



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SUDHA MURTHY'S *DOLLAR BAHU*: AN ECOFEMINIST READING

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Article information

Received:16/08/2020  
Accepted: 18/09/2020  
Published online: 23/09/2020  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.255](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.255)

ABSTRACT

While there is a continuous development in the field of science and technology, the human civilization is paying a heavy cost for it—'environmental degradation.' The living world has reached a position where conservation of nature is at the highest peak, as per the present situation of globalisation. Based on the portrayal of nature as feminine, the present study focuses on the relation between women and nature that is termed as 'ecofeminism,' as well as the continuous oppression of the 'feminine' not only by the patriarchy but also 'women' themselves. Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* is a novel set around typical Kannada families. The character, Vinuta, in the novel makes the readers feel the continuous agonies she undergoes throughout her life, and how being involved with 'nature' made her happy and forget about all those odds in life.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Oppression, Globalisation

Introduction

Literature can be considered as one of the most significant signs in the study of the social background and context of a nation, alongside the influence of those factors upon the people living in it. Among various elements constituting a society, gender issues bear a significant position in literature from ancient times. The issue of feminism is an extensive area covering various concepts, amongst which 'ecofeminism' is gaining importance in recent times, mostly due to the increase in the use of science and technology parallel to the destruction of 'nature.'

Basically, ecofeminism depicts ideas and philosophies linking ecology with feminism. There has always been an imagined invisible relationship between gender and nature, which might vary from time to time or change in culture, but is always there. Ecofeminists attempt to bring out this relation, to which even the literary persons added. The latter decided to reflect this through their writings. According to ecofeminists, there can be no liberation for women and solution to the ecological crisis within a society unless domination is removed from various describing relationships, as the destruction of 'nature' invariably leads to the oppression of 'women.' Bronwyn James states,

"Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner." (James, 8)

In this paper, the researcher tries to analyse and discuss noted novelist Sudha Murthy's novel *Dollar Bahu* (2005) and attempt to show that the female protagonist's identity crises, as well as troubles in life, are somehow resolved through her connection with 'nature.' Though she couldn't solve it as a whole, nature, especially her garden, comforted her and helped her forget all the agonies. Murthy brings out the tensions that occur in the lives of Girish and Vinuta intertwined with the issues of globalisation and 'money;' and the agonies of Vinuta, who is oppressed by none other than her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

### **Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu***

Bookworm reviewed Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* as, "The author through this book has conveyed that it's good to have money and the things that money can buy, and at the same time it's good to ensure that one hasn't lost the things that money can't buy." T. Sai Mamata mentioned in her paper entitled *Age of Dollars and Indian Currency-A Perception into Sudha Murthy's Dollar Bahu and Mahashweta*,

"*Dollar Bahu* is in one way a satire on ignorant people who are fascinated towards the Western culture and dollars." (Mamata, 5)

*Dollar Bahu* was originally written in the Kannada language with the title *Dollar Sose* and was published by East West Books Pvt. Ltd., for the first time, in the year 2005. Murthy uses descriptive words yet very simple language to express her point of view in the novel. Her works give a soothing power with the typical Indian tradition of story-telling, as the narrative is very straight forward without any flash-backs or flash-forwards.

The novel is about a small Indian middle-class family of Shamanna and Gouramma and their three children-Chandra Shekhar (Chandru), Girish, and Surabhi. It is set partly in two cities of India, Dharwad and Bangalore, and partly in an American city, Florida. Shamanna and Gouramma had opposite characteristics in their thoughts and ideals. While the former always wanted the well-being of the children with proper ideals, the latter was very greedy and always strived for a wealthy lifestyle. Their elder son Chandru got a job in America and began to earn the 'magical dollars,' which changed the scenario in the peaceful household. The younger son followed his father's footsteps and lived in his home-town to earn a simple and happy life. After both the sons' weddings, there was a constant comparison between the sons as well as the daughters-in-law, and the reason behind this scenario was the 'dollar,' which points towards the impact of the materialistic elements in the present world. Her obsession for the 'dollar' made Gouramma visit America to live her dream there but everything shattered in front of her eyes once she reached Chandru's home. Murthy very clearly brings in the difference between the modern American culture and traditional Indian culture that opened Gouramma's eyes, and her illusions faded. And America was no more a 'paradise' for her. She realized that

"...the grass is always greener on the other side." (Murthy, 135)

The novel starts with a simple attitude, gradually turning towards various issues from money to relationships and the contradicting cultures of two totally opposite nations, India and America. Intertwining all these issues, Murthy has also brought about the relationship of Vinuta with her surrounding, her beloved 'garden,' the changes in her life when she had to leave her native and become an 'urban dispossessed' in the city, all of her sufferings rendered by her own family, especially Gouramma and Surabhi, and at times, Jamuna as well.

### **Vinuta and Nature**

Vinuta's story is presented by the author herself, narrating the various conditions of the girl's life, filled with agonies and pains as well as some sweeter parts. Her identity echoes certain claims of cultural ecofeminism, as her closeness with 'nature,' especially her garden, is linked to her spirituality and body. She finds happiness being amidst the plants and flowers. All her identity crises, being an orphan, vanish once she enters the garden. The novel brings in the emergence of ecofeminism as an "institutionalized theoretical field," (Kaur, 102) but Vinuta's relation with the garden can be seen through the lens of cultural ecofeminism. The description of Vinuta working in the garden may be taken as a mere source of it-

“The radiance of the morning was reflected in her face and echoed in the joy she felt in her heart.”  
(Murthy, 9)

The oft-quoted passage portrays the connection that Vinuta feels with nature. Vinuta felt ‘oneness’ with Mother Nature in her garden, which made her heart glad and filled with joy amidst all her sadness. The garden, a non-living entity, became the most intimate being to her, with whom she shared all her joys and sorrows.

“.....she shed her tears while watering the garden and no one in the house knew of her sadness...”  
(Murthy, 14)

Though she was living amongst many fellow human beings, no one tried to understand her sufferings, or may be it can be said that they pretended so, inspite of knowing everything. They always ignored her, and the interesting part is that most of them were women themselves. It is usually believed that women are being oppressed by the patriarchy and the ‘male’ members of the society; in Vinuta’s case, it is seen that she is mostly dominated by fellow females. Seetakka’s behaviour towards her proves that.

“If you sit in the garden the whole day, who will do the housework? The dirty clothes are piling up. I am sick of reminding you about every task...” (Murthy, 11)

Vinuta was treated as a slave by none other than the ‘female’ members of the family. Instead, Bheemanna was the only person who cared for the poor soul. It continued even after her wedding, being always criticized by Gouramma and Surabhi.

Vinuta always felt secured in her garden, her loneliness marred away being amidst the plants and blossoming flowers, which was, of course, not understood by anyone. That small garden of her actually contributed to the positive environment in the campus as well as led to her happiness, which was rather felt by an outsider, Chandru.

According to Vandana Shiva, one of the most significant ecofeminists of all times,

“Women’s knowledge and work as integrally linked to nature are marginalized and displaced, and in their place are introduced patterns of thought and patterns of work that devalue the worth of women’s knowledge and women’s activities. This fragments both nature and nature.” (Shiva, 66)

Through this, Shiva expresses her concern towards women, and points towards the fact that the society always draws a boundary line between women’s desires and thoughts and makes them follow the societal norms, thus prioritizing its commands. The same happens to Vinuta when she is informed about the decision regarding selling her house at Dharwad; she is explained that as she has nothing else except the house for dowry, selling the house is the best option. Filled with misery and utter disbelief, she pleads to everyone,

“Please let us not sell the house. That is the last remembrance of my parents. I love that garden. My life is in that.....” (Murthy, 29)

But all her pleads were in vain, she had to bend in front of societal norms and the growing importance of materialism in the modern world. The realistic and practical globalized world of the present times, filled with worldly thoughts, forced her to leave back what she liked the most. Vinuta’s spirit broke when she had to leave behind her home and ‘garden,’ but she accepted it with grace.

“...Every tree, every corner, every fragrance, even in the deep dark night, held so many memories, so much happiness..... Vinuta caressed all the plants of her garden and tearfully bid them goodbye...”  
(Murthy, 29)

## Conclusion

In this paper, it can be seen that Vinuta’s character portrays two significant facts—oppression of women by women and the interconnectedness that women feel with nature. In *Dollar Bahu*, Vinuta is ill-treated mostly by the female members of her family, proving the fact that “Women Are Women’s Worst Enemies” (Chattopadhyay). In addition, Vinuta is the ideal example of the concept that women are always

close to nature due to their similar attributes of caring and nurturing others. Her character also proves the ecofeminist belief that human beings can survive only if they stop degrading and oppressing 'nature' as well as dominating women. The modern world has destroyed nature to such an extent that the effects may be seen in the form of global warming, imbalanced temperatures, and climatic conditions, among others. And if necessary actions are not taken at the earliest, the whole of human civilization will soon diminish. Right from the first world to the third one, women are somehow related to the effects of all the climatic and environmental changes as they are always the closest to nature. In Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu*, Vinuta too was attached to nature; though she was not able to make a huge difference in saving the modern world from negative aspects, yet her small garden resulted in the peaceful soothing environment within the campus, thus, contributing a little in saving 'Mother Nature' as well as filling the empty space in her lone world.

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