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The Married New-Women of Sudha Murty's Novels 'Dollar Bahu' and 'Gentle Falls: The Bakula'

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Abstract— The writer whose works we discuss here in this article is Sudha Murty. She voices the ordinary people of our contemporary time. The writers who portray the New-Women characters in the past mostly showed the characters in the light of a rebel who swims opposite to the waves, completely disregarding the tradition, they are often shown as personalities who break their ties and responsibilities forever but these days we can see writers portraying a new-new-women characters, mostly married women who try to walk with both tradition as well as modernity. Often in fiction we see and discuss how work-life and domestic life collide for the male members of the society. Here in this article I am going deep into analyzing the nature of Married- New-Women characters drawn out by Mrs. Sudha Murty. The article will also discuss how the notion of self-sacrifice is exclusively attributed to a particular gender in Indian society. How they thrive through the difficult situations in life when they are implanted to a new atmosphere and how education becomes a source of strength to them is discussed here in this research article.

Keywords—Married-New- Women, New-Women, Education, Family, Dowry system, Individuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sudha Murty the Padma Shri awarded Indian writer who is also the chairperson of Infosys Foundation is an excellent writer of Indian-English novels who discusses the problems a woman encounter in a micro-cosmic level thereby giving a larger picture of the society and how the women of the Indian society live by their psychological and physical struggles. The women characters we are discussing here belong to the married cult, who struggle to find meaning in life even after the innumerable sacrifices they make to build a happy family.

'New-Woman' was a phrase first used by the Irish writer Sarah Grand and popularized by Henry James. The main thought they propose is such that women should always be free not only physically but also mentally so that they can discover new arenas. Women should participate in various activities and find time to discover themselves. Once they discover themselves it will be easy for them to erase the boundaries drawn around them by the dominating other.

Indian New-Woman movies are nowadays common in the Indian film industry especially the Malayalam film industry of the south. 'The Great Indian Kitchen' is one of the movies which gained International reviews and Kerala state Film award for best film recently. Mrs. Murty's works are interesting to read as well as always gives the readers instances to which they can easily relate. Here in these two novels discussed here brings to light the importance of a career or being financially independent, is for a woman.

Sudha Murty brings to her readers such universal character types to which every female reader can relate. Here readers get answers to various indefinable questions that they face in everyday life.

II. THE CHOICE OF SELF-SACRIFICE AMONG WOMEN

Sudha Murty's protagonist of 'Dollar Bahu' who has 'dollar' not on monetary basis but in the sense of

'character' is named 'Vinuta' who is a school teacher who balances her home as well as work pretty well in spite of the taunts she get in return from her new atmosphere of living among the in-laws. Vinuta gets herself compared to the literally rich 'Dollar Bahu' named 'Jamuna' who comes from a rich background. The self-sacrificing nature of 'Vinuta' is vividly portrayed in the fiction:

Vinuta was pregnant and had had a tiring day at school. Nevertheless, she did everything as per her mother-in-law's wishes, as the word 'no' did not exist in her dictionary (Dollar Bahu, p.58).

Here we could see that she isn't doing anything because someone forced it upon her but it is her own choice. We can see a blend of traditional and modern women in 'Vinuta', who is a new woman character in the fiction.

'Jamuna' who has entered the groom's house with dollars literally never faces humiliation in any manner even if she had very little regard for her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. While reading the story the writer explicitly states that the dowry system is of course abolished from India but it gets disguised and affects a girl's life in many ways.

'Surabhi' is the sister-in-law of 'Vinuta' who lives her life on her own terms. 'Surabhi' was in love with a person who was not that financially equal to her status and thus will abide by her mother's wishes to marry a 'well-settled' guy. Here 'Surabhi' doesn't fall into the category of the new women but a lady who gets easily manipulated. Neither does her mother, 'Gouramma' fall into the category of 'New-women' rather she is a materialistic person who values 'love' less than 'money' but towards the end of the novel she understands the mistakes she has made in her life but unfortunately it was too late because 'Vinuta' by the time was far away from her mother-in-law which can be read in metaphorical terms.

Sarah Grand's 'New-Women' was a woman who expands her spectrum of activities; she would be independent and free but despises the surroundings that make her feel weak. She would not try to make peace with situations rather may break the shackles and fly away. But 'Vinuta' is not like that she is a definition of 'New-New woman' who would rather than breaking the shackles would wait for a change, who is optimistic that the mind-set of the captivator may change with time and if not she would devise other ways to break the chain but never leaves her family like the character 'Nora' of Henrik Ibsen. And one day it does happen that the dominator herself understands her wrong-doings and is guilty of her actions. Thereby the writer is giving a message of peace to her readers.

With a deep sigh, she opened her purse to retrieve the keys to open her suitcase—and a hundred

dollar bill fell out. It was the bill that Chandru had given her at the airport. But at that moment, it did not hold any charm, any power or any magic. The invincible Dollar had fallen . . .

(p.119, *Dollar Bahu*)

Here 'Gouramma' has been portrayed by the writer in such a way that, because of her past experiences of a tough life from the humble salary of her husband who was a school-teacher, she had the misgiving that money was everything for having a happy life. She had understood her mistakes by the end of the novel but still the writer points out that she couldn't understand why her son 'Chandru' helps his wife in household chores again pushing the character into the back-racks of old traditional stereotypical beliefs that household-chores are only for the female members of the family. Jamuna and Chandru had an arranged marriage but the writer through her mouth-piece 'Gouramma' says it's after all his fate!

She was aware that she would never visit America again and she felt sorry for Chandru, who had to put up with such a wife, so far from home. But that again was each person's fate, she consoled herself (p.115, *Dollar Bahu*)

In the story we could see that 'Vinuta's self-sacrificing nature has added shine to her character when Gouramma thinks good of her daughter in law 'Vinuta'. The ability to self-sacrifice one's wishes and to give importance to the thoughts and feelings of other members of the family can be done only to great minds provided whichever gender it is.

2.1 IN THE CONTEXT OF GENTLE FALLS : THE BAKULA

'Shrimati', the protagonist of the story goes through the same old road of a traditional Indian girl who was born and brought up in middle-class family and had the dreams of living a life Independent and free but over the devotion for her love or what we call the choice of 'self-sacrifice' she decides to just be a wife of a successful corporate man. Later on by the way her husband treats her she realizes that she has lost her identity and is living a meaningless life. She does not break her ties but decides to start anew. She decides to continue with her dream of higher studies.

Every human being must at least once be confused at certain situations whether to forsake work for personal life, this book gives all its readers an obvious answer to the problem. Neither of it should be forsaken, rather it should be balanced for having a happy life ahead. Here 'Shrikant' the husband of Shrimati neglects his personal life for the mad-race of money. Foucault once acknowledged there is

no power that is exercised without a series of aims that results from the choice or decision of an individual subject (Philp, 1983).

Shrimati's decision of self-sacrifice has delayed her pursuit of dreams but never denied. Hence we can conclude that self-sacrificing nature of women which is often considered as a trait of good natured women is not a trait but her choice which she makes or rather I would like to rephrase the sentence like- self-sacrificing of dreams for the happiness of others is not a stereotypical trait of women but a choice made by strong independent women who should be respected for who she is and her actions and thoughts. The writer conveys towards the end part of the novel that:

Shrimati, who had walked with him side by side in the same Shraavan rain for ten years had now left him all alone

(p.147, *Gentle Falls: The Bakula*)

III. AN EMOTION CALLED LOVE

As P B Shelley has told in 'Ode to West Wind', the wind have the power to act as a preserver and destroyer, likewise our love towards a person can become strength as well as a weakness for us. There are various types of love discussed in these two novels '*Dollar Bahu*' and '*Gentle Falls: The Bakula*' by Sudha Murty. A girl performs different roles in her second family of in-laws like a sister in law, a wife, a daughter in law etc. and if it's a nuclear family the relationship number cuts down further just with the partner. In the Indian circumstances women should be strong and mature enough to deal with every relation. At those times the love that she gets back from the family members acts as fuel for her to go forward in her personal and professional life.

Vinuta's life when viewed in the light of love is absurd. Her husband is the elder son of the family who is an obedient son with all the responsibilities of his family especially when his younger brother is out of station due to his work. Vinuta's sister in law and mother in law does not show any affection towards her leaving her father in law alone who considers her as his daughter and a member of the family. Hence Vinuta, a teacher by profession who kept honesty, love and sincerity above the dollars towards the end of the novel, doubts herself whether her principles and thoughts were right. That is when her loving father in law clears the air by saying,

This Dollar may have transformed the lifestyles of some families, taken them from poverty to wealth, but it has also broken up some families. It has created financial and social distinctions

within families and destroyed peace of mind. Very few people have understood this.

(p.118, *Dollar Bahu*)

Novelists portraying New-Women characters always estrange them from love even when they are forced to play the typical traditional gender-role. But Sudha Murty's heroines move away from their love-less life to start anew whether it is 'Vinuta' or if it is 'Shrimati'. But it is important to note that they do not sever the family ties forever. And hence a commonly believed thought about new-women novelists is applicable but not completely to the novelist of '*Dollar Bahu*' and '*Gentle Falls: The Bakula*', a common thought which goes like this,

New Woman writers openly claimed that marriage confined women to a limited sphere of education and experience, forced them to abandon their identities as individuals, and required them to participate in monotonous and demoralizing domestic activities. (p.4, Althea)

3.1 IN THE CONTEXT OF GENTLE FALLS THE BAKULA

'Shrimati' the protagonist of '*Gentle Falls the Bakula*' finds herself without an identity or freedom and finally moves away from the confines of love to expand on her experience of outer world and education. Like all the other new-woman heroines she does not break her ties forever but tells her husband where she is going and says that he can visit her whenever he likes. Mrs. Murty's women characters are strong and want to play their role in society and family like their male counterparts. Shrikant and Shrimati once had so much love and respect between them which eventually faded off. It's rightly said by many contemporary critics that contemporary literature is a mirror on contemporary society. Shrikant eventually in the story; being too ambitious put's his work and company above everything. Every other thing becomes secondary compared to his ambitious career in the company. For instance see what Srikant is telling to Harish, an employee working under him,

Not for a day have I put my personal needs or happiness before the company's. The company's success has always been more important to me than anything (p.123, *Gentle Falls: The Bakula*).

New-Women characters of all time period portrayed them as suppressed or having secondary importance compared to their male counterparts. 'Shrimati' and 'Vinuta' both convey this type of an image to its readers towards the beginning of the novels but towards the end of the novels they fight all odds and try to be independent, free and happy individuals with self-respect. Another

important feature of a new-women fiction is that the new-women female protagonists will not have many supporters for her thought. When 'Vinuta' feels only the support and love of her father-in-law, 'Shrimati' has the support of only her mentor and well-wisher, a professor of History.

In spite of getting all those gold medals, being offered a scholarship by Professor Collins and the opportunity to go and study abroad, she had rejected them all because she was madly in love with Shrikant. (p.130, *Gentle Falls: The Bakula*).

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

As is the writer herself, her characters too are highly educated and can support themselves. There are cases where certain woman characters due to their self-sacrificing nature do compromises on their jobs and concentrate on their family such is the lady 'Vinuta' of 'Dollar Bahu'. The New-Woman of this fiction does not leave her job as such because of the taunts she receives from her in-laws. But we can see her job suffering in most of the times when the family has an important event going on amongst them. Another important bias that is happening in the family is that the female protagonist 'Vinuta's' career as a teacher is given less importance to that of a person employed in some other job, namely corporate ones. Once 'Gouri' also known as 'Gouramma', the mother-in-law in the novel says,

Vinuta always takes leave whenever we have a puja at home.

Sarcastically Jamuna shot back, 'She is a government school teacher, which I am not. In any case, in India, people hardly work.' (p.90, *Dollar Bahu*)

The above is the dialogue between the 'Dollar Bahu' and her Mother-in-law where the mother-in-law gets shudder at the retort of her second daughter-in-law 'Jamuna.' To emphasize the notion that this kind of thought is running in our society the writer Sudha Murty again brings in the same thought being conserved between 'Vinuta' and her friend whose lover ditches her for a 'Dollar Girl' who is settled in the US. The dialogue goes thus,

'But Shashi, you have resigned your job and everyone knows about your marriage. Is nobody worried about that?'

'What's a teacher's job, a simple girl's life, in front of the Dollar?'

Vinuta was speechless (p.44, *Dollar Bahu*)

Once upon a time if a person was educated, he or she was considered a person of good character and thought.

But it is very sad to mention that the time has changed and the thought process has changed. In today's competitive world, educated people are those who often forget that 'every job has its own importance and should be given due respect.'

4.1 IN THE CONTEXT OF GENTLE FALLS: THE BAKULA

'Shrimati' is a well-educated girl, in fact the topper of her school. But she does not go for the science discipline as done by all the studious students of her time. She believed that one should study that subject which he or she likes most and not just blindly follow the tradition. The writer is giving an important notion to her readers here when the writer makes 'Shrikant' her mouth-piece by asking,

'Why do you want to take up arts when you are so good at science?'

'I am more inclined towards history and literature. Moreover, I have a principle of my own. We should do what we really like. For two things in life it is very important for us to make our own decisions. One is education. I believe we must study only that subject which we like.'

(p.31, *Gentle Falls: The Bakula*)

New-women characters are often educated or will try to educate themselves if they are not. It's because education will make them 'free'. It is also important to note that education have different value for different person. For instance 'Shrikant' knows that by taking up science and being a corporate job person he can attain so much money, respect and position in life. But he ignores the fact that each subject and the knowledge we gain from it has its own role to play in helping the society grow in different dimensions.

V. CONCLUSION

Sudha Murty is a 'Padma Shree' awardee and is such a writer who voices social, domestic and real life events through her fiction. She writes in simple English in which everyone can understand. She herself says about this that she doesn't want her readers to have a dictionary while they sit down for a pleasure reading¹. Our writer is keen to voice for women and their issues, how they reflect on society and how society treats them in particular. Here through these two works *Dollar Bahu* and *Gentle Falls: The Bakula* the writer talks about two 'married women' characters who stand distinct from the New-Women characters of the writers of the past in their own way. The protagonist women characters of these novels do not sever their ties forever neither do they have hatred to the world

or the other gender. They seek an identity and meaning in their life in the place of void they experience.

This study enables the students of English literature to see the 'New-New Women' characters created by a contemporary writer like Sudha Murty. By the phrase 'New-New Women' I am hereby acknowledging the married new-women characters who try to go with both the modernity as well as tradition. A further study of these works can be done on its symbolism, its male characters etc.

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