DIASPORIC DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE MYTH OF THE DOLLAR: NRI IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DISLOCATION IN SUDHA MURTHY'S DOLLAR BAHU

Vasanthakumar, M., Karthi, G and D.Kalaiselvi

Department of English, Kongu College of Arts and Science, Karur- 639006, TamilNadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Sudha Murthy's Dollar Bahu (2005) presents one of Indian popular fiction's most sustained critiques of the middle-class fascination with Non-Resident Indian (NRI) life and the cultural mythology surrounding dollar-earning emigrants. This paper examines the novel through the frameworks of diaspora studies, postcolonial cultural criticism, and the sociology of aspiration, arguing that Murthy constructs the figure of the NRI and the idealized American life as a collective illusion that distorts values, destroys domestic relationships, and ultimately fails even those who subscribe most completely to it. The paper traces two parallel trajectories: that of Gouramma, whose uncritical veneration of dollar-wealth leads to the gradual erosion of her human relationships in India, and that of Jamuna, whose assimilation into American liberal individualism represents a form of cultural dislocation that severs her from meaningful familial bonds. Chandru's ambivalent relationship with his adopted country, his economic opportunism, and his emotional inertness are read as symptoms of what the novel diagnoses as the psychic cost of emigration. Drawing on the novel's sustained contrast between the imaginary homeland and the real diasporic experience, the paper argues that Murthy exposes the NRI dream not as liberation but as a different form of entrapment, one that trades the constraints of Indian tradition for the alienation of Western individualism. Gouramma's American visit functions as the narrative's epistemological turning point, where the gap between fantasy and reality is made irreversibly visible. The novel ultimately proposes that cultural rootedness and human reciprocity are values that dollar wealth cannot replicate and that emigration, undertaken in a spirit of pure materialism, exacts a cost that only becomes visible when it is too late to recover what has been lost.

Keywords: *diaspora studies, NRI identity, cultural dislocation, Indian middle-class aspiration, Sudha Murthy, Dollar Bahu, postcolonial fiction, diasporic disillusionment*

INTRODUCTION

The figure of the Non-Resident Indian has occupied a central and often mythologized position in the imagination of the Indian middle class since the liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s. The NRI son or daughter who earns in dollars while maintaining nominal ties to the homeland has come to represent a form of aspirational success that combines material prosperity with a carefully managed cultural identity. Sudha Murthy's Dollar Bahu interrogates this mythology with precision and irony, deploying the structure of a domestic family drama to expose the human costs of an aspiration built on the misrecognition of what a good life actually requires (Beauvoir, 1983). The novel follows the Shamanna family of Bangalore as their world is transformed by Chandru's emigration to America, the arrival of dollar remittances, and ultimately by Gouramma's eye-opening visit to her son's household in the United States. This paper reads the novel as a sustained postcolonial critique of the NRI dream, examining how Murthy constructs the American life as a site of both aspiration and disillusionment, and how the novel's diasporic characters inhabit identities fractured between two cultures without being fully sustained by either (Agarwal, 2011).

Indian fiction in English has engaged extensively with the experience of diaspora and cultural displacement. Sudha Murthy occupies a specific position within this discourse as a writer who addresses diasporic themes from the perspective of those who remain in India rather than those who emigrate, which gives Dollar Bahu an unusual critical purchase on the NRI phenomenon. Agarwal (2011), in Women in Post Colonial Indian English Literature, situates Murthy within a tradition of women novelists who examine the intersection of gender and postcolonial social change. Bharat (2005), in Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English, notes that Indian women's fiction has increasingly engaged with the pressures of globalization on traditional family structures. The concept of the imaginary homeland, drawn from postcolonial theory, is directly applicable to Murthy's portrayal of Gouramma's fantasy America, a projection constructed from letters, photographs, and dollar remittances that bears little relationship to the lived reality of diasporic Indian existence. Kapur (1974) provides context for understanding the sociological pressures on Indian middle-class families to achieve upward mobility through the education and foreign placement of sons. D.H. Lawrence's poem "Money Madness," referenced explicitly by Murthy in the novel's conclusion, provides the literary genealogy for the novel's central moral proposition that it is not money itself but the collective madness around money

that destroys human relationships. The novel's engagement with multicultural experience, the adaptation of Indian women to Western social norms, and the psychological costs of cultural dislocation connects it to the broader field of diaspora studies as developed by scholars working on the South Asian transnational experience (Bharat, 2005).

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NRI MYTH

Murthy traces the construction of the NRI myth within the Shamanna household with sociological precision. Gouramma's transformation from a straightforward if somewhat materialistic housewife into an obsessive dollar-worshipper is presented as a gradual process triggered and sustained by Chandru's emigration. The letters from America, the photographs of the house and car, the periodic remittances that fund the extension of the family home: all of these function as instalments in the construction of an imaginary America that grows increasingly detached from any verifiable reality. Gouramma does not build this fantasy in isolation; she is embedded in a community of women similarly captivated by the idea of the NRI life, and the novel makes clear that the mythology is collectively produced and collectively sustained. Gouramma's inability to participate in the conversations of women whose children are also in America, her sense of competitive anxiety about her own status relative to theirs, reflects the sociological reality that NRI mythology is not simply a private aspiration but a social currency, a means by which families claim prestige and position within the middle-class community. Chandru's own complicity in this mythology is carefully documented. He sends money reliably, provides the material evidence on which Gouramma's fantasy depends, and even acknowledges, in a moment of rare candour, that life in America is lonely as against life in India. Yet this knowledge does not lead him to any form of resistance; he participates in the economy of aspiration because it is the only framework available to him (Murthy, 2007).

JAMUNA AS FIGURE OF CULTURAL DISLOCATION

If Gouramma represents the mythology of America as seen from India, Jamuna represents the reality of assimilation as experienced from within it. Murthy's portrayal of Jamuna is complex and deliberately unsympathetic in certain registers, but it is not without a kind of analytical generosity. Jamuna has fully adopted the values of Western liberal individualism: the primacy of the nuclear household, the rejection of extended family

obligation, the equation of freedom with the ability to consume and move without constraint. Her declaration that in America husbands listen to their wives, that one can eat, drink, dress, and roam around as one wishes, and that it is better to send dollars as gifts than to settle in India, is presented by Murthy as both an authentic account of what diasporic life offers and a devastating index of what it costs. Jamuna has purchased her freedom from Indian patriarchal constraint at the price of any meaningful connection to the family she has married into. Her strategy of maintaining her in-laws at a distance through the periodic gift of money, a strategy explicitly recommended by her own mother, represents an instrumental relationship with human beings that is the precise inversion of the ideal of family that both she and her in-laws nominally claim to believe in. Murthy goes further in exposing the inauthenticity of Jamuna's diasporic performance through the revelation that the gifts she sends from America are often items purchased in India and passed off as American imports. This detail is not simply comic; it is a precise metaphor for the NRI identity as Murthy understands it: a performance of Americanness for the consumption of an Indian audience, one that deploys the symbolic capital of the foreign to manage relationships that would otherwise require genuine emotional investment (Lawrence, 1964).

GOURAMMA'S AMERICAN VISIT AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS

The novel's structural turning point is Gouramma's journey to America to assist Jamuna during her pregnancy. This visit functions as an epistemological crisis in the most literal sense: it is the moment at which the fantasy through which Gouramma has organized her emotional life collides irrevocably with reality. The America she encounters is not the golden land of her imagination. It is a society characterized by social atomism, where neighbours do not know or care for one another, where the warmth and reciprocity of Indian communal life are absent, where her own son has been shaped by his environment into someone who manages her presence rather than welcomes it. The decisive moment comes when Gouramma overhears Jamuna speaking to her friends about her in-laws with contempt. The revelation that Jamuna regards Gouramma as greedy and stupid, that she has calculated from the beginning that managing such people with a combination of money and flattery is sufficient, destroys not only Gouramma's faith in her daughter-in-law but her faith in the entire system of values she has organized her life around. The money that she thought was an expression of love and connection is revealed to be its substitute and its negation. Tandon, 2005).

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN DIASPORIC AND DOMESTIC LIFE

Throughout the novel, Murthy sustains a contrast between the quality of human relationships available in the Indian domestic context and those available in the diasporic American one. This contrast is not a simple celebration of Indian tradition against Western modernity; Murthy is too clear-eyed about the oppressions of Indian patriarchal custom for that. Rather, the contrast is between two different kinds of human failure: the failure of Indian domestic life, which produces the suppression of Vinuta, and the failure of diasporic American life, which produces the alienation of Gouramma and the instrumentalism of Jamuna. What the novel suggests, through Shamanna's persistent equanimity and Vinuta's resilient humanity, is that neither of these failure modes is inevitable. The problem is not India or America as such; it is the substitution of material values for human ones, a substitution that can occur in Bangalore just as readily as in Nashville. Chandru's acknowledgment that American life is lonely is one of the novel's most significant statements because it comes from someone who has chosen to remain in America despite knowing this. His choice reveals that the economic logic of emigration, once internalized, is very difficult to reverse, and that the loneliness it produces is the price of a transaction that was entered into too quickly and understood too late (Kapur, 1974).

MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Murthy extends her analysis of diasporic life beyond the Shamanna family through her portrayal of other Indian women in America, figures like Shanta and Asha Patil who have navigated the alien land with varying degrees of compromise and adaptation. Through these figures, the novel builds a picture of the diasporic experience as one of persistent negotiation between incompatible sets of values and expectations. Indian women in America are expected simultaneously to assimilate to Western norms of independence and to maintain Indian norms of familial obligation; to earn in dollars and to send those dollars back to families whose values they have in some measure abandoned; to present themselves to their American peers as liberated modern women and to their Indian families as dutiful daughters-in-law. The strain of this double performance is the existential condition of the diasporic woman as Murthy understands her, and it is a condition that dollar wealth makes possible but does not resolve. Gouramma's observation, upon returning to India, that the Indians living in America face the same problems and challenges as those living in

India is not a conservative argument for staying at home; it is a recognition that the problems of human life are not geographical and that they cannot be solved by emigration any more than they can be solved by accumulation (Murthy, 2007)..

CONCLUSION

Dollar Bahu is, among its many other things, a novel about the limits of the imagination when that imagination is shaped entirely by aspiration. Gouramma's America is a fantasy assembled from fragments of evidence, and its collapse under the pressure of actual experience is the novel's central dramatic event. Murthy's critique of the NRI dream is not anti-modern or anti-aspirational; it is, rather, a plea for the kind of realism that can recognize what money can and cannot accomplish. The novel identifies a specific pathology of the postmodern Indian middle class: the willingness to devalue present human relationships in exchange for the promise of a future in which material abundance will somehow compensate for their absence. Jamuna's instrumental relationships, Chandru's emotional inertness, and Gouramma's belated recognition that she has squandered years of genuine love for the sake of dollars: all of these are presented by Murthy as the characteristic symptoms of a culture that has not yet developed the critical vocabulary to distinguish between prosperity and happiness. The novel's enduring significance lies in its insistence that this distinction matters, and that the cost of failing to make it is borne not by abstractions but by specific people in specific households, people like Vinuta, who pay with their dignity, and people like Gouramma, who pay with their regret.

REFERENCES

Agarwal, Malti. *Women in Post Colonial Indian English Literature*. Atlantic Publishers, 2011.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Penguin, 1983.

Bharat, Meenakshi. *Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English*. Pencraft International, 2005.

Kapur, Promila. *The Changing Status of the Working Women in India*. Vikas, 1974.

Lawrence, D.H. "Money Madness." *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*. Edited by Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts, Viking Press, 1964, pp. 424–425.

Murthy, Sudha. *Dollar Bahu*. Penguin Books, 2007.

Tandon, Neeru. *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*. Atlantic Publishers, 2005.