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Dollar Dreams and Broken Bonds: A Socio-Cultural Critique of Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu*

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Abstract: This paper explores the socio-cultural dynamics in Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu*, a poignant narrative unraveling the allure of wealth juxtaposed against the enduring value of familial relationships. Set against the backdrop of a middle-class Indian family, the novel critiques the pervasive materialism engendered by global aspirations, epitomized by the titular *Dollar Bahu*. The story follows Gouramma, whose preference for her wealthy son and his wife in the United States fuels tension and exposes the fragility of familial bonds. Through vivid characterization and compelling dialogues, Murty portrays the psychological and emotional chasms that arise when financial success becomes the primary measure of worth. This critique explores into themes of migration, cultural identity, and generational conflicts, examining how the pursuit of the "American Dream" alters perceptions of tradition, duty, and love. It further interrogates the dichotomy between material abundance and emotional fulfillment, emphasizing Murty's subtle advocacy for introspection and balance. By situating *Dollar Bahu* within a broader socio-cultural context, the paper underscores its relevance as a commentary on globalization's impact on Indian society. Ultimately, the narrative serves as a reminder of the enduring importance of human connection amidst the distractions of a fast-changing world.

Keywords: Globalization, Materialism, Migration, Cultural identity, Tradition and modernity.

The title encapsulates the novel's exploration of materialism and its impact on relationships. It highlights the tension between traditional Indian values and the allure of Western affluence, symbolizing fractured familial bonds amidst aspirations for economic prosperity.

Sudha Murty is an acclaimed Indian author, philanthropist, and educator, celebrated for her insightful and compassionate storytelling. Writing in English and Kannada, her works often explore social issues, human values, and cultural dynamics. As the chairperson of Infosys Foundation, she champions education, healthcare, and rural development, inspiring millions through her contributions. Mirages, appearing in deserts, freeways, and cold landscapes, have long fascinated the human imagination. These optical illusions distort reality, echoing the ancient concept of Mrigtrishna, a metaphorical pursuit of illusions. In the desert, a thirsty deer chases a phantom oasis until exhaustion claims its life. This relentless chase epitomizes humanity's tendency to pursue elusive desires. In modern society, the pursuit of financial success often mirrors Mrigtrishna. While wealth provides security and fulfills needs, an obsessive chase for financial gain frequently strains interpersonal relationships. Individuals striving for material prosperity may



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achieve their goals only to find themselves isolated, their happiness eroded by broken familial bonds. Balancing material aspirations with nurturing relationships is vital, as true wealth lies in meaningful connections and ethical living.

Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* serves as a poignant satire on society's obsession with wealth and its impact on relationships. The novel critiques the illusion of prosperity, showcasing how the relentless chase for material success blinds individuals to genuine happiness. Originally written in Kannada as *Dollar Sose* (2001) and later translated into English (2007), the story encapsulates middle-class Indian values, aspirations, and the interplay of familial dynamics. At its core, the narrative follows Gouramma, a middle-class matriarch, and her two daughters-in-law, Jamuna and Vinuta. Gouramma's obsession with wealth causes her to favor Jamuna, whose family is affluent, over Vinuta, who endures neglect and mistreatment. Vinuta, a multitalented music teacher with a profound connection to nature, embodies resilience and inner peace despite adversities.

The plot also explores Chandru, Gouramma's eldest son, whose dream of going to the U.S. symbolizes society's infatuation with foreign lands as "promised paradises." Gouramma's visit to America reveals the emptiness of her materialistic aspirations. Through her harsh experiences, she gains newfound respect for Vinuta's virtues. This transformation underscores the futility of valuing wealth over relationships. Murthy masterfully portrays the psychological impacts of poverty and the illusions wealth creates. The novel's realism stems from its nuanced depiction of Indian middle-class life and the intricate relationships within families. Through Vinuta's journey, *Dollar Bahu* reveals that true fulfillment comes not from material gains but from nurturing bonds and embracing life's simple joys. The novel illustrates how materialism disrupts family harmony and fosters discontent. Gouramma's evolution from a dollar-obsessed matriarch to someone who values relationships highlights the danger of prioritizing wealth over emotional well-being. Vinuta's enduring positivity and connection to nature serve as a counterpoint to the relentless pursuit of material success, reflecting the novel's central message: genuine prosperity encompasses emotional, familial, and ethical wealth. Ultimately, *Dollar Bahu* offers timeless lesson material pursuits, like a mirage, may captivate the mind, but lasting happiness stems from meaningful relationships and inner peace. Acknowledging that fate often apportions rewards and challenges based on merit; Vinuta accepts the elders' suggestion. She deeply appreciates Girish's empathy, as he perceives her emotional connection to her Dharwad property and gently reassures her:

If it is so painful for you, we will not sell the house. Let's have a simple wedding. Amma may be upset for a while and might scold or taunt us, but we will endure it. We should not begin our new life with tears. My mother is a good person at heart, though she can be tough at times. She will soften with time. (*Dollar Bahu* 37)



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Girish's words highlight his compassionate character, which stands in contrast to his mother and brother. His understanding nature fosters respect for Vinuta's feelings. After a modest marriage, Vinuta finds her first moments of genuine contentment. Her father-in-law, Shamanna, a noble man with strong principles, reminds her of her late uncle, Bheemanna. In the love and support of her husband and father-in-law, she finally experiences the sense of security that had eluded her. This newfound assurance bolsters her strength to cope with the dominating Gouramma and self-centered Surabhi. Anxiety soon creeps in when Vinuta hears from her friend Shashi about an engagement broken due to her fiancé's preference for wealth. Fate's irony manifests further when Chandru, Girish's elder brother, stumbles upon the wedding photos of Girish and Vinuta the very girl whose mesmerizing voice had captivated him in Dharwad. The revelation is a devastating blow to Chandru, who regrets not expressing his feelings to Vinuta during his time in Dharwad. Despite their admiration for Vinuta, fate favored the younger brother, Girish, over Chandru. After years of striving for a green card, Chandru returns to India with mixed emotions. He dutifully marries Jamuna, a wealthy girl chosen by his mother, Gouramma. Though satisfied with fulfilling his mother's wishes, Chandru suppresses his true feelings. Reflecting on his life, he remarks: "Life in America is lonely compared to India" (*Dollar Bahu* 49).

The arrival of Jamuna, the affluent "*Dollar Bahu*," shifts Gouramma's worldview. Obsessed with wealth, Gouramma begins to belittle Vinuta, who tirelessly serves the family without receiving recognition. Gouramma's favoritism for Jamuna, driven by materialistic desires, creates a stark disparity between her daughters-in-law, disregarding the principle that all children are equal in the eyes of their mother. Vinuta's dismay grows as Gouramma openly praises Jamuna's opulence while criticizing Vinuta's modest life. In a moment of desperation, Vinuta prays: "God, let a day come when forty-five dollars are equal to one rupee. Then, what would this *Dollar Bahu* do?" (*Dollar Bahu* 137) Gouramma's obsession with wealth escalates, culminating in a scathing tirade against Vinuta. She accuses her of manipulating Girish and being selfish for refusing to sell her Dharwad house, adding to Vinuta's emotional burden. Surabhi joins the assault, accusing Vinuta of jealousy and manipulation: "You want me to live like you counting every paisa. But I see through your innocent smile; you can't fool me" (*Dollar Bahu* 65).

Despite Shamanna's efforts to defend Vinuta, the relentless verbal abuse leaves her feeling humiliated and isolated. Her physical and mental health begins to deteriorate under the weight of constant comparisons with Jamuna. Shamanna, observing Vinuta's distress, intervenes with wisdom and compassion. He advises her to leave the toxic environment and build a life of her own, likening her situation to the parable of Sage Kashyap's two wives. He gently reasons: "If the woman of the house is unhappy, the family cannot live in peace. I don't want you to stay here in bondage. Please, go and make your own home" (*Dollar Bahu* 138). Vinuta heeds Shamanna's advice and decides to reclaim her life, understanding that her happiness lies in her own hands.



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Shamanna further reflects on the complexities of life in India and America: “Nothing is absolute in life. Both India and America have their pros and cons. choose a place, accept it wholly, and live happily. Dreaming of one while living in another leads only to grief” (*Dollar Bahu* 140).

Vinuta's journey underscores the plight of countless women trapped in oppressive domestic situations. Despite her struggles, she emerges as a symbol of quiet resilience, choosing self-worth and independence over subjugation. Shamanna inspires his children with his motivating words, teaching them a priceless lesson: when courage is exercised persistently, it always leads to success. Gouramma, however, discovers the changes in her household without her consent, when her husband informs her of them. She responds:

They are adults. They don't need our permission. In fact, I was the one who sent them. Your excessive praise of Jamuna was pushing Vinu into a depression her symptoms were evident. I don't want my healthy daughter-in-law suffering for no fault of hers. It's better for her to be away from such an environment. (*Dollar Bahu* 141)

Kindness is a virtue that should never be overlooked. Unfortunately, Gouramma fails to see the gentle and compassionate nature of Vinuta. She has taken advantage of her daughter-in-law's submissiveness, neglecting to show compassion toward Vinuta, who has cared for her as a mother would. Money may bring power, but it is only through character that one earns respect. Shamanna is respected for his humanity, yet Gouramma fails to achieve the same. What you do now will come back to you later. Her greed for money blinds her to the fact that hurting others' feelings is wrong, and her selfishness and ego have finally driven her loyal daughter-in-law, Vinuta, to leave.

In Indian culture, a woman becomes a member of her husband's family after marriage, often leading to a belief among mother-in-laws that they have the right to control the mental and emotional well-being of their daughters-in-law. This dynamic is a reflection of the patriarchal society in India, where a mother-in-law forgets her own struggles as a daughter-in-law—struggling to provide a dowry and instead becomes hard-hearted, demanding a hefty dowry from her sons. This unfortunate lack of mutual respect has been a feature of tradition-bound societies for centuries. While Shamanna recognizes the intrinsic value of both of his daughters-in-law, Gouramma remains indifferent. She fails to appreciate Vinuta's brilliance. Despite being pregnant, Vinuta is treated as an afterthought in the family's affairs. Surabhi's wedding is scheduled around Vinuta's due date, as though Vinuta is irrelevant to the family's happiness. In contrast, when Jamuna becomes pregnant, Gouramma travels to America to care for her. Despite Jamuna's indifference, Gouramma humbles herself and serves her, believing that Jamuna is deserving of her attention. Sadly, the American experience helps Gouramma realize that Vinuta is a good person, while Jamuna is a manipulative woman. As Gouramma travels to the United States, she is captivated by the country and its way of life, comparing it to India: “She sighed, thinking to herself,



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‘This is America. What a difference between this land and India. No crowds, any rickshaws, cows, or handcarts just cars, cars everywhere. The Hindu epics describe different worlds, like nagaloka or yakshaloka. What kind of world is this?’ (*Dollar Bahu* 81)

Gouramma is enchanted by the United States, but her feelings towards Jamuna have not changed. Despite her deep admiration for the country, Gouramma still fails to appreciate Vinuta for her true worth. Her visit to the U.S. reveals more about Jamuna’s nature, especially when Jamuna rejects Gouramma’s attempt to perform a traditional ceremony for her: “...she had brought with her a green sari and sweetmeats for the occasion...Helpless, she was forced to give her gift without performing the ceremony. She noticed that Jamuna didn’t even open the gift” (*Dollar Bahu* 86).

Gouramma begins to learn more about Jamuna’s true character during her granddaughter’s naming ceremony, when she overhears a conversation between Jamuna and her friend, Rekha. Jamuna reveals her manipulative tendencies: “In a way, I’m lucky. My brother-in-law and his wife will never be able to afford to come here, though my sister-in-law is greedy. But they can’t come because her husband is only a lawyer. Even if they want to, I can put them off on some pretext” (*Dollar Bahu* 90).

Gouramma’s fragile psyche receives another blow when she accidentally stumbles upon some old photos. She is shocked to realize that Jamuna has cleverly disposed of many of her old saris and received much praise for it: “Gouramma was shocked... She realized that Jamuna had cleverly gotten rid of many of her old saris and had received so much appreciation for them” (*Dollar Bahu* 126). Gouramma is further devastated when she recognizes a silk sari Jamuna had worn at a wedding, which is now passed on to Surabhi as a gift:

...ironically ironed, professionally folded, and gifted to Surabhi for the wedding. Gouramma was furious. She thought to herself, ‘I was crazy about American things and expensive silks, but it does not mean I’ll accept a used sari as a gift.’ She was deeply hurt and vowed never again to ask Jamuna for anything from America” (*Dollar Bahu* 127).

She now understands that she is nothing more than a servant in her son’s house, controlled by her “*Dollar Bahu*” (*Dollar Bahu* 127). Gouramma overhears Jamuna speaking about her in-laws with disdain: “Nothing 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 sister-in-law Surabhi has no brains. It’s easy to manage such women” (*Dollar Bahu* 128).

Jamuna goes on to explain how she manages her in-laws: “I give them what I don’t like, and they don’t suspect anything. For example, I passed on all my old saris to Surabhi, telling her I had to rewrap them due to customs restrictions. They believe me. My mother-in-law doesn’t realize that she should get along with Vinuta, who works day and night for these people, yet she praises me. I always believe in divide and rule” (*Dollar Bahu* 128)



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Jamuna reveals her true intentions in a conversation about why she and her husband allowed Gouramma to stay with them: “I wanted my mother-in-law for one year. She was dying to come to the US anyway, and my husband wanted his mother to come. It was the right time to call her. In this one year, she has looked after us, the house, and even babysat Manasi” (*Dollar Bahu* 129). Gouramma collapses, overwhelmed with the realization of her own foolishness:

She collapsed on the steps, head in hands. ‘Oh God! Why was I so stupid?’ She cursed herself, feeling like running away to India immediately. She realized that she had married her son off to an evil-minded woman, falling prey to her wealth and sweet talk. (*Dollar Bahu* 129-130).

It is possible to recognize an individual's character by analyzing their words and behavior. Gouramma, her daughter Surabhi, her eldest son Chandru, and her inclination towards materialism are all indicative of their ignorance regarding the poisonous nature of greed as a vice. This brings to mind a poem, *Money Madness*, by D.H. Lawrence's, where he opines: “But it is not money we are terrified of, it is the collective money-madness of mankind” (Lawrence 62). Upon her return to India, Gouramma showered Vinuta and Harsh with profound care, despite her occasional disregard of them. Finally, after getting slapped emotionally by Jamuna, Gouramma came to the realization that while it is possible that wealth may eradicate poverty, in the end, nothing except family and connections are far more valuable than financial worth. Sudha Murthy states: “Money is a double-edged sword that can be used to cut a fruit and also to kill a person. It is important to earn money, but much more important to handle money” (Phusunge 51).

Arundathi Roy in her *The God of Small Things* deals with the exploitation of women in India, wretched condition of an untouchable boy on the society, faces that wear masks etc. “The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 33). In fact the greatness of a novel depends on the effective handling of various themes. It is interesting to note at the outset that though a woman, Sudha Murthy's themes are not restricted to women's issues only. Her writings show remarkable shift in overall perspective to feminine writing. It is general practice in feminine writing to blame men for the sufferings of women as if men and women were born enemies and marriage was a license to carry out an agenda of exploitation of women by men. Sudha Murthy is perhaps the first Indian writer in English to reason out the issue by blaming one woman for the miseries of another woman along with the man in the family. Bacon's essay *Of Riches* offers a useful theoretical connection because it examines wealth as a means rather than an ultimate measure of human fulfillment, “Should a marriage be arranged on the basis of love and understanding or on the love for the Dollar” (Bacon 59).

Over time, Gouramma begins to see life in America from a different perspective. She realizes that no amount of money can buy the affection and respect she is accustomed to receiving in India. While the middle-class life in India is complex, it is filled with love and mutual respect,



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something she finds missing in the U.S. This experience leads to a shift in her relationship with Vinuta. Gouramma now understands that material wealth cannot buy the respect she deserves, and that meaningful relationships, built on love and mutual respect, are what truly matter. The visit to the U.S. serves as an eye-opener for Gouramma, who comes to realize that people in America face their own challenges and hardships, just as they do in India. Despite her initial belief that her “Dollar Bahu” was superior, Gouramma’s perspective shifts, and she recognizes the value of genuine relationships over material wealth.

The **conclusion** of the socio-cultural critique of Sudha Murty’s *Dollar Bahu* through the lens of “Dollar Dreams and Broken Bonds” highlights the complex interplay between materialism, familial relationships, and cultural identity. Murty’s novel critiques the social pressures placed on individuals, particularly women, within traditional Indian families, as they navigate the aspirations of upward mobility and the contrasting values of familial loyalty, love, and integrity. The character of the “*Dollar Bahu*,” who marries into a family with hopes of elevating her financial status, represents the allure of material wealth that comes with immigration to a foreign land, symbolized by the United States (the “dollar” culture). However, the novel sheds light on the emotional costs of such dreams, particularly in terms of broken familial bonds and the erosion of values like love and connection. Through the lens of socio-cultural dynamics, Murty critiques the growing materialism in society and its negative impact on traditional relationships, often portrayed in the tension between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, as well as the strained relationship between the protagonist, her husband, and her family.

Finally, Murty’s *Dollar Bahu* serves as a commentary on the challenges faced by individuals caught between traditional cultural values and the allure of modern, capitalist ideals. The novel underscores the consequences of pursuing wealth at the expense of human relationships and cultural heritage, urging readers to reconsider the cost of dreams built solely on material gain. Through her nuanced portrayal of family dynamics, Murty invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of globalization and the changing socio-cultural landscape in contemporary India.

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