

## The Pedagogical Exploration of Familial Value System Versus Aura of Capitalistic World in *Dollar Bahu* by Sudha Murthy: A Study of Identity Crisis

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DOI:

The paper explores the novel *Dollar Bahu* written by Sudha Murthy by applying various literary and psychological theories, such as psychoanalytic theory, hierarchy of needs developed by Maslow, and Marxist criticism. The paper will examine how the story challenges the clash of the conservative values of Indian society with the enticing nature of capitalistic materialism represented by the symbolic image of the American dollar. By examining the main characters and characters in detail, especially the main characters, Gouramma, Vinuta, and Shamanna, this paper will propose that Murthy creates a moral system where genuine human interrelation and cultural groundedness have the final victory over the materialistic accretion. This ambiguity in the novel implies that it is the upholding of fundamental ethical principles ingrained in the Indian tradition that results in self-realisation and reconciliation to the family.

**Keywords:** Dollar Bahu, Sudha Murthy, Indian values, materialism, psychoanalytic criticism, Maslow's hierarchy, brain drain, familial ethics.

### 1. Introduction

One of the principles of the Indian value system is the Sanskrit maxim Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which means that the whole world is one family. Although this ideal often directs the behaviours of people in many cultures, its origins are in the sacred texts of India and its various traditions, which are close to what many view to be the spirit of Indian civilization. Mark Twain also described India as the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition and claimed that not only were the most valuable and the most instructive materials of the history of man treasured there, but that India was the only source of them (Twain, 1897). Irrespective of the fact that the nation is incredibly diverse in terms of religion, caste, language, and geography, this system of common values helps to keep India unique in its diversity.

Sudha Murthy (born in 1950, Shiggaon, Haveri district, Kittur Karnataka region) is one

of the most important literary authors in contemporary India who has been dealing with this cultural inheritance. Murthy, a computer science M.Tech. graduate and the co-chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, is a writer with both technical accuracy and extensive philanthropic involvement in the Indian society. With 200 publications in the form of novels, travelogues, technical writing, short stories, non-fiction, and children literature in both English and Kannada, her writing is a consistent focus on the human identity in the globalising India. She has been honored with R.K. Narayan Award, Padma Shri (2006) and the Attimabbe Award (2011) because of her literary work.

*Dollar Bahu* (2007) is an indication of a long-term concern of Murthy with questions of value, both economic and ethical, in the modern Indian family. The story of the household of Shamanna follows its ups and downs as it tries to balance between the old ideals of morality and the new ideal of capitalist ambition and in the end sets up a

clash between the native moralistic ideals and the lure of the American dollar.

The paper employs a variety of theories to shed light on the thematic issues in the novel: Freudian psychoanalytic theory to discuss the psychological aspect of the obsession of Gouramma, Maslow hierarchy of needs theory to trace her processes of self-actualisation, the Grass is Greener Syndrome theory to diagnose her inherent dissatisfaction and the use of axiological analysis to analyse the competing sets of values at play. With this multi-perspectival style, the paper shows how Murthy creates a story that, though he accepts the material realities of globalisation, the result is to declare the power of familial love, cultural belonging, and ethical integrity.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Psychoanalytic Theory

The psychoanalytic criticism originated in the therapeutic practice of Sigmund Freud and presents the methods of psychoanalysis to the interpretation of literature through the lens of the interaction of conscious and unconscious in the psyche. The tripartite model proposed by Freud (the ego, or consciousness, super-ego, or conscience, and id, or unconscious drives) is a model according to which character motivation and conflict can be explained. Such a framework is especially helpful in *Dollar Bahu* to examine the psychological connection of Gouramma on the wealth and status that is functioning at the level beyond her perceptions and rational self-interest.

### 2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One psychological theory by Abraham Maslow, developed in the year 1943, organises human motivation into five levels that are arranged hierarchically and they include: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem needs and self-actualisation. The theory holds that most people tend to follow these needs in a series, as the achievement of the lower-level needs should act as a precondition to the higher level endeavours. The career followed by Gouramma in the novel can be traced into this hierarchy because her original obsession with esteem (via material presentation) finally yields to the realization of her own lack of true love and her sense of belonging.

### 2.3 The Grass is Greener Syndrome

It is a psychological state attributed in conceptual terms to the Greek poet Ovid, which involves an inability to see any positive things in what is happening to a person. The affected will never be satisfied with anything even after they attain success, and they will always want more because of obsession with what is perceived as wanting. Such clues as perfectionism, constant comparison with others, and lack of gratitude are all elements that contribute to Gouramma orientation towards her two daughters-in-law in the greater part of the story.

### 2.4 Brain Drain Theory

Brain drain can be defined as the exodus of highly educated and intelligent professionals out of developing countries to the developed countries in search of improved opportunities, living standards or larger

salaries. The effect of this phenomenon is the loss of useful human capital by the source countries. The process of Chandru migrating to America in *Dollar Bahu* is the best example of this trend, but at the same time, it also establishes the economic imbalance which forms the main conflict of the novel.

### 2.5 Axiology and Value Theory

The philosophical analysis of value and valuation called axiology is the conceptual terms of analysis that are used to study what the novel reports is valuable and how various characters attribute value to various objects, material, relational and spiritual. The axiological aspect of the story that Murthy tells eventually gives more weight to intrinsic (love, respect, cultural belonging) rather than instrumental (wealth, status, material comfort) goods.

### 2.6 Marxist Theory

Marxist theory is a socio-economic, political philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that was based on the struggle of classes and a criticism of capitalism. This framework sheds light on the role of economic relations in forming the family relations in the novel because the way that Gouramma treats her daughters-in-law is directly related to their economic status in the capitalist system.

## 3. Plot Summary and Character Analysis

### 3.1 Narrative Overview

The novel traces the lives of Shamanna, a Sanskrit teacher, his wife Gouramma, and their three children Chandru, Girish and Surabhi as they go through life in

Bangalore, Dharwad and Florida. Shamanna is struggling to imbue the traditional values in his children, whereas Gouramma is being desirous of belonging to the rich social class, and envies having a more rich life. The family set up changes drastically when their first son Chandru leaves to the United States and starts earning in dollars.

On the contrary, their second son Girish is no different and pursues the same route as his father, staying back in his home town and he is satisfied with a simple life as a bank clerk. He marries Vinuta and becomes part of domestic life and Vinuta takes the benefit of patiently tolerating the criticism of Gouramma. However, when Chandru gets married to Jamuna daughter of a wealthy property developer, Gouramma treats her daughters-in-law even more differently. Jamuna is called the *Dollar Bahu* and Gouramma always contrasts the meager situation of Vinuta with the dollar-finance richness of Jamuna and this makes Vinuta lose all her health and sanity.

But this is brought to a head when Gouramma spends the extended time in America. Although she enjoys some of the freedom that is there in America, she understands that no amount of money can buy true love and respect. Realizing that her mistake Gouramma attempts to reconcile with Vinuta, but that will only happen based on the ability of the latter to forgive.

### 3.2 Major Characters

Shamanna is the ethical hub of the story, an instructor of Sanskrit who preaches morals that give the personality an extra value.

His younger son Girish inherits these characters, and it is the intergenerational preservation of traditional values.

Gouramma shows the psychological multiplicity in the center of the novel. Her conviction in the economic aspect of life defines the world of her oldest son and makes the main conflict. The main storyline of the story is her transformation.

Vinuta, the eldest daughter-in-law, is first revered as Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) of the household, only to be later belittled by being the poor bahu, on the basis of her low social origins. Her long-suffering patience and eventual triumph is a moral argument of the novel.

Jamuna is the second daughter-in-law who is given the name of *Dollar Bahur* referring to her rich background and American living. She is not a complete realisation of a character but rather an icon of the material wealth Gouramma desires.

Chandrashekhar (Chandru), the eldest son was a civil engineer who became a computer professional but later went to America and got a higher salary. His career is an example of brain drain and his marrying Jamuna gives the dramatic contrast of an economy that forms the plot.

Girish, the latter son, is a bank clerk, and who inherits the moral inclination of his father. The marriage to Vinuta symbolises the valorisation of contentment and not ambition that is highlighted in the novel.

#### 4. Analysis: Familial Values Versus Capitalist Aspiration

##### 4.1 Gouramma's Psychological Condition

Obsession with wealth and status by Gouramma is at the conscious and unconscious levels, and as such, psychoanalytic theory is especially applicable in studying her personality. The fantasy of America her mind has had shows how far material aspiration has invaded her psyche:

Gouramma was physically in India, but her mind would be wandering all over America, all the way through. She would fantasize about the Dollar, the magic green money, which was able to transform her home and make her dream come true. It was not Indian rupees but the Dollar that could bring her to the high society in the social events and matrimonial halls. Dollar was compared with the Goddess Lakshmi and a magic wand (Murthy, 2007, p. 25).

Here we see the working of the id or the unconscious memory of the desires because the waking life of Gouramma was dominated by the images of wealth. The Dollar becomes the new idol and it is merged with Lakshmi implying that material ambition has replaced religious devotion. Her conscious part (ego) is powerless to control such desires, and her conscience (super-ego) does not curb her treatment of Vinuta which grows crueler and crueler.

The Grass is Greener Syndrome also helps to understand the mind of Gouramma. Although she has a well to do family, a well to do husband and responsible children, she is never satisfied, she is obsessed with the wealth of her social group. The syndrome is also exhibited by her pattern of making comparisons, whether to her own position

relative to that of richer persons she knows, or to her two daughters-in-law.

#### 4.2 The Economics of Marriage

The way marriage is addressed in the novel indicates the way the economic relations order familial relations. The wedding of Girish to Vinuta is a mere affair, full of no dowry or costly presents, which incites the "grim and humiliating attitude of Gouramma to her new daughter-in-law. When Chandru gets his green card, which in itself is the sign of the brain drain draining the Indian human capital, Gouramma treats his choice of marriage partner as being one of pure economic calculation.

Among thirty women who could be her bride, Gouramma gives preference to Jamuna, daughter of Krishnappa who is a successful property developer. What actually enamored Gouramma, however, Murthy writes, was another thing, the humble demeanour of Jamuna toward Surabhi--but the text makes it clear that economic reasons are in the foreground. Gouramma regards Jamuna as a connection to a huge dowry and a lavish life, the ultimate "Dollar Bahu" to the comparatively penny-pinching Vinuta.

This Marxist aspect of the story shows how the capitalistic principles penetrate the very space of human relations where the family lives the capitalist ideals. The way Gouramma treats her daughters-in-law is directly proportional to their economic status, which proves that the relations of a class organize even the motherly love.

#### 4.3 The American Sojourn: Transformation Through Experience

The long period of stay in America by Gouramma also serves as the catalyst that triggered her psychological and moral change in the novel. Her experience in the American society is a big eye-opener as it confronts her conservative beliefs regarding gender, family and value.

The gender equality which she observes especially upsets her anticipations:

She was stunned by the level of gender equality she witnessed; the division of household chores wasn't strictly tied to being a man or a woman, and the independent lifestyles of American women challenged her traditional views (Murthy, 2007).

Her first meeting with Jamuna in America solidifies the difference between anticipation and reality:

Jamuna looked so bare. She looked so strange with her short hair, a loose gown, and neither a bindi nor her mangalsutra! The only improvement was that her complexion had brightened (p. 82).

In this description Gouramma is depicted as culturally disoriented, there are no signs of a traditional Indian womanhood (bindi, mangalsutra, sari) instead, she is an American casualty. Similarly, she observes that "unlike Girish, Chandru had to help in the household work, like washing the dishes, ironing the clothes etc.," contradicting "Indian culture in which the male members of the family did not work in the kitchen" (p. 103).

The experience helps Gouramma attain what the text refers to as a dual view of the world. As she enjoyed the new things like prenatal planning, fathers in the delivery room, independence of the infants, the very

experience helped her to appreciate more the Indian culture. She concludes that the traditional values of the Indians are an indispensable source of the social and family happiness.

#### 4.4 Self-Realisation and the Limits of Materialism

The change in Gouramma signifies some kind of movement in the direction of what Maslow calls a self-actualisation, which is awareness of genuine needs beyond material acquisition. When she comes back to India she admits the mistake:

America has opened my eyes and I shall never make that mistake again' (p. 141). I promise, I will not be talking about America, its wealth and Dollar Bahu, Jamuna. At that moment Dollar did not hold any excitement, or any magic. The indomitable spirit of Dollar had fallen from her mind (p. 142).

It is a self-realisation which makes up the climax of the novel. The magic of the Dollar, the quasi-divine attribute of it dominating the imagination of Gouramma, is lost when she realizes that money cannot purchase the human virtues and the real values of life. The Indian values that Shamanna has been advocating to his wife eventually pay off in the transformation of his wife.

This is a significant aspect of the axiological dimension of this resolution. The journey of Gouramma is a reassessment of values, a shift in prioritising instrumental to intrinsic goods (love, respect, familial harmony, cultural belonging), as well. The novel implicitly criticizes hedonism the philosophical theory that the highest ends of

life are made up of pleasure and enjoyment and instead in favour of what could be called an egalitarian ethics of care in which relations of mutual respect are more significant than relations of wealth.

#### 5. Thematic Implications

##### 5.1 Indianness and Identity

Murthy does this through characters such as Shamanna, Girish, and Vinuta to pay tribute to the significance of being Indian, or showing allegiance to the old values in all situations. This does not mean that there should be strict traditionalism but a sound sense of identity that will be able to absorb modernity without being subdued by it.

Vinuta is an example of such virtues. Her candor and insensitivity about the fortune of her sister-in-law prove that the true self-identity does not have to be quantified in terms of financial aspects. Her stoic calmness though definitely puts into doubt the prices that women are charged by the patriarchal framework of the family nevertheless, she is rewarded by her former oppressor in terms of respect.

##### 5.2 The Critique of Materialism

In the story by Murthy, one might conclude that conflict and suffers with same condition as Gouramma, people who are blinded by the beauty of money run the danger of losing self-identity and causing inner crisis. Gouramma serves as a symbol of the Indian socio-familial situation whereby, the allurements of the globalised capitalism pose a threat to the conventional means of meaning and belonging.

The novel does not disregard modernity as a whole but implies that the perfect world is created through mixing traditional morals, which are at the center, and modern adjustment. Such a synthesis does not abandon what is valuable in tradition, but is open to that change which may be beneficial.

### 5.3 Gender and Familial Ethics

Although the traditional values are affirmed in the novel, the way of how gender is treated is worth criticism. Vinuta is virtuous because she is patient, endures and serves the home, which are all features that build traditional intuitions of Indian womanhood. Her redemption is not based on any agency of her own but on the change of Gouramma.

Meanwhile, feminist themes, such as gender equality in household work, female autonomy, are brought up by Gouramma through her American observations and make any straight-forward traditionalism more difficult. The novel therefore stands in an undecided role, on the one hand discrediting some of the traditional practices (the devaluation of daughters-in-law according to economic status) and on the other hand validating others (the centrality of family, the respect to the seniors, the culture continuity).

### 6. Conclusion

As it has been evidenced in this paper, *Dollar Bahu* by Sudha Murthy challenges the conflict between the Indian family traditions and the temptation of capitalist materialism. The paper has followed the psychological experience of Gouramma since the period of

obsessed with material things through the application of psychoanalytic theory, Maslows hierarchy of needs, the Grass is Greener Syndrome, brain drain theory and axiological analysis.

The Indian values and ethical culture are depicted in the novel as it is preferable to material possessions. In the case of the Indian community that Murthy describes, social and moral righteousness prevails over the lure of capitalism. Most of the characters are not blinded by the wealth that comes with affluence; after a while they realise that the search of wealth may destroy the self-identity as well as trigger internal crisis.

*Dollar Bahu* is a novel that brings into question the idea that true human prosperity is not about amassing wealth but rather about holding on to the most important ethical principles based on cultural heritage. The loyalty and character of Vinuta that was preserved under many hardships eventually find a reward in the respect, which her mother in the role of her in-law provides, and it proves that traditional values are still the best guide that humanity may have.

The ending of the novel, the metamorphosis of Gouramma and her search of reconciliation provides a promising sight of family harmony, which can be reached by self-identity and moral re-orientation. The story though leaves it to the reader whether Vinuta is capable of forgiving the suffering she has undergone or not, implying that it is up to the reader whether the damaged relations can be fixed not only by realizing the mistake but also by mending the damage that the mistake has caused.

At a time when the world is becoming more globalised and economic migration is occurring, *Dollar Bahu* by Murthy continues to be an important literary intervention, challenging readers to think about their connection to wealth, family, and values that render life meaningful.

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