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Indo-Feministic Characteristics Of Protagonist In The Novel *Dollar Bahu* By Sudha Murthy

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Abstract: The term Indo-feminism refers to the Indian form of feminist thought that aligns women's liberation with cultural, ethical and social values of the Indian Context. It focuses on self-realization, education, equality in relationships and moral empowerment. Indo-feminism is a blend of feminist theories and practices that address the unique social, cultural, and economic issues faced by women in India. While Western feminism has contributed significantly to global feminist discourse, Indian women may benefit from understanding Indo-feminism for several reasons like understanding the roots of Indian culture and addressing specific challenges that may not be directly applicable from western perspectives; Indo-feminism acknowledges the complexities of Indian society, including caste, class, religion and regional differences; Indo-feminism allows Indian women to define their own feminist identities, priorities, strategies, rather than relying solely on external influences.

Key Words - Indo-feminism, Selflessness, independence, struggle, freedom, Gandhian ideal, self-respect, humiliation, realization.

Sudha Murthy occupies a unique place in Contemporary Indian Literature as a writer who blends social realism with deep moral insight. Her novels such as *Dollar Bahu*, *Mahaswetha* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* - portray the everyday lives of Indian women caught between tradition and Modernity. Unlike western feminists who advocates open rebellion against patriarchy, Murthy champions a more Indianized, humane and reformist approach. Her feminism grows from within Indian Culture, grounded in compassion, morality, and family harmony. She believes that women empowerment comes from education, empathy and ethical strength.

Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* is a subtle yet powerful portrayal of women's lives and their struggles within the boundaries of Patriarchy, Consumerism and Materialism. It is written Originally in Kannada as "*Dollar Sose*". This novel presents the unequal treatment of women, their undervalued labor and social obsession with status over money.

The story revolves around Vinuta, a simple and selfless young woman who marries Girish, a bank clerk, and moves to Bangalore to live with his family. The family consists of Girish's parents, Shamanna and Gouramma, and his elder brother Chandru, who is settled in the US. Vinuta faces constant comparisons and criticism from Gouramma, who is obsessed with the wealth and status of Chandru's American wife, Jamuna. As Vinuta struggles to cope, Gouramma visits Chandru and Jamuna in the US, expecting a life of luxury. However, she is shocked to see the realities of American life and begins to appreciate the simple joys of her own family. Through Gouramma's journey, the novel highlights the importance of love, family, and cultural values over material wealth. The story concludes with Gouramma's newfound appreciation for Vinuta's selflessness and devotion.

"Vinuta, the protagonist, is a representation of the middle-class Indian Woman who is educated, sincere and self-respecting. The author introduces her through the description of Chandru.

"She was fair with bold and beautiful black eyes, a straight sharp nose, a long thick hair braided into a plait... She was wearing a Simple Cotton Ikal saree..." (Dollar Bahu 04,05)

Vinuta works as a music teacher in Bangalore, supporting herself after the loss of her parents. Her quiet dignity and determination mark her as an independent individual before marriage. Vinuta has a deep interest in singing. Despite having no support from the family, she manages to practice singing while doing house hold chores. She is a single armed women who has to fight a lot to persuade her interest in singing and to become a music teacher. We can see that Vinuta is very sportive, positive and graceful person who manages the house, family and her carrier very well. Chandru describes Vinuta as, "The Spring Goddess of Dharwad".

Through Vinuta, Murthy portrays the Indian woman's power to endure and transform injustice without losing her moral compass. Unlike many women in her generation, Vinuta is financially independent. Before marriage, she supports herself by teaching music, showing that she values self-reliance. However, her independence does not lead her to reject family or cultural values. This balance is central to Indo-feminism - the idea that a woman can be modern without rejecting her roots. Vinuta never demands freedom in western terms; instead, she redefines freedom as the right to live with self-respect within her family and culture. At the time of her wedding when the groom's family insists Vinuta to sell her property for a grand wedding, Vinuta is intelligent and smart enough to not to sell her property for the wedding and stand up for her property rights.

Vinuta always believes in herself. She is self-confident and very independent, which can be observed at the time of her wedding when she did not demand any materialistic riches from her in laws. Her decision to keep working even after marriage symbolizes a quiet assertion of her identity beyond domestic roles.

"No. I don't have any such demands. Nor am I bothered about this family's riches. If necessary, I will continue to work. All I ask for is to be contented". (Dollar Bahu 31)

After marrying Girish, Vinutha's modesty, work ethic and selfless care make her a model daughter-in-law. She does all the household chores genuinely for helping and supporting family members without expecting any recognition and appreciation. When Chandru is coming to India, she takes leave from work, stays at home and makes all the preparations right from decorations to preparing snacks while everybody goes to pick him from the airport. Gouramma is happy at the Vinuta's attitude as Vinuta is totally unselfish and adjusting to all the circumstances. However, her virtues are overshadowed once Jamuna, the "Dollar Bahu", enters the family.

After the wedding of Chandru and Jamuna is fixed, Gauramma is very happy and wants to gift expensive sarees and jewels to Jamuna. She boasts of Jamuna that she is the only daughter of a rich man. After the wedding, when Chandru and Jamuna return from honeymoon, Jamuna straight away goes to her house but Gouramma does not boss over Jamuna as she does over Vinuta because she is from a rich family. When Jamuna comes to Chandru's house to tell that she is going to America alone the next day, she does not care to speak even a single word to Vinuta as she is from a relatively poor background. Even when her Mother-in-law, Gouramma and her Sister-in-law Surabhi treated Vinuta unfairly after being influenced by Jamuna, Vinuta never retaliates harshly, and continues to fulfil her duties with self-respect. Vinuta embodies the idea of dignity and patience and forms of quiet resistance.

When Vinuta sees her Sister-in-law, Surabhi and Gopinath, their neighbor in the cinema theatre, she immediately goes and tells this to her father-in-law, Shammanna. This Vinuta does as she genuinely cares about Surabhi. Instead of creating a ruckus, she quietly tells it to the elder of the family so that they can attend to the situation.

When Gouramma and Surabhi come to know that Vinuta has told Shamanna about seeing Surabhi and Gopinath in the theatre, Gouramma and Surabhi start ignoring Vinuta. They seek Jamuna's opinion in the wedding matters of Surabhi (as she is from a rich household) while avoiding that of Vinuta's. Despite feeling like an outsider, Vinuta remains silent not because she is weak but because she respects and treats others as her own. Even when Surabhi and Gouramma blame Vinuta for Surabhi's wedding being called off, she remains silent and absorbs all the negativity. This exemplifies her wisdom reflecting the Gandhian ideal of strength through restraint.

Later when Surabhi's wedding is fixed, Vinuta forgets the past (ill-treatment by Gouramma and Surabhi) and gives one lakh rupees to Surabhi for her wedding. Vinuta's forgiveness becomes her power. She reforms hearts instead of wounding them.

Gouramma fixes the wedding date of Surabhi in such a way that Jamuna is able to attend it and Vinuta is not able to attend it (as she is pregnant and about to deliver a child the same time as the wedding). Gouramma tells everyone that her elder daughter in law is coming to India for Surabhi's wedding but did not care about Vinuta's presence in the wedding. Vinuta's refusal to compete with Jamuna, her decision to move to her native for her delivery, and later, her choice to live independently are acts of feminist strength.

"That is my hometown. I have a house there. My grandmother, Seetakka, will come over. There are good hospitals. I have decided that it is the best place to deliver my Child". (Dollar Bahu 68)

All these actions reflect a woman's awakening to her own dignity and the realization that self-respect is more valuable than validation from others. Vinuta's journey in the novel is one of self-realization. Initially she seeks approval from her mother-in-law and finds satisfaction in being appreciated. But when Gouramma begins favoring Jamuna, Vinuta stops seeking validation and recognizes her own worth. This transformation illustrates that true liberation begins within. Vinuta does not rebel outwardly; she achieves emotional freedom through self-awareness. Vinuta's strength grows from her silence. She learns to value herself and not through others, but her own eyes.

When Gouramma is not well and wants to go through biopsy, Vinuta takes leave from her work and takes Gouramma to the doctor. When Gouramma is admitted in the hospital for Surgery Vinuta stayed with her in ward. When Gouramma is asked by the adjacent patient about Vinutha, Gouramma, in all her arrogance, answers

"My daughter stays in Hyderabad and my elder daughter-in-law is in America. This is my younger daughter-in-law". (Dollar Bahu 74)

Vinuta Embodies Sarojini Naidu's brand of Indian womanhood - strong yet gentle, traditional yet thinking, emotional yet independent. Vinuta in the story proves that empowerment can coexist with responsibility and tradition. Her Indo-feminism lies in her inner strength, empathy, moral courage and balance between selfhood and tradition. Through Vinuta, Sudha Murthy redefines the Indian feminists ideal; not as a defiance against male. The assertion of dignity, compassion and self-worth within the Indian family structure is shown. Whenever Vinuta feels that she is not valued and not being respected, she remains silent. She respects elders, cares for her family and fulfils her roles sincerely, yet maintaining her individuality.

When Chandru and Jamuna invite Gouramma to America for Jamuna's delivery, Gouramma is very happy and readily goes to her son's house with excitement. However, her trip to America becomes an eye-opener. She witnesses Jamuna's materialism and disrespect. She also experiences the loneliness of the so-called "American dream." After Jamuna's delivery, when Gouramma asks to stay with the baby, Jamuna replies,

“No. Please don't do that. Manasi should get used to sleeping alone in her room. That's how it is here' Without allowing her mother-in-law say anything more, Jamuna sailed away to her bedroom and shut her door. Gouramma was stunned by her rudeness” (Dollar Bahu 87)

In America, Gouramma starts to feel that her Dollar Bahu's house is very big but she has a very small heart. When Gouramma, seeing her son Chandru do the household chores, extends help, Jamuna shouts and humiliates Gouramma.

The once idolized “Dollar Bahu” is exposed as manipulative and hollow, while the truly compassionate and grounded Vinuta emerges in Gouramma's mind as the real pillar of family values. This transformation in Gouramma signifies a feminist awakening not only for her but symbolically for the older generation of women who begin to question social hierarchies. Her repentance and recognition of Vinuta's silent strength mark the moral resolution of the novel, highlighting that feminist consciousness can emerge even within traditional frameworks through empathy and moral realization.

Vinuta ultimately teaches that empowerment does not always need protest; Sometimes, it comes through quiet grace and unshakable self-respect.

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