

Human Relationships and the Changing Social Values

- Akshay Kumar

Abstract: The present research paper is an attempt to study some aspects of social reality as depicted in Bhisham Sahni's short story. The short story discussed in this research paper is "Dinner for the Boss". It presents that with the growth of nuclear family and with pressures of urbanization elders are often seen as a burden by the young people. It focuses on some of the moving representations of the agony of elderly and helpless people who fall a victim to the changing social values and the increasing self-interest or selfishness of the younger generation.

Keywords: Urbanisation, Interdependence, Victim, Burden, Materialism, Individualism, Degeneration.

The writer's commitment is to life and not to any-ism.

...And since humanism is the sheet anchor of literature, the contribution of ideologies becomes valuable for the writer where they strengthen his faith in humanism and human values, on which his literary endeavours ultimately stand. (Sahni 4)

Bhisham Sahni is a socially committed writer but he himself preferred to use the term "involvement" rather than "commitment", because he felt "commitment" implied a certain "rigidity" in character or relationships. He strongly believed that "the writer's involvement is with life and that the writer's domain therefore is the vast world of human experiences, of relationships, human impulses and aspirations of joys and sorrows" (Sahni 4). In his short stories Sahni sensitively portrays interdependence of human beings on family and other relationships and how they often lead to agony for individuals. Short stories represent social reality with a sharp focus because their canvas is limited as compared to that of a novel. To quote Bhisham Sahni, "A short story is like lodging in a house one night and moving away the next morning, whereas a novel is like coming into a town where you have to bide for months on end" (vii). Man's nature is such that he cannot afford to live alone. Human nature develops only when individuals live in society. Man lives in society because he has a felt need for association and interdependence. Many of his needs will remain unsatisfied if he doesn't have the co-operation of his fellow beings. Every individual is the offspring of a social relationship established between man and woman. D. H. Lawrence states, "The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman..." (Cited in Sitiesh 40). The child is brought up under the care of his parents and learns the lesson of citizenship in their company. Even as an adult he is totally dependent for his survival upon fellow feeling and co-operation with other individuals. Not only one is dependent on others for food, shelter and clothing but even for emotional and mental fulfilment one is dependent on others. Hence human relationships are

very important for the growth and fulfilment of human beings both at personal or family level and at larger social level.

Family is the basic unit of society. It is defined as a, “relatively permanent social group of two or more people related to by blood, marriage or adoption, who usually live together” (Sharma 46). It is based on our impulses of mating, procreation and parental care. It fulfils several emotional needs of individuals. But family as a unit itself can be put to strain due to various factors. Under economic pressures or due to compulsions of the job, members of the family may have to move out or live alone. Family relationships and family structure have come under strain also due to various social factors such as urbanization, nuclear family structure and growth of materialism. The joint family system is most suited to the agricultural families. But with the increasing industrialization workers from the villages move to the cities which breaks the joint family system. Due to the development in the means of transport and communication also, movement of people has increased and more people migrate to cities in search of better livelihood. In the cities lack of space and higher cost of living does not allow one to have big or extended families. As a result the concept of family in modern times means only a young couple and their children. There has also been in recent decades influence of western thought and ideology on Indian society. The modern laws relating to marriage and divorce have been enacted on western pattern. Individualism has become a cherished virtue in modern life. The views of the young men and women on family relations have under gone a change. The influence of materialism and individualism has made deep inroads in the Indian outlook. Nuclear family has become everywhere the dominant form. Due to all these changes and new social conditions a great change has come in the behaviour of human beings. In search of personal independence and economic ambitions modern man has forgotten the human values or responsibilities and has become materialistic. Before independence human beings had great respect for their elders but after independence there has been a decline in human values. Human relationships have undergone a drastic change. Bhisham Sahni has recorded these changes with great sensitivity in his stories. In several stories set in family relations he depicts how self-interest has become more important than the welfare of all the members of the family. In the nuclear family the plight of the older people is particularly highlighted, who are considered a burden by their children. The transition in social set-up, the change in social values has led to the devaluation of human beings which disturbs Bhisham Sahni. Hence, this becomes the subject of his several stories where he records the agony of some individuals who are humiliated or ignored by the family.

Bhisham Sahni's story “Dinner for the Boss” presents the degeneration in human relationships in the familial context. It is a very touching story which depicts the elders' agony and youngsters' callousness. Shymnath, the protagonist of the story, invites his boss for dinner at his home and gets busy in making the arrangements. When Shyamnath and his wife have made all the arrangements then his mother becomes a problem for

them, "what to do with mother?" (Sahni 1). He decides to send her mother to her friend's house for a night so that the guests may not see his mother. But thinking that her mother's friend who is too old will start to visit their home regularly, he gives up the idea of sending her mother to her friend. This situation shows that the old woman has no one to give her company in her old age and she has to live as a stranger in her own home. Here Bhisham Sahni highlights the pathetic condition of the old or aged beings who are dependent only on their children but instead of giving them respect their children consider them as a burden. Here we find the selfishness and self-centredness of the son who has no respect or concern for the mother. Shyamnath tells his wife that they will tell the mother to eat early and then go to her room. But another tension arises in his mind, "If she goes to sleep and starts snoring, then what?" (2). So he gives some instructions to his mother, "And mother, first he'll be in the sitting room, for that time you sit on the veranda. Then when we come out here, you go through the bathroom to the sitting room." (3). He keeps on giving instructions to his mother to behave properly when his boss comes so that he can create a good impression on him. He doesn't want to be embarrassed by the presence of his old mother. However, Shyamnath's boss's eyes fall upon his mother. Shyamnath gets annoyed by her expressions. She is so afraid that she cannot shake hands with the boss properly. When the boss asks about her well being she replies hesitatingly. There is a peal of laughter. Shyamnath begins to feel ashamed. Then the boss asks her to sing a song. In order to please her son's boss she sings even though she hasn't ever sung. The boss feels pleased and Shyamnath's annoyance turns into joy and pride. Shyamnath who had been irritated with his mother's presence in the home now feels happy as she was helpful in making his boss happy. Then encouraged by the boss's attention towards the mother Shyamnath shows to his boss the handicrafts made by his mother. The boss feels very happy to see the phulkari made by Shyamnath's mother. Shyamnath tells his boss that he'll get a new phulkari made for him. He requests his mother to embroider phulkari for his boss. Shyamnath's mother tells him that she is unable to embroider the phulkari at this old age and that she cannot see properly. She expresses her desire to go to Haridwar and stay there for the rest of her life. Shyamnath says harshly, "you want to disgrace me so that the world will say that I could not keep my mother with me" (10). She would be more at peace at Haridwar but Shyamnath doesn't let her go for the sake of his public image. Here we find the selfishness which makes Shyamnath polite towards his mother at the moment. Shyamnath again requests his mother to make the phulkari for the sake of his promotion. Mother says:

Will you be promoted beta?

Shyamnath: Can it happen just like that? If I keep the Sahib happy, then he'll do something, otherwise there is no dearth of people wanting to please him. Mother: Then I'll do it, beta. However it'll have to be done, I'll do it. (11).

Here we find the unconditional love of the mother towards her son who gets ready to make the phulkari in her old age and cancels her decision to

go to Haridwar. Her personal desire doesn't matter to her. It is only her son's pleasure and gain which matters to her. Thus, Sahni has presented the plight of the older generation in the present society. He has depicted the gap between the old and the new generation. Modern man has no respect for the old ones. He wants to lead an independent life and doesn't accept any sort of responsibility or emotional bond with the elders. The theme of selfishness and materialistic approach of children and filial ingratitude often finds expression in literature. One is reminded of Shakespeare's play *King Lear* where Lear is ill treated by his own daughters whom he gives all his property and kingdom. There have been several films in India on the theme, such as "Swarg" and "Bagbaan". Bhisham Sahni also very sensitively portrays the plight of the old people in urban middle-class social context in post-independent India. Thus, we see that Bhisham Sahni covers a wide range of human relationships. He has presented very well the changing human relationship between mother and son. He has shown that the main cause of all the sufferings is poverty, and increasing selfishness of individuals particularly younger generation. In this story if the old woman had money, she would never have been subjected to humiliation by others. Here we also find the materialistic approach of the modern man who is completely devoid of any emotional bond for his own ones but in order to gain his selfish ends he can cross any limit. Through this story Tendulkar has tried to make the people aware towards the declining human relationships and through his poignant portrayal he does succeed in sensitizing people.

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