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Material Aspirations and Cultural Values in *Dollar Bahu*: A Feminist Study

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Abstract: The novelist, Sudha Murty, presents the conflict between material aspiration and traditional values in the novel, *Dollar Bahu*. The novel explores how the obsession for wealth and social status affects relationship in the family. The story of the novel revolves around the experiences and lives of an Indian middle-class Punjabi family. The couple, Shamanna, a school teacher, and his wife Gouramma, have three children, Chandrashekhar or Chandru, Girish and Surabhi. Chandrashekhar is an engineer who gets settled in America with his wife, Jamuna whereas Girish, a bank employee, lives in India with his wife, Vinuta. Surabhi is an ambitious girl who gets married to Suresh, a lawyer based at Hyderabad. Jamuna represents materialism and modern culture whereas Vinuta represents traditional and moral values. The novel also explores the struggle of women caught between social status and self-respect, family expectations and self-identity, desires and duties, material aspiration and moral values, traditionalism and modernism. The novelist tries to draw our attention towards the importance of moral values and family bonding. The novelist highlights how material aspirations can affect respect and bonding within a family. In fact, the central theme of the novel is the conflict between material values and moral values in our society. The novelist skillfully puts forth how sometimes wealth is mistaken for worth through the initial perspective and perception of Gouramma towards her daughter in laws. Since Gouramma initially views her relationships through the lens of wealth and social status therefore, she praises Jamuna and does not acknowledge the worth of Vinuta. However, when she visits America and observes Jamuna and her lifestyle, Gouramma realizes her fault and understands the true worth of Vinuta and her country. Gouramma's realization of true worth and moral values after returning back to her own country and home, symbolizes the significance of values and togetherness. This research paper analyzes how the novel, *Dollar Bahu* critiques materialism and its destructive impact on traditional values and family bonding.

Index Terms: Materialism, cultural values, social status, emotionalism, family bonding.

Sudha Murthy is a well-known Indian author, educator, philanthropist and a social worker. She has been a recipient of various prestigious awards such as the Padma Bhushan, the Padma Shri, R.K. Narayan Award for Literature and so on. She started her professional career in computer science and engineering. She is also a social worker who spoke out for equal opportunities for women to work in the TATA group. She later became the first woman engineer hired at India's largest automobile manufacturer. She is more popularly known for her contributions in English and Kannada and has written more than forty books. Some of her important works are *Mahashweta* (2000), *Dollar Bahu* (2003), *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* (2004), etc. The novel, *Dollar Bahu*, was originally written in Kannada by Sudha Murthy and later translated into English. It was also adapted as a televised dramatic series and aired in 2001 by Zee TV. The novel explores the obsession for wealth and social status rather than the family bonding. The title of the

novel is suggestive of materialism and dollar status as well as family relationships. The story of the novel reflects the scenario of the Indian homes with joint families. The novelist projects how some women have great fascination for the foreign land and its currency. The novel presents the perspectives of women regarding marriage, as well as their expectations from it. The novelist skillfully portrays the conflict between traditional and modern values and also illustrates how the value of wealth is perceived by different generations. The novel presents a contrast between Indian cultural values with the American lifestyle. Through the women characters, the novelist tries to present the contrast between materialism and emotionalism, modern lifestyle and traditional values.

The novel, *Dollar Bahu*, explores the lives of a middle-class Punjabi family. The novelist presents the family of Shamanna, a Sanskrit teacher in a government school, his dominating and ambitious wife, Gouramma and their three children, Surabhi, Chandrakant or Chandru and Girish. Shamanna is a sensible man who wants his children to have good education. His wife on the other hand, is an extremely ambitious person. Chandru is married to Jamuna and settles in America while Girish is married to Vinuta and lives with the family in India. The women characters shape the story of the novel projecting the idea of money, marriage, social status on one hand and moral values and social responsibilities on the other. Jamuna is the dollar bahu who is valued for the foreign currency she brings from the United States in form of dollars, whereas Vinuta, a simple middle-class girl, represents traditional Indian values. Through the character of Gouramma, the elderly mother-in-law of Jamuna and Vinuta, the novelist presents the picture of Indian homes with joint families where the bahus are compared with each other by the mother in laws. This comparison sometimes generates the feelings of jealousy and bitterness amongst family members that ultimately destroys the family's peace and prosperity. Through the character of Gouramma, Sudha Murty tries to draw our attention towards the negative consequences of materialism in our lives.

Gouramma represents all those Indian women who are concerned about their social status and perceive America as a status symbol and a place full of opportunities that provide better life. The character of Gouramma embodies the central theme of the novel, that is how materialism can become important over emotionalism. Though the transformation in Gouramma by the end of the novel, highlights the importance of family values and togetherness over materialism. Initially, Gouramma judges everyone including her daughter-in-laws, Jamuna and Vinuta, through their status and wealth. "Since her husband had been unable to fulfil her dreams, Gouramma had pinned her hopes on her children" (19). In fact, whenever she attended any social gatherings, she would feel envious of the women wearing expensive saris and jewellery, considering them lucky. Let us see how she feels in such gatherings:

In most such gatherings, it was customary for women who had travelled abroad to form an exclusive circle. Most of their children were settled abroad, so their conversation was usually different from that of the others. 'Oh, when I was in New York the last time, I bought a coral set,' one would say and another would remark, 'But you know jade is available only in San Francisco....' And poor Gouramma would feel completely left out. She felt people ignored her and looked down upon her because none of her children were based abroad. Every day she would pray to god that her children should go abroad and earn lots of money so that she could join that circle and tell them, 'See, I am equal to you'. (19)

Like her other friends who equate wealth with prestige and status, Gouramma too wants to flaunt her social status by boasting about her son Chandru, who settled in America. To overcome her social insecurity, she mingles in the company of well-off women and frequently refers to her son's status in America. Further, she keeps on mentioning about the material status of Jamuna, her car, jewellery, attires and American lifestyle in order to elevate her own social status. Such insecurity in women is definitely one of the root cause in escalating tension, fractured communication and conflict within the families.

Jamuna represents western culture and materialism. She is conscious of her social status and is concerned only about her own self. She is hardly bothered about her family and does not shoulder her responsibility even during the wedding of her only sister-in-law, Surabhi. Though Gouramma was happy as her "precious son and Dollar Bahu were there. Jamuna, on her part, did not contribute in any way to the proceedings. She spent most of her time shopping, visiting her family, changing into different clothes for every occasion and posing in front of the camera" (69). Her personality reflects material comfort, and effort to completely adopt the American culture. In fact, it is Jamuna who is the dollar bahu in the novel and it is

through her character that the central conflict of materialism and emotionalism or traditional values is presented. The novelist very well presents a contrast between money and values through the character of Jamuna who is manipulative and tries to gain respect in the family by giving them gifts and money though keeping herself distanced emotionally.

Vinuta, the wife of Girish and younger daughter-in-law in the family, is a music teacher in the same school where Shamanna also teaches. Vinuta is a simple, sincere, self-sacrificing and caring person. She symbolizes love and moral values. She is often compared with Jamuna, the elder daughter-in-law who is wealthy and lives in America. Unlike Jamuna, she has lot of concern for the wellbeing of her family. Being a woman and a bahu, she very well understands her roles and responsibilities towards her family and tries to fit herself within the set framework of a woman. This reminds us of what Peter Barry mentioned it in his *Beginning Theory* about the statement made by Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*, “One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (Barry 125). She takes good care of her mother-in-law when she falls sick. She takes leave from her school and takes Gouramma to hospital for operation. She stays with her and does not leave her as is presented in the novel, “That week, Girish’s bank colleagues had planned a bank holiday to Karwar and Gokarna. Vinuta said, ‘Amma is alone and scared. She requires company. I shall stay back’”(74). She also saves the life of her sister-in-law, Surabhi, from getting married to a fraud man. Despite her devotion towards her family, she does not get appreciation and acknowledgement from her mother-in-law. She is also frequently compared with Jamuna, the dollar bahu, and made to feel inferior. This ultimately hurts her emotions and gradually distances her from the family.

Surabhi, the daughter of Gouramma, represents the young generation self-centered girls who have lot of expectations from their marriage and want everything from their spouse but forget about their responsibilities and duties towards him and his family. Through the character of Surabhi, the novelist tries to project how the middle-class family’s material aspirations and foreign status shape the novel’s theme of gender, marriage and family dynamics. Surabhi intends to marry someone who could fulfill all her materialistic dreams including going abroad to a foreign country and providing a comfortable life. Sometimes even the materialistic mothers encourage their daughters to seek only comfort and luxury in their lives rather than adopting the traditional values and family bonding. Let us consider the conditions put by Gouramma while looking for a suitable boy for the marriage of her daughter, Surabhi:

He had to be handsome, rich, but should not be the only son, because then the in-laws would permanently live with their son. Neither should he have sisters because they would frequently visit their parents along with their families. It was better if he was one of two sons, preferably the younger. If there was no mother-in-law, it would be a bonus. They must own a car and a house. Preference would be given if the boy was living abroad. (57)

The novelist has indeed presented a true picture of what most mothers think about the marriage of their daughters. If the mothers would put so many conditions, then what would the daughters learn and what values would they inherit from their mothers. This is one of the most important reasons for marriages being unsuccessful in the present society. Since Surabhi was neither a software engineer nor had very modern looks so her proposal was not accepted by the software engineers who came from abroad. Surabhi was actually seeing a man, Gopi, who was her neighbour. On knowing about this relationship, Gouramma gets infuriated and admonished her. She said:

‘Surabhi, you do not know how hard life is. Yesterday I came to know that you had gone for a movie with Gopi. What does he have? An ordinary job and a small house! If you marry him, your life will be like Vinuta’s. You will have to count every penny and try to save all the time. Look at Jamuna! She has two cars; she can spend money in lakhs because she has money in dollars. The Dollar is all-powerful. You know it is the Dollar that has changed our lives! Have you not seen the photos of your brother’s house? You can lead that kind of life if you marry someone who is in the US or someone very rich in India’. (59)

This is the mindset and perspective of an ambitious mother who is concerned for her daughter’s comfort only and does not bother whether she imbibes moral values and ethics or not. Vinuta heard this conversation and was utterly shocked. She wondered, “Should a marriage be arranged on the basis of love and understanding or on the love for the Dollar” (59). Gouramma wants Surabhi to marry a rich man because

she perceives wealth as the way to social security and status. Since Surabhi does not imbibe and emulate goodness in her character, so later on she does not even bother to look after her mother when she falls sick. During that time, only Vinuta takes good care of her mother-in-law. The novelist has raised a serious concern over the lack of traditional values and ethics in the younger generation that is ultimately becoming an important reason for the disintegration of families.

The novelist very well presents how the rich and dollar earning people get respect and importance in the society while the humble, sincere less earning people are not valued. This is evident in the novel through the comparison made between Jamuna and Vinuta by Gouramma. Gouramma's insecurity is witnessed in her perspective towards Jamuna and Vinuta. She openly appreciates and favours Jamuna, wife of her elder son and always considers her superior to Vinuta, wife of her younger son, who does not earn in dollars. This kind of frequent comparison between both the bahu create tension in the family and distances her emotionally from her Indian bahu, Vinuta. Jamuna represents wealth and money while Vinuta represents values and emotions. Gouramma, the central character, brings out the contrast between the two by continuously comparing the two bahu. Comparison of bahu in the Indian joint families is something common that generates differences in the families by disturbing the harmony and understanding. Gouramma also represents the mother in laws of the elder generation who have lot of expectations from their daughter in laws and keep on comparing them with their own times. So, they are biased and this creates a generation gap in the social scenario. As we all know that the older generation perceives life through the lens of moral values, family bonding, and living happily in limited resources, whereas the younger generation is more practical, materialist and perceives dollar as a means of comfort and social status. The clash in the generation gap having different perspectives towards life is aptly presented in the novel through the prominent characters in the novel. This conflict generates tension in the family as both the generations have different perspectives and perceptions towards materialism; for the traditional, it is dangerous while for the youngsters, it is practical and empowering. The two different perspectives, moral values and materialism influence human nature and society in different ways. For the characters like Shamanna and Vinuta, truth, values, respect for elders, self-sacrifice and family bonding are significant whereas for characters like Gouramma, Jamuna and Surabhi, physical comfort, show-off and wealth matter the most. The novelist convincingly presents that materialism is not just love for wealth and comfort but it is one of the important reasons for disturbing the family bonding and harmony.

Gouramma is a materialistic person who considers America as a land of luxurious life and happiness. Her younger son, Girish worked as a clerk in a bank and was contented and happy with his life. He believed that "as human being it is our duty to help everyone" (20). Gouramma was worried about his future with this approach. Since Girish had married Vinuta, a simple, and cultured school teacher, who comes from a modest background so, Gouramma could not fulfill her wishes of having a rich daughter-in-law. She has lot of expectations from her elder son, Chandru. She expects that Chandru will take her to America, bring dollar in the family and uplift their social status. It is evident in the novel that "Chandru was Gouramma's favourite child. Like her, he was fair-complexioned, slightly built, with a pleasant, intelligent face. He shared her dream of going abroad" (20). She is extremely excited during her visit to America and is initially impressed by the lifestyle of the people over there. While staying there, she closely observes the immigrant's isolation, practical approach of the people and their fast pace of life. Gradually, she experiences the indifference of Jamuna and in contrast, comes to appreciate the devotion of Vinuta. At this point, she understands that moral values, love and family bonding could not be replaced by money or status. Realizing her faults, she returns to India with renewed love and affection for Vinuta and her son. Her return to India marks her emotional reconciliation with her family.

The novelist also draws our attention towards the fact that we do not value the things that we have, rather, we realise its importance when we lose it. Gouramma constantly compares Jamuna and Vinuta in terms of wealth, status and American connection and does not acknowledge the worth of Vinuta. It is only when she visits America, she realizes that instead of treating her mother-in-law with respect and reverence, Jamuna, her "Mahalakshmi" bahu treats her more as a domestic help or a baby sitter. Further, she finds out that Chandru helps Jamuna with her household work but Vinuta single handedly does all the domestic work despite being a working woman and never complained. On finding out that Jamuna had made arrangements for her newborn baby to sleep alone, Gouramma offers to sleep with the baby but Jamuna said, "No. Please

don't do that. Manasi should get used to sleeping alone in her room. That's how it is here" (87). Gouramma felt stunned and recalled how Harsha, Vinuta's son, slept with his grandparents and it might be the reason for the bonding of children with their grandparents. But here, in America, she questions herself, "how could these people expect a bond to develop between parents and children when they brought up their children amidst loneliness? Gouramma was worried" (87). So, gradually, as she passes her time in America, Gouramma observes and experiences many things that brings a transformation in her perspective and mindset. Finally, she agrees with Shamanna when he says, "Gouri, love and affection are more important than food and money. Vinuta is like our daughter..." (141).

Through the transformation in Gouramma from materialism to emotionalism, the novelist clearly conveys the moral message of the importance of traditional values and emotional connections in the family. The novelist upholds goodness and human values over wealth and materialism. She is quite clear in her approach and conveys the message that materialism and wealth should never be considered more important than family values and togetherness. She values kindness, empathy and goodness in human beings rather than social status. This is evident in the novel through the transformation in Gouramma from her obsession for the dollar and its status to the realization of its hollowness. Thus, the novelist very convincingly presents the fact that money and wealth can buy comforts but not contentment which comes through love, care and bonding in a family.

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