



## GENDER DYNAMICS IN DOLLAR BAHU BY SUDHA MURTY: A CRITIQUE OF MATERIALISM AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMANHOOD

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### Abstract

*This paper critically examines the gender dynamics in Sudha Murty's novel, Dollar Bahu (2007), analyzing the complex interplay between traditional Indian gender roles and the disruptive forces of globalization and materialism. The study argues that the novel functions as a powerful critique of the materialistic re-evaluation of female identity, where a woman's worth is reduced to an economic asset, symbolized by the "dollar." Through a detailed analysis of the central female characters - Vinuta, Jamuna, and Gouramma the paper demonstrates how Murty champions an intrinsic, character-based form of womanhood. Ultimately, Dollar Bahu advocates for a balanced form of empowerment rooted in self-respect and moral integrity, offering a vital commentary on the evolving nature of gender inequality in the modern Indian family.*

### Keywords

*Gender Dynamics, Sudha Murty, Dollar Bahu, Materialism, Commodification, Indian Literature, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

Sudha Murty, a prominent voice in contemporary Indian English literature, is celebrated for her accessible yet profound narratives that often delve into the complexities of middleclass Indian life. Her works are characterized by a keen focus on social issues, ethical dilemmas, and the enduring strength of human relationships against the backdrop of rapid socio-economic change. Among her most discussed novels, *Dollar Bahu* (2007) stands out as a compelling social commentary on the shifting values within the Indian family structure, particularly concerning the status and identity of women. The novel's title itself literally translating to *Dollar Daughter-in-Law* immediately signals a central conflict: the collision between traditional, intrinsic values and the modern, extrinsic measure of wealth and foreign status.

The study of gender dynamics in *Dollar Bahu* is profoundly significant because the novel provides a vivid microcosm of the cultural anxieties prevalent in post-liberalization India, where the economic success of the diaspora often overshadows domestic virtues. Murty masterfully uses the domestic sphere specifically, the fraught relationship between a mother-in-law and her two contrasting daughters-in-law to critically examine how patriarchal norms, once rooted in tradition, are now being subtly re-enforced and complicated by the new metric of materialism. The narrative



forces a confrontation with the fundamental question of a woman's worth: is it determined by her character, education, and contribution to the family, or by the financial status and foreign currency (the "dollar") her husband commands? By juxtaposing the lives of the two main female protagonists, Murty offers a nuanced critique of the commodification of womanhood and the persistent, yet evolving, nature of gendered expectations in a globalized world.

This paper argues that *Dollar Bahu* functions as a powerful critique of the materialistic re-evaluation of gender roles in modern Indian society. Sudha Murty demonstrates that the elevation of financial success over character not only distorts traditional family hierarchies but also subjects women to a new form of oppression where their identity is reduced to an economic asset. Ultimately, the novel champions an intrinsic, character-based form of womanhood, represented by the undervalued Vinuta, thereby asserting that true empowerment and familial harmony are rooted in self-respect, education, and emotional richness, rather than the superficial allure of the 'dollar.' This analysis will explore the novel's portrayal of gender roles, the impact of materialism on female identity, the influence of patriarchal norms on inter-personal relationships, and the scholarly debate surrounding the novel's feminist consciousness, all supported by rigorous academic references.

### **A Concise Summary of *Dollar Bahu*:**

*Dollar Bahu* centers on the life of a middle-class family in Bangalore, India, and the domestic upheaval caused by the materialistic aspirations of the matriarch, Gouramma. The novel's central narrative tension is established through the contrasting marriages of Gouramma's two sons. The elder son, Chandru, marries Vinuta, a simple, educated, and traditionally virtuous girl from a modest background. Vinuta embodies the ideal of the bahu (daughter-in-law) rooted in Indian cultural values: she is hardworking, devoted, and prioritizes the well-being of her family over personal gain. Despite her quiet strength and competence, she is initially undervalued and often subjected to the subtle emotional neglect of her mother-in-law, Gouramma.

The younger son, Girish, marries Jamuna, who quickly earns the moniker "Dollar Bahu" after Girish secures a job in the United States. Jamuna represents the modern, materialistic Indian woman whose worth is measured by her husband's foreign income and the luxury goods she brings back from America. Gouramma, blinded by the glamour and perceived social status associated with the "dollar," lavishes attention and praise on Jamuna, openly contrasting her with the less glamorous Vinuta. This preference creates a deep-seated tension and an implicit hierarchy within the family, where Vinuta's traditional virtues are rendered invisible by Jamuna's material wealth.

The plot progresses as Gouramma, driven by her desire to experience the "American dream" and escape the perceived drudgery of Indian life, travels to the US to live with Girish and Jamuna. The reality of life with the *Dollar Bahu* is a stark contrast to her expectations. Jamuna, self-centered and arrogant, treats Gouramma with indifference and disrespect, reducing her to a mere caretaker. This experience serves as a crucial turning point, forcing Gouramma to recognize the superficiality of material wealth and the true value of Vinuta's selfless character.

The novel's resolution sees Gouramma returning to India with a profound realization: the "pure gold" of Vinuta's character is far more valuable than the "dollar" represented by Jamuna. The narrative thus uses the domestic conflict to critique the cultural shift towards materialism, ultimately reaffirming the enduring importance of traditional Indian values, particularly in defining the identity and status of women within the family structure.

The central gender dynamics are established through the contrast between the three main female characters and the influence of the male figures. Vinuta represents the traditional ideal, embodying the undervalued, virtuous Indian woman whose worth is based on character and



service. Her intrinsic value is initially ignored in favor of extrinsic wealth. Jamuna, the *Dollar Bahu*, represents the modern, materialistic woman whose status is derived solely from her husband's foreign income. Her superficial wealth and arrogance expose the hollowness of a purely economic definition of womanhood. Gouramma, the matriarch, represents the traditional family authority figure whose judgment is corrupted by materialistic aspirations, highlighting the societal confusion over what constitutes a "good" daughter-in-law in a globalized world. Finally, Shamamma, Gouramma's brother, provides a balanced, non-patriarchal perspective, offering a crucial counter-narrative that supports female autonomy and self-respect.

### **Critical Analysis of Gender Dynamics in *Dollar Bahu*:**

The core strength of Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu* lies in its incisive critique of how gender roles and the traditional family hierarchy in Indian society are destabilized and redefined by the forces of globalization and materialism. The novel does not merely present a clash between tradition and modernity, but rather a more complex conflict where a new, economically driven patriarchy attempts to supplant the old.

### **Gender Roles, Hierarchy, and the Impact of Materialism:**

In traditional Indian society, the status of a woman, particularly a daughter-in-law (*bahu*), is often contingent upon her adherence to prescribed gender roles: service, obedience, and the maintenance of familial harmony. Murty initially portrays this hierarchy through the character of Gouramma, the mother-in-law, who holds the power to define the worth of her daughters-in-law. However, this traditional authority is shown to be easily corrupted by the lure of the "dollar."

The novel demonstrates that the traditional gendered expectation of the *bahu* is now being commodified. Vinuta, who fulfills the traditional role of the ideal daughter-in-law through her hard work and devotion, is marginalized because she lacks the economic status of Jamuna. Jamuna, the "Dollar Bahu," is initially revered not for her character or contribution to the family's emotional well-being, but for the perceived wealth and social status her husband's foreign income provides. As Joshi and Rao argue, the novel explores how "the value of a woman is constructed and measured in society" by challenging the notion that financial status should determine a woman's worth. This elevation of financial success creates a new form of gendered oppression. Jamuna's identity is reduced to an economic asset, and her arrogance stems from this misplaced sense of material superiority. Her treatment of Gouramma in the US reducing her to a domestic servant is a powerful reversal that exposes the hollowness of a purely materialistic existence. The novel suggests that when women internalize and perpetuate the patriarchal value system, even if driven by economic factors, they become agents of their own and other women's subjugation.

### **The Socio-Cultural Context of Post- Liberalization India and the NRI Phenomenon:**

To fully appreciate the gender dynamics in *Dollar Bahu*, one must situate the narrative within the socio-cultural landscape of post-1991 liberalized India. The economic reforms of the early 1990s ushered in an era of unprecedented economic growth and a corresponding shift in social values, particularly the rise of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) as a symbol of ultimate success. The NRI, and by extension the *Dollar Bahu* became a cultural icon representing the fusion of Indian roots with Western prosperity. This phenomenon created a new form of social hierarchy where foreign currency and the ability to migrate became markers of superior status, directly impacting the marriage market and the perceived value of women.

Murty's novel captures the resulting cultural anxiety. The family's obsession with Jamuna is not merely personal greed; it is a reflection of a national aspiration where the "dollar" is seen as a key to escaping the perceived limitations of middle-class Indian life. This aspiration directly





influences Gouramma's judgment, causing her to devalue Vinuta, who represents the domestic, local, and therefore, less glamorous success. The novel critiques this cultural moment, highlighting how the patriarchal system quickly adapts to new economic realities, using the lure of wealth to maintain control over women's choices and identities. The novel implicitly asks whether the economic freedom brought by globalization truly liberates women, or simply replaces one form of patriarchal control (tradition) with another (materialism).

### **The Commodification of Woman- hood and the "Dollar" Metaphor"**

The central metaphor of the novel, the "Dollar Bahu," is a powerful literary device that critiques the commodification of womanhood in the post-liberalization Indian context. The "dollar" is not merely a currency; it is a symbol of globalized aspiration, material success, and a new, insidious form of social capital that dictates female worth. Murty illustrates how this economic metric replaces traditional, character-based virtues, effectively turning the daughter-in-law into a status symbol or a financial asset for the family.

Jamuna, the titular character, is the embodiment of this commodification. Her value is entirely extrinsic, tied to her husband's foreign income and the material goods she imports. Her behavior her arrogance, her neglect of traditional duties, and her emotional detachment is tolerated, even celebrated, by Gouramma because of the perceived social elevation she brings. This dynamic highlights a critical shift in the patriarchal gaze: the traditional expectation of obedience and service is momentarily suspended in favor of economic gain. However, this is not liberation; it is merely a transaction. Jamuna is valuable only as long as the "dollar" flows, and her identity is fundamentally unstable, resting on external, volatile factors.

In contrast, Vinuta represents the intrinsic value that resists commodification. Her "pure gold" character, as the novel later terms it, signifies a worth that is inherent, stable, and independent of market forces. Murty uses this juxtaposition to argue that the pursuit of material wealth as a measure of female identity is ultimately self-defeating. The emotional poverty and familial dis- cord that Jamuna's materialism creates serve as a moral lesson, suggesting that a woman's true strength and contribution lie in the non-monetary realms of education, emotional labor, and moral integrity. The novel thus serves as a cautionary tale against allowing global economic forces to dictate the terms of domestic and gendered relationships.

### **Patriarchal Norms and Inter-Gender Relationships:**

The novel's exploration of inter-gender relationships is complex, particularly in the portrayal of the male figures. While the sons, Chandru and Girish, are largely passive and defined by their wives' status, the traditional patriarchal structure is most clearly challenged by the character of Shamamanna.

However, Murty introduces a crucial counter- narrative through Shamamanna, Gouramma's brother. Shamamanna is a wise, educated, and progressive male figure who actively challenges the family's materialistic bias. He champions Vinuta's self-respect and advocates for her education and personal autonomy, stating that a woman should have a "good career" and not just be defined by her domestic role. His perspective serves to deconstruct the rigid patriarchal framework, suggesting that true empowerment for women requires not just economic independence, but also the support of enlightened male allies who value character over convention. Shamamanna's intervention is critical, as it provides a moral compass that guides Gouramma toward her eventual realization, demonstrating that the dismantling of gender inequality requires a shift in perspective from both men and women within the family unit.

### **The Mother-in-Law's Journey: A Re-education in Gender Values:**



Gouramma's character arc is pivotal to the novel's exploration of gender dynamics, as she represents the internalization and perpetuation of patriarchal values by women themselves. Initially, Gouramma is the primary enforcer of the gendered hierarchy, favoring Jamuna and marginalizing Vinuta. Her preference is a direct result of her own materialistic aspirations and her desire for social validation, demonstrating how women can become complicit in their own oppression by adopting the values of the dominant economic patriarchy.

Her journey to the United States is a narrative device for her re-education. Removed from the familiar social structure of India, Gouramma is subjected to the very commodification she championed. Jamuna, who once symbolized her aspiration, now treats her as a burden and a domestic servant, exposing the transactional nature of the "dollar" relationship. This experience forces Gouramma to confront the difference between perceived status and genuine respect. Her realization that Vinuta's quiet devotion and self-respect are more valuable than Jamuna's material wealth is a powerful moment of feminist consciousness, albeit one achieved through personal suffering. This realization is not just a return to tradition, but a moral awakening that re-establishes character as the supreme value in gender relations, challenging the economic determinism that had temporarily blinded her.

### **Feminist Readings: The Debate on Murty's Traditionalism:**

Scholarly analysis of *Dollar Bahu* often centers on a critical debate: whether Murty's ultimate affirmation of Vinuta's character constitutes a truly feminist statement or a subtle re-affirmation of traditional, patriarchal gender roles. Critics who lean towards the latter argue that by positioning Vinuta as the ideal woman one who is self-sacrificing, devoted to the family, and finds her fulfillment within the domestic sphere Murty risks reinforcing the very stereotypes that limit women's autonomy. They suggest that the novel's moral victory is achieved through a return to a conservative ideal, where a woman's worth is still measured by her success as a bahu, albeit one with a strong moral compass.

However, a more nuanced feminist reading suggests that Murty's work is a form of cultural feminism that reclaims and redefines traditional virtues within a modern context. This perspective highlights that Vinuta is not merely submissive; she is educated, self-aware, and eventually asserts her self-respect by pursuing her own career path, demonstrating a synthesis of traditional commitment and modern autonomy. Her strength is internal, not dependent on a husband's income or a mother-in-law's approval. As Joshi and Rao contend, the novel ultimately promotes a "feminist consciousness" by showing that true empowerment stems from inner strength and self-respect, rather than external, materialistic measures. The novel's triumph is not the rejection of the West, but the rejection of materialism as the sole determinant of value, thereby creating space for a more holistic and self-determined female identity in Indian society.

### **Traditional vs. Modern Perceptions of Womanhood and Empowerment:**

*Dollar Bahu* offers a nuanced comparison between traditional and modern perceptions of womanhood, ultimately advocating for a synthesis that transcends both extremes. The two primary female archetypes, Vinuta and Jamuna, serve as critical foils in this discussion. Jamuna embodies a purely modern, materialistic perception of womanhood. Her worth is entirely extrinsic, defined by financial power and social dominance derived from her husband's foreign income and luxury possessions. This archetype is ultimately critiqued by the novel, as it leads to emotional poverty and familial discord, serving as a cautionary tale against pure materialism.

In contrast, Vinuta represents a synthesis of traditional virtues and modern autonomy. Her source of worth is intrinsic: character, education, emotional contribution, and self-respect. Her empowerment is achieved through self-discovery and the realization of inner strength. The novel's



resolution, where Gouramma realizes the "pure gold" of Vinuta's character, is not a simple endorsement of traditionalism. Vinuta is not merely a submissive wife; she is educated and eventually asserts her self-respect, a key element of modern empowerment. Murty's message is that true empowerment for the Indian woman lies in a balanced identity: one that retains the emotional richness and familial commitment of traditional values while embracing the self-respect and autonomy afforded by modern education and financial independence [4]. The novel thus serves as a powerful reminder that the most valuable currency in the domestic sphere is not the dollar, but the enduring strength of character.

### Conclusion:

Dollar Bahu by Sudha Murty offers a compelling and multi-layered examination of gender dynamics within the context of a rapidly globalizing Indian society. The novel's central conflict, driven by the mother-in-law Gouramma's preference for the materialistic Jamuna (the "Dollar Bahu") over the virtuous Vinuta, serves as a powerful allegory for the societal shift where financial success and foreign status begin to eclipse traditional values and intrinsic character.

The analysis confirms that Murty's work functions as a profound critique of the new, economically-driven patriarchy that commodifies womanhood, reducing a woman's identity to an economic asset. The novel meticulously portrays how traditional gender roles and family hierarchies are distorted when materialism becomes the primary metric of worth, a distortion rooted in the socio-cultural anxieties of post-liberalization India and the NRI phenomenon. However, the narrative ultimately affirms the enduring value of character, education, and self-respect, as represented by Vinuta's journey from being an undervalued bahu to the true anchor of the family.

In its reflection on gender roles, Dollar Bahu contributes significantly to Indian literature by moving beyond a simple binary of traditional oppression versus modern liberation. Instead, Murty advocates for a balanced form of empowerment where women, like Vinuta, can retain the emotional richness of their cultural heritage while asserting their individual autonomy and self-worth. The novel's resolution, marked by Gouramma's realization and the affirmation of Vinuta's "pure gold" character, suggests that true progress in gender dynamics is achieved not through the acquisition of external wealth, but through the cultivation of internal strength and a societal re-evaluation that prioritizes human values over material possessions. Murty's story thus serves as a vital commentary, urging readers to recognize and resist the subtle ways in which economic forces can perpetuate and redefine gender inequality in the modern Indian family, making it a crucial text for understanding contemporary Indian feminist consciousness.

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