown as a suave seducer, consciously using his powers of sexual persuasion to manipulate and he thus breaks the stereotype of 'the woman as seductress / vamp'. This politics is not restricted to romantic relationships alone. It comes into play in familial and parental relationships as well. All the fathers, the patriarchs of their respective families speak the same language. For instance, Romita's father tells her to adjust a little because small sacrifices of freedom and self-denials do not kill anyone. She does not understand her father and wonders whether her sister does and what freedom really means.

Patriarchy is based upon an implicit, tacit female consent. Trina's mother is only too willing to exonerate her future son-in-law, Rohit. When Trina threatens to break the engagement she accuses her daughter of being disloyal because he was merely indulging in a minor instance of eve-teasing which, according to her, is insignificant. Other such examples may be found in Srobona's cynical colleague Mita, in Srobona's mother and in the female relatives who visit Romita out of a perverse curiosity.

'It is interesting to note that the only women who voice their protests against the injustice and atrocity are both unmarried though they are emotionally attacked. Of course

that attachment is constantly exploited by others. Srobona and Trina are both under pressure from family and society at large to cross that threshold and enter into matrimony as quickly as possible so that they cease to threaten the status-quo; that they are socially tamed and become docile, submissive women.

It is significant to note how the interior space of a middle-class household is used to create a sense of claustrophobia. Especially in Romita's bedroom, there hardly seems to be any breathing space. It is packed with furniture; the bed, occupying most of the space, becomes a vortex of social and sexual tensions. The shot compositions of her bedroom and the rest of her in-laws' house reinforce this notion of domestic imprisonment. A long take of a woman behind the bars of a window, ironing clothes recur twice in the beginning. Another shot which gives a similar impression of a caged life is the one of the vertical bars of the collapsible gate and lock in the foreground and the iron meshes in the background behind which the partial figure of Romita can be seen together with a priest.

A feeling of entrapment is developed from which Romita finds an escape through the writing of four letters to her sister. It is a cathartic process—a purgation of oneself and a release from the confines within which she finds herself. It is interesting to note that when we first see her sister, she is a voiceless and unidentifiable entity who gesticulates to be understood. Romita is passive. She is acted upon but never acts. So the camera is static to a large extent—passive camera capturing a passive protagonist. When she finally decides to call Srobona, the camera leaps into life, sensitive to her first action. On the first occasion it tracks her movement from behind while the second time it tracks her movement from the front—as if it was leading her to the phone.

Society does not know what it should do with a woman like Srobona. So it first applauds her and then humiliates her, felicitates her and then treats her like a felon. Even her family members are uncertain in their reaction—especially her mother and younger brother. They seem to grudge her sudden fame and the fact that accolades are showered upon her. They seem reluctant participants in the praise heaped on her. On various

occasions and in various ways, her family and society repeatedly cut her down to size either by mocking her or questioning her intentions. Her brother gifts a play—*Saint Joan* by Shaw to her, inside of which he writes: ‘Joan of Arc whose other name is Jhinuk’—Jhinuk being Srobona’s pet name. This assumes another significance altogether when Srobona is publicly humiliated at an inquisition, not religious but legal, where her ‘character’ is brought to question. Her grandmother asks her to read the play carefully because she would find in it many things which have remained the same since the days of Joan—obviously referring to the plight of the women who assume agency.

It is of interest to note the number of times the male members of Srobona’s family, her boyfriend and ultimately the defence lawyer enquire about her movements. They seem to share a common anxiety about her easy mobility and repeatedly ask about her exact whereabouts. Efforts are made to ensure that she is accompanied by her father /brother/ boyfriend. A woman’s bid for autonomy is to be monitored and tempered. Her freedom to travel alone at all hours, the assertion of her independence as a free woman suddenly becomes a bone of contention. Her every movement is seen as an attempt to overstep the boundaries set by society around its women—the so-called invisible *Laxman Rekha*. She threatens to disturb the equilibrium so she is kept under surveillance since society can least afford to let her make a habit out of saving women. Srobona and Romita never meet after that fateful incident; a conscious attempt is made to keep them apart. Any possible contact is thwarted because it would be too dangerous to expose her to Srobona. Every move she makes is a transgression. Consequently, in the court of law she is forced to account for her presence in an auto-rickshaw on a rainy night and justify why she was with two unknown men. She had dared too far for the comfort of society. Women, after all no matter the mobility or bravery of their acts, are still half outlaws for the community of people.

On the other hand, Romita’s movements are severely restricted—she is not even allowed to go out barring one visit to the doctor. She wonders whether she has lost her right over the outside world forever because of a single incident. Society creates the victims that it afterwards vainly attempts to get rid of.

This domestic melodrama could have degenerated into mawkish sentimentality but it does not because it refrains from moralistic sermonizing. No resolution is arrived at and no solution offered. During the last moments of this film, both the women—Srobona and Romita—realize the need for a certain freedom of movement, of self—sufficiency and self-reliance. They recognize the need to redefine themselves and their lives. Henceforth, they will negotiate life on their own terms—unafraid to step out alone. Romita attains self-realization the hard way. Yet something positive results from the crossfire—a new woman is born conscious of her sudden self-awakening. She acknowledges herself in relation to her being and not in the context of her marriage. She is now in search of a new life and a new identity; not passively taking things in her stride but willing to make the necessary changes. Her marriage has long ceased to be the sole reason for her existence.

The dominant point of view is that of the female gender. The male protagonists owe their existence entirely to the women—Palash as Romita's husband and Tunir as Srobona's boyfriend and not one central characters having autonomous identities. By themselves and in themselves they are of little importance.

Both Srobona and Romita express a desire for freedom simultaneously. A sequence where Romita voices this desire to her sister is immediately followed by a sequence where Srobona expresses a similar wish to her grandmother. The third movement comes almost immediately afterwards when Romita asks her sister-in-law to accompany her to Canada. In the very next sequence, Srobona expresses a desire to go away. This time both women get negative, discouraging responses from their respective confidants.

The concluding shot from top angle, shows Srobona walking out of the old home alone, while we hear, on the voice-over, Romita informing her sister that she is coming to Canada alone and that she will henceforth stop denying herself the pleasure of independence. The visual of one woman corresponds to the sentiments expressed in the

voice-over by the other woman. This audio-visual overlapping seems to suggest that though they followed separate paths of struggle, they have reached the same goal—that of a new identity.

A significant departure from the usual conclusion of any commercial film is that in *Dahan* the home is not restored. Neither does this film undermine its realist aspirations by showing the woman storming out of her in-laws' house. It negotiates a path which falls midway between these two extreme yet stereo-typical conclusions. In any relationship a certain sacrifice of autonomy, of self-determination must be made by both partners but even in the age of dawning liberation the balance between men and women is still way off. And, the more a woman has a life or mind of her own, the greater the sacrifice seems to be. In a sense, her identity is more precarious, it is a thing arrived at. A man's identity is more established, it is not as cultivated, as solicitously hovered over. No wonder women associate losing their identity with accepting love for where one is gained, the other is in some part lost. This rings true in the case of both these women. Srobona in order to adjust to a life with Tunir has to lose some of her idealism so that she gains love while Romita prepares to lose love to gain her identity. *Dahan* shows that struggle against dominance and oppression is intrinsic to the lives of these women and that herein lies the essential energy and collective spirit of any ongoing movement.