

EMERGING ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

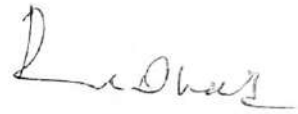
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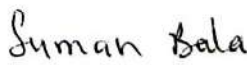
CERTIFICATE OF PARTICIPATION

In Collaboration with Indian Society
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This is to certify that **G. SHARADA, ASST. PROFESSOR, PESIAMS** participated
as Resource Person / Chairperson / Paper Presenter / Delegate in the Three - day International
Conference organised by Forum of College English Teachers, Kuvempu University & Indian
Society for Commonwealth Studies, New Delhi, at Karnataka Sangha, B.H. Road, Shimoga on
7-9 December 2017 and presented a paper entitled **THE FALL OF INVINCIBLE DOLLAR:
AN ANALYSIS OF CARICATURES IN 'DOLLAR BAHU'**


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The fall of invincible dollar: An analysis of caricatures in 'Dollar bahu'

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Even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, keep to your own side; it's where you belong to. There you can plant your own grass and tend to it.'

This paper attempts to bring out the contrasts and hustle and bustle of cultural and moral values of life between typical Indian middle class families and the immigrant Indian families of America in the novel 'Dollar bahu' by Mrs. Sudha Murthy, published first in the year 2005.

The story first written in kannada and later translated into other languages, is a simple typical Indian novel set partly in Bangalore, then Dharwad and moves over to the US and back to India at the end. The greedy Gowramma, the mother-in law, always complains and compares her 'local bahu' Vinutha with that of her 'dollar bahu' Jamuna, and dreams to visit America and enjoy its sights and riches and the company of her dollar bahu. Gowramma succeeds in her dreams only to realize that her dollar bahu has a small heart, even though her house is big and that love and affection are more important than food and money and America becomes no longer a fantasy land for her.

Though the story is mediocre and the end easily predictable, the narration is lucid, straight forward and at many times thought provoking. The incidents in the novel are in fact common experiences of many readers and the characters etched by the writer appear to be real ones whom we have come across in our daily lives.

Mrs. Sudha Murthy is successful in bringing out the contrasts in the mindset of Indians living in their own county and those immigrants who have settled in America, making it their homeland. Through such characters she is able to spill out traces of diaspora like sense of loss, struggle for identity and cultural variations.

The elder son of Gowramma and Shamanna by name Chandru thinks of himself as punctual, organised, thorough, systematic and ahead of time in everything. A civil engineer efficient at work who doesn't want to leave Bangalore is sent to North Karnataka and later to the US on a project which is his promised land, the land of milk and honey. He is the captain of the ship, earning potential. He lives frugally in America saving money and dutifully takes care of the family at home. Hardworking, ambitious and capable he quickly climbs the ladder of success, filled with ebullience.

Through the eyes of Chandru the writer is able to make a contrasting picture of life in India and the U.S. He concludes that the American Government is far more than capable of

fulfilling the basic needs of all its citizens and that is why it is the richest nation on earth and the most powerful. According to Chandru in India everything is a hassle even though it has a five thousand year old civilization. It has become a land of scarcity and superstition, its vital organs decayed, its essences sapped. The two countries are not comparable. If one is the sky the other is the earth. One is dark and the other incandescent light. When he gets the green card he feels he is on top of the world. Later his fascination for American life style wanes and he feels lonely and wants to get married once his dream to earn in dollars is achieved. When he writes out a cheque with the language of the dollar, he feels it is the first rung of success and the thought of returning to India recedes to the back of his memory. Somehow living in the same small house, sharing the toilet and bathroom with others, having to breath polluted air, and finding dirt and dust all around seemed most disagreeable to him.¹

His conscience pricks him when he skips for a new job, but he rationalizes that his is not the only one and several brilliant young men from his poor country have done it to settle in the land of opportunity. When the time for his marriage arrives he is reminded of Vinutha, a town koel in Dharwad but is unable to get her hand in marriage. At same time, Chandru is very practical and chooses Jamuna as his life partner since she is bold, outright and not a home bird.

His lady of interest becomes his brother's wife. He shows affection and great respect to her which never vanishes. In fact he even presents Vinutha an aquamarine saree with a pink border as gift for his marriage which she had desired before.

After the passage of some years he understands one major truth. Ever since he has started earning in dollars, people respected him, envied him and showed him that extra bit of warmth. In the process however he had also lost real love and mutual trust. It was an unalterable fact that no amount of dollars could buy the warmth of genuine affection.³

Chandru lends his hand to Jamuna while doing house hold chores and gives her complete freedom. Even though he is aware of the vile ways of his wife, he manages to run the show. Chandru criticises the attitude of Indians at home who equate the dollar to forty three or forty five rupees, but do not understand the struggle that Indians in America undergo far away from home, family and culture. He further emphasizes that the children in America are confused between the two value systems and hence the price they pay is very high.

As a matter of caution Chandru advises his mother not to ask intruding questions and tells her that in this country everyone loves the complete freedom of their private life. Even parents do not ask personal questions of their children. There is an invisible line in any relationship and they don't mind sacrificing anything for their privacy. Sometimes it ends up in divorce.

Next character worth discussion is Vinutha, the second daughter in law of Gowramma and wife of Girish, younger brother of Chandru. She is beautiful, gentle and soft natured and at the same time firm when there need be. Lover of nature and very active, she takes care of household chores before and after her marriage.

When marriage proposal comes, she says "I am not bothered about family riches. I will continue to work. All I ask for is to be contented"

Everybody likes her including Gowramma when she gets married to Girish. Gowramma would say "now that Vinutha is here I am totally relaxed, like a retired person. She takes care of everything".⁴ When Surabhi's marriage (sister of Girish and Chandru) proposal fails, Vinutha is blamed by Gowramma. She goes to the extent of saying that ever since she came to their house she was trying to keep Girish under her thumb and says 'You are the siren who bewitches my son in a wrong direction'. Further she is also scolded by surabhi as cunning woman. She compares her to Jamuna and says 'That is the reason people say you should bring brides from good families. Look at Jamuna. She is so unselfish and kind.'⁵ Vinutha asks for forgiveness and not to meddle with anything concerning the family. She shrivelled up like a flower closing its petals to protect its soft vulnerable core. But life had trained her to live in pain. She didn't not take long to adjust to the new atmosphere of oppression she felt in the house. ⁶ When Chandru visits Vinutha after her delivery, she confides the treatment meted out to her by Gowramma and even says that the family doesn't need her anymore and that there is constant comparison between Jamuna and herself and that she is not ready to compete with anyone. In the end on the advice of her father in law Shamanna she moves out of the house to settle in her own house at Dharwad along with Girish.

Jamuna, the dollar bahu, wife of Chandru is cunning, calculating woman who comes from a very affluent family. She pretends to be very loving and caring daughter in law; but is only interested in dollars wanting to enjoy American way of life. She doesn't even stay in her marital home when Chandru leaves for America after their marriage. After a gap of many days when she gets her visa, she appears back only to say that she is leaving for America. She doesn't even talk with Vinutha. When Gowramma visits America Jamuna though appearing to be a very dutiful bahu, succeeds in getting the entire house hold work done by Gowramma without spending money on servants. She doesn't open the gift packs brought by her. She is rude, arrogant and selfish. Jamuna has opinion on every matter and argues over every small thing and always wins and is the boss of the family and Gowramma has to take her permission even for trivial matters.

Coming to Gowramma the main character of the story, having studied up to 4th standard but a clever woman who knows how to run the family, she is the wife of Shamanna and mother of Chandru, Girish and Surabhi and mother in law of Vinutha and Jamuna. She works hard to keep the domestic expenses within the budget. She is extremely ambitious always dreaming of diamonds, gold and silver jewelry, cars, a big house and servants. She always used to look at women wearing expensive silk sarees, diamond ear rings with envy. Every day she would pray to God that her children should go abroad and earn lots of money so that she could join the circle and tell that she was their equal. When Chandru goes to America she would dream about the dollars, the magic green currency, which would change her house and fulfill her dreams. She felt the dollar was like the Goddess Lakshmi with a magic wand.

In the beginning she liked Vinutha because of her unselfish attitude and ready to adjust to any situation, but once Jamuna comes into the picture she insults Vinutha and praises Jamuna all the time because she is the dollar bahu upon whom she has pinned her hopes. Every day she would repeat that she was lucky to have Jamuna as her daughter in law. She used to compare both her daughters in law and praises Jamuna constantly. For her dollar meant everything. "The dollar is all powerful. You know it is the dollar that has changed our lives".

But once she stays with Jamuna in America, slowly she realizes that Jamuna is not what she appeared to be in India- carefree, talkative and spendthrift. But in the US she is quieter, calculating and very conscious of her diet. She insists on Chandru sharing the household work with her. She argues with her and humiliates Gowramma, who is dumbfolded. Gowramma is bossed over by Jamuna and it is Jamuna who decides everything. Further Gowramma realizes that she is dancing to the tune of her dollar bahu. She is outraged by her attitude and realizes that Jamuna is selfish, money minded and has a small heart. She understands that the presents of American silk and chiffon sarees got by Jamuna from America were in fact her old Sarees and that she had got rid of many of her old Sarees thus. She is deeply hurt and decides that never again would she ask Jamuna for anything from America. She feels she is only a servant in her son's house and everything has to be decided by her dollar bahu.

Gowramma comes to know at the end that Vinutha is a better bahu than Jamuna is and feels sorry for treating her badly. When she wants to stay with Padma in America Jamuna does not like the idea. But Gowramma feels "I can't be with you forever. Let me have my freedom". She felt like shouting at the top of her voice, but restrained. After her return from New York Gowramma's perception of America changes a lot and she starts missing her country. She loses interest in going to either the grocery store or any other store which she used to enjoy at

the time of arrival. Further the experiences she has and the persons she meets in America opens her eyes who always viewed America as a land of nectar and honey. She refuses to accept anything from Jamuna during her return to India. Gowramma in fact becomes more enthusiastic about her return and decides not to visit America again and she feels sorry for Chandru who has to put up with such a wife. But she consoles herself that it is his fate.

Mrs. Sudha Murthy is cleverly able to tell the readers about the flip and flop sides of the lives of the Indians living in America and elements of diaspora such as sense of loss of identity, struggle for survival and cultural variations. By introducing characters one after the other such as Shrikanth, his wife Roopa, Tara, Malathi, Venkat, Radha krishna, Savitha, Chithra Josheph, Asha etc., in the story, the writer makes not only Gowramma but also her readers understand the complexities of life of Indian people settled down in America. Gowramma as well as the readers are able to realize the struggle that they undergo far away from their home, family and culture and that they have to work under extreme weather conditions. One feels that America is a funny country. Like a colorful web spun by spider, an insect walks in and gets trapped and they get used to the easy living conditions and the professional work atmosphere and they find it difficult to go back to India and settle there after so many years. The readers also understand how privacy is of supreme importance to individuals in America. There is also appreciation and praise showered by Malathi who says America rewards those who work hard and it has changed her life and when the US is criticized by anybody they get mad. Further the readers also realize that religious ceremonies, traditions and culture of India are being followed by many immigrants in America and how devout they are when Gowramma visits the temple. Though there were devotees of different color, features, languages all Indians were connected by the same string of devotion. ' Gowramma feels Indian Gods looked brighter under the sparkle of American cleanliness.

Mrs. Sudha Murthy also reveals to the readers through her book the flop side of America- how divorces are common, elders living in old age homes while their children move away from them, how each one is too busy with his own life and how loneliness is growing, whereas human bonds are weakening .

But on the brighter side some Indians are determined to continue their stay in America in spite of the shortcomings there. Gowramma is finally able to realize that the grass is always greener on the other side and America is no longer a fantasy land for her. There is pain, misery and happiness there as in any other country. It is no longer the land of mighty dollar which made magic and it is not a paradise.

The writer at the end of her treatise concludes through her character Shamanna who summaries the pros and cons of American life. He advises people that one cannot have the best of both worlds. Chose the country and accept it with its plus and minuses and live happily there. Staying in one country and dreaming of the other is road to grief.

As an end note, when Gowramma comes back to India and opens her purse to retrieve her keys to the suitcase, a hundred dollar bill falls out and it does not hold any power or magic because the invincible dollar had fallen in her eyes forever and she comes to know that love and affection are more important than food and money.

After all, "All that glistens is not gold".⁸