

Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Sudha Murty's "Dollar Bahu"

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ABSTRACT: Tradition' and 'Modernity' are the two terms which have not only fascinated but also baffled the critical as well as creative world in literature, both Indian and American. Not everything related to 'modernity' can get universal approval while 'tradition' which is rooted in the past can get universal acclaim. The first-generation Indian novelists writing in English like Mulk Raj Anand, RK Narayan and Raja Rao have highlighted the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. The same is true of the next generation women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Mrs. Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Anita Desai. Sudha Murty, the famed author of "Dollar Bahu" exploits the potential of the conflict and contrast between tradition and modernity in a light-hearted though enlightening manner in this novel. She concentrates on the contrast between 5000-year-old Indian society rooted in tradition and the young, vibrant American society which symbolizes modernity. The typical Indian fascination for the 'Dollar World' is contrasted with the average Indian's resistance to American liberality, especially in the context of matrimonial relationships. Most of the male and female protagonists, who are tempted by America, the land of opportunities, accept and acknowledge America's liberality after they have gone through emotional crisis. A close critical perusal of the story-line in Sudha Murty's "Dollar Bahu" casts significant light on the typical Indian attitude to the education, settlement in career and in wedlock of their wards.

KEYWORDS: Tradition, Modernity, Liberality, Emotional Crisis

TRADITION AND MODERNITY-A STUDY OF 'DOLLAR BAHU' BY SUDHA MURTHY

The term "tradition", in common parlance, is associated with what is customary or conventional, hence relatively "fixed" and frequently "inhibiting". It is symptomatic of those customs and practices which have been passed on in society from generation to generation. It thrives on a set of do's and don'ts which bind an individual within well-defined and demarcated limitations. By contrast, the term "modernity" betokens what is 'recent', 'relatively liberal' and 'liberating'. Modernity is reflected through our ability to modify tradition in the light of the latest developments-shedding what is outdated while retaining what is useful. Tradition, which is transmitted from age to age and from generation to generation, is almost invariably rooted in the past and bound not only with the life and affairs of a community but also with that of society as a whole. The caste system and the institution of patriarchy in Indian society provide two illustrations of the hold of the typical Indian psyche. In spite of the whiffs of change noticed during our freedom struggle and even after the independence of the country from the British yoke, we could not become sufficiently 'modern' during the fifties, sixties and even seventies. However, the spread of education, globalisation, and revolutionary changes in the means of communication since 1980s set us distinctly apart from our predecessors and consequently, the vicious hold of tradition seems to be loosening.

The three towering figures of who dominated the world of Indo-Anglian novel just before and after independence were Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. They differed in the quality and intensity of their crusade against the vicious hold of tradition on the psyche of the Indian society. "The themes handled by them were predictably pan-Indian: the caste system, the clash between tradition and modernity, faith and rationality and similar clichés of East-West encounter-experiences that are familiar all across the country."¹ The dichotomy between tradition and modernity has been brought out most powerfully in Anand's "Untouchable" and "Coolie". In "Untouchable" Anand's critical focus is directed upon the lowest of the low in Indian society wherein the ugliest features of the high caste Hindus are held in sharp contrast with the dignity, honesty and perfection of the protagonist Bakha. Likewise, in "Coolie", the humiliating treatment his protagonist Munoo, receives at the hands of his successive employers has been brought out in the most telling manner. R.K. Narayan, without being hostile to tradition, like Anand, brings out in his later novels like "The Financial Expert", "The Guide" and "The Vender of Sweets" how the hold of tradition is relaxed under the impact of changes in the evolving Indian society. Mr. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar substantiates this point by explaining that "the imperatives of tradition are exceeded by the impact of change, and stability and certainty are no more."²

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The fictional creations of the elder women novelists like Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Mrs. Jabhwala and Anita Desai highlight the different aspects of the sufferings of their female protagonists. Their writings clearly reveal the fact that they, in their separate ways, started questioning the restrictive role of the patriarchal dominance in the lives of their female protagonists. Directly or indirectly, they refused to be mere puppets in the hands of their husbands. Desai's novel is about "modern issues that beset all nations: globalisation, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism and insurgency"³ remarks Anuradha Marwah. Arundhati Roy's debut novel "The God of Small Things", which gave her international recognition, casts important light on Indian politics and caste system. It also focuses on the themes of betrayal, family and love.

The fictional world of Sudha Murty too dramatizes the conflict between the restrictive role of tradition in the lives of her female protagonists in particular. She also, at the same time, explains how her major characters fall a prey to the lure of opportunities the prosperous countries like America promise to shower upon them. A critical recapitulation of the plot in "Dollar Bahu" casts an interesting and effective light on certain details recorded quite dramatically by Sudha Murthy in the present novel. In the novel Shamanna and his wife Gouramma represent two diametrically opposed views of patriarchy—one rational and realistic and the other entirely irrational and hence unrealistic. While the patriarch in the story emphatically represents the positive facets of tradition, his wife displays a total disregard for them. Shamanna's attitude to his three children with regard to their upbringing, education and settlement in life reveals a balanced attitude. His wife Gouramma, by contrast is indulgent towards her daughter Surabhi but is hostile towards her daughter-in-law Vinuta.

A similar contrast is represented through the different attitudes of Shamanna and Gouramma in relation to the matrimonial alliances of their children. In preferring Jamuna for Chandru, Gouramma falls a prey to the temptation of money (dowry). She accepts Jamuna as her daughter-in-law, though her husband cautions her that being used to a wealthy lifestyle she will have a large ego. Jamuna reveals her true colours immediately after Chandru's departure to America though Gouramma realizes it much later when she pays her daughter in law a visit in her dollar country. Vinuta's marriage to their other son Girish is a relatively simpler affair but their love and understanding for each other makes their wedded life reasonably successful. However, Jamuna's marriage to Chandru shows Jamuna to be utterly lacking in both love and understanding in relation to her in laws and to a lesser extent with regard to her husband.

The inhibiting impact of tradition causes a lot of misery to the protagonist, Vinuta in the form of the cold, unjust and even unprovoked hostility of her mother-in-law Gouramma. She suffers untold misery primarily because she is an orphan and she hasn't brought much by way of dowry. She adjusts to the situation at her in laws house, rises up early to help her mother-in-law in household chores before going to school while her sister-in-law Surabhi enjoys rather undeserved indulgence. Vinuta's emotional tension multiplies manifold after Chandru's marriage to Jamuna, the dollar bahu. The consistent torrent of comparisons tends to demoralize Vinuta. Later when her baby is due to be delivered in August, the marriage of Surabhi is fixed during the same month though luckily for Vinuta, she delivers a healthy male child just 2 weeks before Surabhi's marriage. Her humiliation and misery is multiplied during the period of Jamuna's pregnancy when the doting Gouramma prays in different temples for the well-being and safe delivery of her dollar bahu's baby. Vinuta painfully remembers "how they had treated her when she was pregnant: no gifts, no sweets not even a tender word". When her son Harsha was born, she recalls her Gouramma had sent Rs.100 on the occasion of his naming ceremony though now during the period of Jamuna's pregnancy, she longs to be with the dollar bahu so that she may take care of her bahu and the grandchild. The novelist has this to record: "Vinuta felt all this was so unfair, especially when she had always done whatever Gouramma expected of her" but she said nothing and surrendered tamely to her humiliation and neglect though the comparison at this stage intensified her agony.

Most marriage proposals in India are accepted or rejected for wrong reasons. The focus is shifted quite often on factors like bright prospects rather than emotional maturity, upbringing and education. Marriage, in most of the cases, is regarded as a sort of staircase through which the daughter may rise in financial and social status or could be in-laws of the son can ensure better prospects for him. Jamuna's father, who is a wealthy property developer, can lure Gouramma so that she consents to Chandru's marriage to his dusky daughter Jamuna, who may not, according to Shamanna, become a suitable wife for their son. The temptation for the green card, a sure ticket for entry into the Dollar Kingdom, pushes Chandru and Jamuna into wedlock. On the contrary the engagement of Vinuta's friend, Shashikala to Shankar, an M.A. in English, a part time lecturer pursuing PhD proves disastrous. Her dream world comes crumbling down like a house of cards when an Indian family settled in the US lures him away with an offer of a green card through marriage and support for his PhD studies in any university in America.

The average Indian parents, whose beliefs are rooted in the Indian tradition of arranged marriage, often land their daughters into ugly situations. The author first presents the case of Shama, a victim of arranged marriage whose wedded life crashes down. She is married to Surendra through a lavish wedding and the gift a furnished apartment with a promise for higher studies. Once Surendra gets a scholarship, his attitude towards Shama is altered so much so that they are finally divorced. Shama blames her parents for having destroyed her entire life. She resolves not to return to her parents in India, studies in California, works as a waitress in a restaurant and refuses to take any financial help from her parents. Eventually she settles in a live-in relationship with a Brazilian boy, resolving her matrimonial crisis through the modern American concept of live-in relationship, jeered at in India but welcomed in America.

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The author also presents the case of Chitra, daughter of Shankarrana, a peon in Shamanna's school. Chitra is first married to Manappa who drinks all the time and harasses her. When the drunken Manappa is knocked down by a lorry, poor Chitra is reduced to the shocking status of a young widow. She refuses to take things lying down, joins typing classes (with Shamanna's financial help), takes up a job as a typist and comes close to Gobind who is also a typist in the same firm. However, on learning that she is a widow, his entire attitude to her undergoes a sea change: He is willing to marry her only if she promises to give her entire salary to him, which she refuses because she also wants to support her parents. Luck favours her and she migrates to America as a domestic help. She attends evening classes, learns driving and eventually marries an American engineer; a year younger than her. Chitra's household is simple, peaceful and contented. She not only sends five hundred dollars to her parents every month but also ensures the settlement of her younger brother and sisters.

The dilemma which most Indian migrants to America have to face is that they just pretend that they are willing to embrace American opulence without shedding their Indian mindset. They rush to America (and other such foreign destinations) in pursuit of prosperity but are wary of the core of the American way of life, rooted in individuality, liberality and practicality. Caught in this vortex, they can neither become sufficiently modern like Americans nor can they cling to the core of Indian way of life and as such end up becoming hypocrites. Savitri, whose husband Radhakrishna, is a senior scientist, remains worried all the time that their teenage daughter Savita may not follow in the footsteps of her elder sister Shama, who has already adopted the American mode of life. On the other hand, Shama blames her parents for having destroyed her life. She rightly, thinks that Indians come to America only to earn money but they can never become a part of it.

The resolution to the multi-dimensional crisis through which the main protagonists (and even many of the minor characters as well) have to pass comes through the subtle suggestions given by Shamanna, the family patriarch, who is essentially a calm, contented and sensible man. He is a witness to the unjust treatment meted out to Vinuta whom he eventually advises to shift to Dharwad; he even urges her husband, Girish, to apply for a transfer to Dharwad so as to ensure that they lead a peaceful, contented life away from the taunts and unjust treatment of his wife Gouramma, who represents the other extreme of the spectrum, undergoes a series of shocking experiences during her 'dream trip to America.' She is made to realize the hypocrisy of her 'Dollar Bahu' and also the worth of Vinuta who dutifully obeyed all her commands and calmly bore all her taunts. She is now an entirely transformed and reformed individual after her return from the 'dollar kingdom'.

Conclusion:

The novelist has taken a balanced view of the contrast between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the present novel. Her dissection of the multiple situations through which several couples belonging to different stratas of Indian society have to undergo is quite logical and convincing. The parallel and contrast between what Vinuta and Jamuna stand for highlights the fact that despite financial prosperity, couples can't survive unless they, like Vinuta, evolve a bond of mutual love and trust. Even Gouramma's realization of the hollowness of the blind pursuit of wealth, linked with modernity in the superficial sense, eventually paves the way for her reconciliation with Vinuta. The novel aptly explores the contrast between tradition and modernity in the context of a middle-class family with focus on gender roles, familial expectations and cultural values. Sudha Murty has artfully juxtaposed the traditional Indian woman with her modern counterpart, the traditional Indian daughter-in-law with the dollar bahu to highlight the dilemma of the modern society caught between past values and present ambitions. She offers a balanced reconciliation between tradition which affirms the enduring value of cultural rootedness and modernity which is a force of displacement and cultural alienation.

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