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## Materialism and Family Dynamics in Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu*

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### Abstract

Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu* is a compelling exploration of familial relationships, cultural values, and the influence of material wealth on human behavior. Set within a middle-class Indian family, the novel examines the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting themes of love, jealousy, ambition, and social perception. Through the contrasting experiences of two daughters-in-law—one in India and the other in the United States—Murty critiques the allure of financial prosperity and its impact on family dynamics. This study analyzes the novel's themes, character development, and narrative style, showcasing Murty's ability to craft an accessible yet thought-provoking story. By addressing moral dilemmas and societal expectations, *Dollar Bahu* offers a nuanced perspective on the evolving values in contemporary Indian society, solidifying Murty's place in modern Indian English literature.

**Keywords:** Materialism, tradition, modernity, *Dollar*

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## Materialism and Family Dynamics in Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu*

### Introduction

Sudha Murty, a prolific writer, philanthropist, and social worker, is known for her simple yet profound storytelling. Her works often depict the realities of Indian society, addressing themes such as family, morality, and cultural transformation. *Dollar Bahu*, first published in 2001, remains one of her most celebrated novels. The title, which translates to "Dollar Daughter-in-Law," encapsulates the novel's central conflict—the contrasting lives and perceptions of two daughters-in-law, one residing in India and the other in the United States. Through this narrative, Murty presents a critique of the growing materialism in Indian society while celebrating the enduring values of love, compassion, and humility.

### 1. Materialism vs. Traditional Values

The novel's core conflict revolves around the tension between material wealth and traditional values. Vinuta, the selfless and devoted daughter-in-law in India, is overshadowed by Girish's wife, Jamuna, the "dollar bahu," who lives in the United States and enjoys a higher social status due to her financial prosperity. The mother-in-law, Gouramma, views her American-based daughter-in-law with admiration and prioritizes wealth over emotional bonds. This preference for financial affluence over genuine familial relationships exposes the deep-seated materialistic tendencies in Indian society. Murty critiques this mindset by highlighting the emotional cost of such biases. As she states, "In the race for money, we often forget the value of relationships" (Murty 45).

This theme remains highly relevant in today's globalized world, where financial success is frequently equated with personal worth. Murty's portrayal of the struggles between material ambition and human connection challenges readers to reflect on their own values, questioning whether wealth truly brings happiness or merely creates an illusion of superiority.

### 2. Family Dynamics and Relationships

*Dollar Bahu* delves into the intricacies of family relationships, particularly the emotional struggles within a traditional Indian household. The novel examines the bond between a mother and her sons, revealing how financial aspirations and social status can impact familial harmony. Gouramma, the matriarch, finds herself torn between her love for her sons and her desire for financial security. Her preference for the *dollar bahu*, Jamuna, over Vinuta, who remains in India, exposes the societal tendency to equate wealth with success and prestige.

This favoritism creates an emotional divide within the family, leading to feelings of neglect and resentment. Vinuta, despite her devotion and sacrifices, is constantly compared to Jamuna, making her feel undervalued and unappreciated. Murty skillfully portrays the emotional turmoil Vinuta endures, emphasizing the struggles of women who face unfair expectations in traditional family structures. Through these conflicts, the novel underscores the significance of empathy, respect, and emotional intelligence in maintaining familial harmony. By presenting these themes, Murty encourages readers to reflect on the true essence of relationships—love, understanding, and mutual support—rather than material wealth.

### 3. Cultural Identity and Globalization

*Dollar Bahu* explores the tension between cultural identity and globalization, highlighting the impact of Western influence on traditional Indian values. The novel presents a stark contrast between the two daughters-in-law—Jamuna, who embraces the luxuries of an American lifestyle, and Vinuta, who remains deeply rooted in Indian traditions. Through these characters, Sudha Murty examines how globalization shapes aspirations, relationships, and societal perceptions.

Jamuna's Western lifestyle symbolizes the allure of financial prosperity and modernity, making her more valued in the eyes of her in-laws. Meanwhile, Vinuta represents cultural continuity and traditional values, yet she struggles with being overlooked and

underappreciated. Murty does not outrightly criticize globalization but instead cautions against the blind pursuit of material success at the cost of personal relationships and cultural heritage. The novel suggests that while financial stability is important, it should not overshadow fundamental human values such as love, respect, and emotional fulfillment. As one character insightfully observes, “*Money can buy comfort, but it cannot buy respect or love*” (Murty 89). This theme is particularly relevant in the context of India’s rapid modernization and the experiences of the Indian diaspora, where individuals often grapple with balancing their cultural roots with the demands of a globalized world. Through *Dollar Bahu*, Murty encourages readers to reflect on the importance of preserving one’s cultural identity while navigating the complexities of modern life.

### **Character Analysis**

Vinuta, the central protagonist of *Dollar Bahu*, represents traditional Indian values such as humility, patience, and selflessness. Despite facing continuous neglect and comparison to the dollar bahu, she remains devoted to her family and responsibilities. Her resilience in the face of adversity highlights her inner strength and moral integrity.

Vinuta’s journey in the novel is one of self-discovery. Initially, she suffers in silence, accepting her secondary status in the household. However, as the story progresses, she begins to understand her own worth and refuses to let societal biases define her. Through her character, Sudha Murty emphasizes that true value lies in one’s character and actions, not in wealth or social status. Vinuta ultimately serves as the moral anchor of the novel, symbolizing dignity and self-respect in a world driven by materialism.

Gouramma, the matriarch of the family, is a complex character whose decisions are shaped by her desire for financial security. Her favoritism toward the dollar bahu stems from her belief that wealth equates to success and stability. She is initially blinded by societal perceptions, equating the prestige of foreign earnings with a better quality of life.

However, as the novel unfolds, Gouramma faces the emotional consequences of her actions. She gradually realizes that money cannot replace genuine love and familial bonds. Her character serves as a critique of the materialistic mindset prevalent in society, particularly the tendency to judge individuals based on their financial standing rather than their virtues. Her transformation from a money-driven mother-in-law to someone who values emotional connections adds depth to her character arc.

Jamuna, the titular *dollar bahu*, is more of a symbolic figure than a deeply explored character. She embodies the allure of wealth and a foreign lifestyle, which makes her seem superior in the eyes of her in-laws. Unlike Vinuta, who earns respect through her kindness and dedication, Jamuna’s value is largely based on her financial status.

Despite her material comforts, Jamuna remains emotionally distant, emphasizing the limitations of wealth in fostering meaningful relationships. Her character serves as a foil to Vinuta, highlighting the stark contrast between material success and emotional fulfillment. Through Jamuna, Murty critiques the societal tendency to glorify wealth without considering the personal sacrifices and emotional detachment it may entail.

### **Narrative Style and Language**

Sudha Murty’s narrative style in *Dollar Bahu* is simple yet evocative, making the novel accessible to a broad readership. She employs clear, straightforward language that mirrors the speech and thought patterns of everyday people, allowing readers to connect deeply with the characters and their struggles. Her storytelling is rooted in ordinary, real-life experiences, adding authenticity and relatability to the narrative.

Murty’s use of an episodic structure enhances the novel’s readability, as each chapter flows seamlessly into the next while focusing on different aspects of the central conflict. The conversational tone of the novel makes it engaging and immersive, almost as if the reader is

part of the family's discussions and dilemmas. This accessibility does not diminish the novel's depth; rather, it strengthens its impact by making its themes—materialism, familial bonds, and cultural identity—more immediate and personal to the reader.

As critic Ritu Menon observes, "*Murty's strength lies in her ability to tell complex stories with simplicity and grace*" (Menon 34). This balance of simplicity and depth ensures that *Dollar Bahu* remains an engaging and thought-provoking read, resonating with audiences across different generations and backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

*Dollar Bahu* is a timeless exploration of the tensions between tradition and modernity, materialism and moral values. Through her nuanced portrayal of family dynamics and cultural change, Sudha Murty offers a compelling critique of societal attitudes toward wealth and success. She encourages readers to reflect on what truly defines happiness and fulfillment in life.

The novel's enduring appeal lies in its universal themes and relatable characters, which resonate with readers across cultures and generations. Murty's storytelling does not merely highlight problems but also offers solutions in the form of self-awareness, empathy, and the realization that true wealth is measured not in money but in love, respect, and meaningful relationships. As Murty reminds us, "*True wealth lies not in dollars but in the love and respect we earn from those around us*" (Murty 112). In this way, *Dollar Bahu* serves as both a mirror and a guide, reflecting the complexities of modern life while reaffirming the importance of timeless values.

### **Works Cited**

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