

# Feminist Consciousness and Traditionalism in Dollar Bahu by Sudha Murthy

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*Abstract*— The purpose of the paper is to study Feminist Consciousness And Traditionalism in the novel Dollar Bahu by Sudha Murthy, taking in account the complexity of life, different histories, culture and different structure of values, the women's question, greed for money and working abroad as status symbol in Indian society. The article mirrors that Indian mentality which is fascinated by Dollar ...the foreign currency which is valued more than sentiments, morals and relationship. Murthy is considered to be one of the most realistic authors, for she is able to bring the true picture of psyche of the women changing with the times. Her concern for the women who are caught in the dilemma of liberty and individuality or stability and protection is understandable. The paper displays the way in which the Urban middle class women struggle for self identity yet rooted deep into values of being a women who binds together the family in Sudha Murthy's Dollar Bahu . The novel is women centered and woman's emotions and attitudes are delineated quite meticulously. We see a very clear touch of Traditionalism in this novel in the way a woman rate down another women low blinded by glow of Dollar. The study of the research highlights the dominance of the mighty Dollar in every pursuit of life. Today's new women are ready to accomplishing their aspirations. An Indian woman unlike a man, is stronger morally and emotionally. The novel deciphers the fact that it is the power of 'SHE' that can make or break a family.

*Keywords*— Chauvinist, Disposition, Feminism, Modernism, Repertoire, Stereotypes, Titular.

## I. INTRODUCTION

History of English language and literature in India starts with the advent of East India Company in India. It was in late seventies that a new breed of Convent, boarding school educated and elite class of novelists and writers started to come on block. To begin at the very beginning, the contributions of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Toru Dutt cannot escape our attention.

Bankim's contribution was the first English novel by an Indian, Rajmohan's Wife (1864). A novel, where the female protagonist's (Maatangi) romanticism is snatched away and she is punished for her personal revolt against the mundane life and its meaningless shackles. An extremely modern novel of its times – the plot and its message remains socially relevant even today.

Toru Dutt (1856 – 1877), virtually unknown during her short life of 21 years, made her mark posthumously in the world of literature by sheer purity of the spirit in her writings. Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. Indian Women Writers in English are victims of a second prejudice vis-à-vis their regional counterpart's.

As Chaman Nahal writes about feminism in India: "Both the awareness of woman's position in society as one

of disadvantage or in generality compared with that of man and also a desire to remove those disadvantages" [1].

The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. Among such writers is a name that takes readers heart is Sudha Murthy [2].

Among the various prolific writers of English in India is a name that does not need an introduction per se. Sudha Murthy is an immensely accomplished business woman, teacher, social worker and an author to reckon with.

In her notable writing career, she has penned nine novels, each of which is a reflection of what she has grown up with and observed in middle class India. She has been lucky to have lived through an era where traditionalism was waning to pave way for modernism. The transition neither complete nor sudden, nevertheless, gave her enough to write about.

Out of the many issues that make up her writing repertoire, the condition of women remains the most highlighted one. She wrote about feminism and the concept of equality for women in the choices they make and the lives they lead. The significant thing isn't the content but the timing of her revelations. She spoke about women issues and highlighted their plight when it wasn't 'in vogue'. She drew the attention of readers to things which had been socially acceptable, in fact a prerequisite,

of the Indian middle class society and its women. Most times, her work refrains from being sermonizing or instructing the reader what needs to be done to improve the lot of women. She doesn't believe in the chest thumping and slogan- screaming kind of feminism. Her stories and characters portray the world as she sees it, without bothering to impact a change but, in a very subtle and understated way, achieving just that.

Originally published in 2003, 'Dollar Bahu' deals with the fascination of middle class Kannadagas' with America, the promised land of riches and comforts. It highlights the dominance of the mighty Dollar in every pursuit of life [3].

The novel showcases how women themselves are the worst enemies of other women and how we are, as a society, responsible for keeping our women-folk down. It also brings into perspective how easily and seamlessly we accept stereotypes and how vehemently we oppose change, especially if it pertains to the fairer sex.

## II. FEMINISM AND TRADITIONALISM IN NOVEL DOLLAR BAHU

The first female character we are introduced to in the novel is VINU (Vinuta).

She was fair with bold and beautiful black eyes, a straight, sharp nose, and long, thick hair braided into a plait. She seemed slightly flustered to find someone occupying her seat [3].

Vinu is our regular girl next door and a perfect example of how women are brought up in middle class households of India.

One thing that had struck him in this short time was that the major share of the housework was done by Vinu. Even from his room on the terrace, he could hear someone or the other calling out for her, '*Vinu, have you plucked the flowers for puja?*', '*Vinu, where are the ironed clothes?*', '*Vinu, where is the bigger kadai?*', '*Vinu, add some salt to the dal*', and so on. Who was she really? A maidservant, an orphan, a poor relation, a housekeeper or...? But then she addressed Bheemanna Desai as uncle and he knew she went to college. It was a mystery to Chandru [3].

Not only does she have an angelic voice, she also is beautiful, talented and yet homely- PERFECT, some would say. She is rooted, sincere, diligent and a complete family girl. She works like a mule and never raises her voice or expectations.

The following night, after dinner, he heard Bheemanna telling Vinu, '*Vinu, I could not get the exact colour you had asked for. Instead I have got this for you.*'

'*Oh, that's all right. This is also very pretty. I like this blue colour,*' said Vinu brightly [3].

'Chandru', the male protagonist notices the difference between her and his sister when she accepts, with a smile, a sari from her uncle which wasn't the one she had wanted. She doesn't know how to throw a tantrum and she isn't an uneducated, underprivileged person either.

Orphaned at a young age, and looked after by her uncle and his family, she has been raised with all the right ingredients.

She is perfect marriage material. She has her role and character cut out for her. She is a lot into music and would have loved to make a career out of it but she gives up all of that when she is married to a man who, in the nitty-gritty of everyday living, isn't much inclined towards the arts. She has a hidden, independent streak too which is evident in her working woman avatar. She hates to be indebted to anyone and that becomes a trait which attracts Girish to her.

She spoke sternly to the tall man. '*Listen, sir, I will pay you my fare the minute we disembark*' [3].

Although in the beginning, Vinu looks like the female lead of the story but she actually isn't. She is the burning example of a docile, accepting Indian woman who is programmed to tolerate the excesses of her mother-in-law, the disdain of her sister-in-law and the silence of her men folk (even her husband).

Chandru kept up a happy chatter, but suddenly thought of something.

'*Do you still sing?*'

'*Chandru, the koel has understood her position. She has stopped singing,*' Vinu said in a sad tone [3].

She, and women like her, are the reasons we talk about Feminism these days. She is an ideal bahu'- doting, caring, homely and all sacrificing. She doesn't let the neglect of other women in the family come in the way of her exercising her household duties.

Before Jamuna's advent into their lives Gouramma used to say, '*Now that Vinuta is here, I am totally relaxed, like a retired person. She takes care of everything.*' But now, there was no such talk. The proverb, '*If you have money, like the sun you will shine; if you don't have money, like a dog you will whine*', was quite apt in this case. Jamuna's sun shone brighter each day while Vinuta's life became more like that of a dog [3].

The unsavory and fulsome comparison with the new Bahu, which she is subjected to at the hands of her mother-in-law, also fails to provoke her to raise her voice. She tolerates every slight, lying down, giving way to self-doubt and depression.

The main female protagonist of the story is Gouramma- mother of Chandru, Girish and Surabhi.

Stepped into traditionalism, she has set ideas and a craving to be a part of the 'American wave' or the NRI club.

Gouramma was in India only in body at such times; her spirit would be flying across the length and breadth of America. She would dream about the Dollar, that magic green currency, which could change her house and fulfil her dreams. It was the Dollar, not Indian rupees, which could elevate her into the elite circle at social gatherings and marriage halls. The Dollar was like the Goddess Lakshmi, with a magic wand [3].

Although very critical of the simplicity of her husband and second son, she is nevertheless, the anchor that holds the family together. She has pinned all her hopes on the prospects of her eldest son Chandru, who has been sent to America by his company.

She hopes to get all the dollars and privileges that an NRI could provide. She is a firm believer in marrying her precious son off to the highest bidder. For her second son, who is content in his job as a clerk at a bank, she chooses the homely Vinu. Though the girl is virtuous and diligent, she never receives a word or praise or appreciation from Gouramma, because she did not bring in the dollars. Gouramma is happy to leave the day today chores to Vinu not because she appreciates her but because that is what an ideal Bahu is supposed to do, lessen the burden of the mother-in-law in looking after the family. Gouramma starts by firmly believing in the gender roles.

As the story moves on, Gouramma and her perspective on life undergoes a sea change when Chandru is married off to Jamuna, a plain girl from an affluent family, only because he is an NRI. She is blind to the flaws of this match which has been forged keeping the social status and money in mind.

Jamuna was effusively friendly with Surabhi and that made Gouramma very comfortable. When they were leaving, Parvati handed over baskets of vegetables and fruits, saying, 'The match is not in our hands. But let us at least continue with the cordial relationship.' Gouramma left with tears in her eyes.

On the way home, Gouramma silently prayed that her son would choose Jamuna as his bride, and began enumerating her virtues. In the end Shamanna was forced to say, 'Let Chandru decide' [3].

She showers Jamuna with all the love and gifts appropriate to a girl coming from a richer family. She closes her eyes to the indifference and apathy of Jamuna. She fails to recognize that for Jamuna and her parents this match was apt because the boy lived in America and it was easier to blind his mother with gifts and riches or by feeding their greed and need to be a part of the rich brigade.

When she reached the door, Gouramma heard her name and stopped for a minute. She was curious to know what Jamuna and her friends were saying about her. Foolishly she thought, maybe Jamuna is praising my services.

She listened in on the conversation. Girija said, 'Jamuna, you are the smartest of all. I can trade my PhD to possess your talent on how to handle a mother-in-law and win her heart.'

'It seems her mother-in-law always treats her like her own daughter! Is it not surprising?' said Veda.

'Nothing so surprising. My mother-in-law is greedy and stupid. My co-sister-in-law Vinuta is from a poor family and innocent about the ways of the world. My sis-in-law Surabhi does not have any brains. It is easy to manage such women.' [3].

The power tussle that goes on amongst the women of the family is not new to Indian households. The concept of feminism or providing equal status to women was alien, if not completely than surely, even in the new millennium India.

It is only when Gouramma fulfills her lifelong desire to visit the US and get a chance to actually stay with Jamuna that she comes face to face with gender equality in a twisted form. Not only the roles in the household are not gender specific, but also the dressing and lifestyle of women are an eye-opener for Gouramma.

Gouramma was disturbed on another account. She had noticed that, unlike Girish, Chandru had to share in the housework, and washing the dishes and ironing the clothes were his responsibilities. Gouramma had been brought up with the view that the male members of the household did not work in the kitchen [3].

On many occasions she comes across examples of Indian girls being married off at an early age by their parents, lured by the attraction of a new developed country and how these women were left to pick up the pieces of their lives and carry on in a strange land. It is evident from the story that young women tried, desperately, to unbolt the shackles that bound them. Education was not enough to bring that change about. The adversity of their lives and the situations they found themselves into gave them the much needed push. But without fail, all of them found their fortunes in the United States, a country far removed from the orthodox chauvinist mind set of India. It is all a novel concept for Gouramma, who believes in the gender specified roles that the society has always prescribed to. She supported the education of her own daughter Surabhi but for her that is how far the notion of women going out, goes.

Gouramma's mind was reeling. She felt she was seeing the world from a new perspective (Case of Asha Patil Bombay store) [3].

The characters of this tidy little novel do not place more importance on feminism and equality, in fact that does not seem to be the central idea of the novel to begin with.

Jamuna, the dollar Bahu, the titular character of the novel, has shades of grey bordering on the black. Her moves are calculated and manipulative. She and women like her, are the reasons that traditionalists do not warm up to the idea of equality among men and women. She takes undue advantage of her affluence, education and the fact that she is gainfully employed in a foreign land. Her vampish traits are in sharp contrast to other Indian women living in the US, mentioned fleetingly in the story.

Vinu is lucky to have grown up with Bheemanna, her distant uncle, after the death of her own parents. He is a poor man with limited resources but is very fond of Vinu and cares for her a lot. He is the one who promotes her singing talent in her growing up years.

Bheemanna was very fond of Vinuta and wanted her to complete her degree, work for two years in order to become financially independent and then marry. At present she was in the second year of the BA degree course in Karnatak College, majoring in Hindustani music. A bright and talented girl, she had won almost every prize in every event in the college.

Every night, after dinner, Bheemanna would sit on the bamboo cot underneath the mango tree and relax for some time. That was the time when he also talked to Vinuta. *'Vinu, come here. You have done enough work for the day. Let the others also do something. What did you learn in the college today? Come on. Sing me a nice song now.'* [3].

The greatest feminist in the entire story is in fact Shamanna, father of Girish, Chandru and Surabhi and husband of Gouramma. Shamanna has been a school teacher all his life and wholeheartedly supports the women in his family.

Shamanna, a Sanskrit teacher, was a calm, sensible and contented man. He had a reputation as a good teacher and a good human being. Gouramma, his wife, was a clever woman who knew how to run the family. She worked hard to keep the domestic expenses within the budget, but she was extremely ambitious. She always dreamed of diamonds, gold and silver jewellery, cars, a big house, and servants.

Shamanna had a modest salary but he had managed to build a small house in Jayanagar. His priorities were different from his wife's. He wanted his children, Chandra Shekhar, Girish and Surabhi, to have a good education. So

he did not think of extending his house or making any changes [3].

He recognises the failings of his wife and yet realises how she keeps the household together. He gives a free rein to her when it comes to the household and social decisions of the family. He looks beyond the beauty of Vinuta and accepts her singing talent.

Sometimes, she felt a little sad that Girish did not have an ear for music, like Shamanna did. But he certainly did not object to her singing.

Shamanna would often say, *'Vinu, you have a good voice. You should pursue music as an alternative career.'* [3].

He keeps motivating Vinu to pursue her craft. He sees through the devious designs of Jamuna and her family.

Shamanna had seen through Jamuna's pretence [3].

He is the one who recognises what Gouramma's contempt had done to Vinu's spirit. He advises Vinu to leave them and settle down in her own village, where she had a house of her own. He, in fact, uses all his resources to get Vinu and Girish shifted from the toxic environment of their household. The simpleton Vinu finds in Shamanna, her true champion.

Shamanna guessed what was going on in Vinuta's mind. One day he called her to his room and said, *'Vinu, I want to tell you a story.'*

Vinuta and Kadru were the two wives of Sage Kashyap,' began Shamanna. *'There was tough competition between them. The condition was such that the one who lost would become the other's slave until her son brought back the holy nectar. Kadru cheated and won, and Vinuta became the slave. A hundred years later, however, Vinuta's son Garuda brought in the nectar and rescued his mother from slavery.'*

*'Why are you telling me this story, Appa?'*

*'All due to my wife's foolish behaviour, you will develop a complex and you will start hating our family the way a slave does. If the woman of the house is unhappy, a family can never live in peace. Vinuta, I do not want you to live with such a complex. In that story, the son comes after a good hundred years. I don't want you to stay in this house for that long, in bondage. Please go away and make your own home.'*

Vinuta was surprised by this sudden decision.

*'Is Girish aware of this?'*

*'Yes. I have told him the same thing and have explained the situation. Chandru, being away from us, has become independent, assertive and confident. I want Girish also to become like that. He is always under the protection of his parents. In that sense, America has taught Chandru a good lesson.'*

Vinuta was silent for a long time, pondering over what Shamanna had said. Then coming back to the present, she said, 'Appa, where can we go?'

*'I have told Girish to apply for a transfer to Dharwad. I have also sent him to the government education office with a request for your transfer. The person in charge was my student. I am sure that he will comply with my request. You have your own house there and you will love to live there as you did before. You need not send us any money. I plan to tell Chandru, too, to stop sending us dollars. With just the two of us, we can rent out the first floor. And I have my pension. We can lead a comfortable, peaceful life without being a burden on our children.'*

Vinuta looked at her father-in-law. She felt sad that just when he was ageing, and when it was proper that his children should stay with him, they would be leaving him [3].

In the end it is Shamanna who makes Gouramma see sense. Although, by then, Gouramma has already learnt her lesson, after her year long stay in the US with her Dollar Bahu, Jamuna. But he explains to her the way she should have treated Vinu all along.

*'Gouri, love and affection are more important than food and money. Vinuta is like our daughter and I do not want her to suffer. What I would have done for Surabhi, I did for Vinuta.'*

Gouramma sat down helplessly. 'Gouri, we raised our children according to our ideas and values,' Shamanna continued quietly. 'Now, allow Vinuta to do the same thing in her house. Never once did you mention Vinu or Harsha in any of your calls or letters. Don't you think she felt it rather deeply?' [3].

Girish takes after his father in loads of senses. He has never had a problem with the dominating character traits of his mother. His first meeting with Vinu leaves an indelible mark on his conscience because he likes the streak of independence in her disposition, in addition to her beauty.

### III. CONCLUSION

The novel 'Dollar Bahu' portrays strong, progressive male characters on one hand and on the other, various shades of grey, black, weakness and strength, traditionalism and modernity in its female characters. The novel also concludes on a note of regret and penance where Gouramma – the mother in law of Vinuta realizes that the invincible dollar has fallen and that she has never valued the pure gold that she possessed in the form of her a pure soul of her daughter in law Vinuta.

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