

Gendered Landscapes and Material Displacement: Exploring the Cultural Ecofeminism in *Dollar Bahu*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper offers a critical examination of Sudha Murty's novel *Dollar Bahu* (2005) through the theoretical framework of cultural ecofeminism. It explores the profound ontological connection between the protagonist, Vinuta, and her botanical environment, positioning her garden as a site of emotional refuge against a backdrop of domestic marginalization. The study highlights the tension between traditional ecological values and the encroaching forces of globalized materialism, which facilitate the commodification of both nature and the feminine spirit. By analyzing the intra-gender oppression exerted by the matriarchal figures, the paper underscores the ecofeminist tenet that the exploitation of the landscape mirrors the subjugation of women. Ultimately, it argues that Vinuta's horticultural engagement serves as a resilient reclamation of the organic self within a currency-obsessed society.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Materialism, Cultural Ecology, Urban Displacement

The Ecofeminist Framework: An Intersectional Overview

Ecofeminism emerged as a transformative branch of philosophy and activism that posits a direct, systemic link between the exploitation of the natural world and the oppression of women. At its core, it argues that the same patriarchal structures responsible for gender-based subjugation are also responsible for the degradation of the environment. As the prominent ecofeminist critic Françoise d'Eaubonne, who coined the term, suggested: "The destruction of the planet is a direct result of the masculine world, and the liberation of women is inextricably linked to the protection of the environment." (The Time for Ecofeminism 214)

This perspective highlights that both nature and women have historically been viewed as 'resources' to be managed, harvested, and dominated. Within a patriarchal framework, a hierarchy is established where the masculine is associated with culture, reason, and progress, while the feminine is relegated to nature, emotion, and passivity. This dualism justifies the dual exploitation of both.

Patriarchal Dominance and the Environment

The patriarchal mindset often operates on a model of unlimited extraction. In this worldview, the environment is not a living system to be respected but a commodity to be conquered for capital gain. This 'domination of the wild' mirrors historical social structures where land ownership and the control of natural resources were tied to masculine authority and status. When the environment is treated as an object for profit, the ecological balance is disrupted. This disruption often manifests as the commodification of life, that is, reducing complex ecosystems to market values and mechanization, that is, moving away from organic, sustainable growth toward industrial, artificial output.

The Female Experience within the Dominant Paradigm

The female experience is affected by this dominance through what critics call the "logic of colonization." Just as the environment is expected to provide endless sustenance without acknowledgment or care, women's labor, particularly in the domestic and nurturing spheres, is often 'naturalized' and thus devalued.

Patriarchy affects the female experience in the following ways:

- **Marginalization of Care:** The essential ‘nurturing’ roles, which align with ecological preservation, are treated as secondary to the ‘productive’ roles of the marketplace.
- **Physical and Social Control:** The restriction of female agency parallels the fencing and taming of the landscape; both are kept under surveillance and management to serve the needs of a patriarchal economy.

Theoretical Synthesis: The Nexus of Gender and Ecology

Ecofeminist discourse illuminates the profound philosophical and structural intersections between environmental health and gender justice. Historically, an intangible yet persistent bond has existed between the feminine experience and the natural world, a connection that remains a constant despite shifting cultural paradigms or temporal contexts. Scholars in this field seek to expose these latent associations, a mission shared by literary figures who utilize narrative to mirror these complex realities.

Central to this school of thought is the conviction that neither the emancipation of women nor the resolution of planetary degradation can be achieved under the current hierarchical structures of supremacy. As long as the paradigm of control remains the defining characteristic of human relationships, the erosion of the biosphere will inevitably precipitate the marginalization of the female subject. Regarding the intrinsic quality of this bond, scholar Bronwyn James posits: “Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner” (8).

Objectives of the Study

This inquiry undertakes a critical evaluation of Sudha Murty’s 2005 work, *Dollar Bahu*, intending to demonstrate how the central character’s existential turmoil and domestic hardships find a semblance of resolution through an affinity with the natural landscape. While total liberation remains elusive, the floral sanctuaries and green spaces curated by the protagonist serve as vital sites of emotional refuge, mitigating her profound psychological distress. Furthermore, Sudha Murty masterfully illustrates the friction within the household of Girish and Vinuta, where personal contentment is constantly at odds with the encroaching forces of neoliberalism and fiscal obsession. The study focuses on Vinuta's suffering, a victimization facilitated not by male figures, but by the female relatives, Gauramma and Jamuna, who have internalized the logic of capital-driven dominance.

Critical Reception and Thematic Foundations

The critical discourse surrounding Sudha Murty’s *Dollar Bahu* frequently centers on the precarious equilibrium between fiscal prosperity and ontological well-being. A review by *Bookworm* encapsulates this central tension, suggesting that while the narrative acknowledges the utility of material wealth and the comforts it procures, it serves primarily as a cautionary tale. The text underscores the imperative of preserving those intrinsic human values and emotional anchors that remain beyond the reach of commercial acquisition. Furthering this socio-cultural critique, T. Sai Mamata, in her paper entitled “Age of Dollars and Indian Currency-A Perception into Sudha Murthy’s *Dollar Bahu* and *Mahashweta*”, characterizes the novel as a poignant critique of colonial cringe and contemporary materialism. She argues: “*Dollar Bahu* is in one way a satire on ignorant people who are fascinated towards the Western culture and dollars” (5).

This scholarly observation positions the novel not merely as a domestic drama, but as a satirical commentary on the ‘dollar-fixation’ that permeates the modern Indian psyche. From an ecofeminist perspective, this ‘fascination’ represents a shift away from the organic, rooted values of the homeland toward a synthetic, currency-driven identity that inevitably devalues the natural and the feminine in favor of the global and the profitable.

“Modern ecofeminist discourse continues to evolve beyond binary oppositions, focusing instead on how cultural narratives-- specifically in the Global South- reclaim the environment as a site of both resilience and material struggle (Jabeen 372)”.

Textual Genesis and Narrative Structure

Initially composed in the Kannada vernacular under the title *Dollar Sose*, the narrative was introduced to the literary market by East West Books Pvt. Ltd. in 2005. Sudha Murty employs a linguistic style characterized by profound descriptive clarity and accessible prose, facilitating a direct engagement with her thematic concerns. Her storytelling technique evokes the tranquility of classical Indian oral traditions, utilizing a linear chronological progression that eschews complex temporal distortions such as prolepsis or analepsis.

The Domestic Ecosystem: Characters and Settings

The plot centers on a modest, middle-class Indian household comprising Shamanna, Gauramma, and their offspring: Chandru, Girish, and Surabhi. The narrative geography is split between the Indian urban centers of Dharwad and Bangalore and the American landscape of Florida. This spatial duality serves as a backdrop for the ideological conflict between the parents. While Shamanna prioritizes ethical integrity and the holistic welfare of his children, Gauramma is driven by an insatiable desire for social elevation and opulent living.

The 'Dollar' as an Invasive Species

The family's equilibrium is disrupted when the eldest son, Chandru, secures employment in the United States. His acquisition of foreign currency introduces a "magical" but volatile element into the domestic sphere, altering the household's socio-economic climate. In contrast, the younger son, Girish, adopts his father's philosophy, opting for a sustainable and contented existence in his ancestral region. Following the marriages of both sons, the residence becomes a site of relentless evaluation. Gauramma's fixation on fiscal accumulation leads to a toxic comparison between her daughters-in-law, predicated entirely on their association with the dollar. This behavior exemplifies the corrosive influence of contemporary materialism on organic human bonds.

Deconstructing the American 'Paradise'

Compelled by her preoccupation with wealth, Gauramma travels to the United States to experience her envisioned utopia. However, this journey serves as a catalyst for disillusionment. The stark contrast between the hyper-individualism of Western modernity and the communal foundations of Indian tradition shatters her preconceived notions. Consequently, the myth of America as a terrestrial "paradise" is dismantled, leading to an ontological awakening where her materialistic fantasies are replaced by a grounded realization of cultural reality. She realized that "...the grass is always greener on the other side." (Murty, 135)

Commencing with a deceptive simplicity, the narrative incrementally evolves into a sophisticated examination of the friction between capital-driven interests and interpersonal cohesion, while simultaneously navigating the cultural dissonance between Indian traditionalism and American materialism. Within this complex framework, Sudha Murty foregrounds Vinuta's profound ecological attachment to her flora, illustrating how her migration to a metropolitan environment renders her an "urban dispossessed" subject, severed from her spiritual and natural anchors. This displacement is compounded by the systematic psychological marginalization she endures at the hands of her female relatives—Gauramma, Surabhi, and Jamuna—who function as agents of a patriarchal, currency-obsessed domestic hierarchy that mirrors the broader exploitation of the natural world.

"The intersection of materialism and domestic power dynamics in *Dollar Bahu* remains a focal point in contemporary scholarship; recent studies emphasize how the 'craze for green card' facilitates a shift from traditional familial values to a consumerist hierarchy that marginalizes the non-earning daughter-in-law (Aayushi and Kamboj 11)".

Vinuta and Nature

The protagonist's trajectory is meticulously charted through the authorial voice, which delineates a life defined by profound emotional tribulations punctuated by transient moments of serenity. Vinuta's ontological essence aligns with the tenets of cultural ecofeminism, specifically through the visceral and metaphysical bond she maintains with the botanical world. Her personal sanctuary, the garden, functions as a vital extension of her physical and spiritual self, offering a restorative space where her joyous inclinations are cultivated.

Within these verdant boundaries, the anxieties surrounding her status as a parentless individual are mitigated, providing a sense of belonging that the social structure denies her. While the text reflects the development of ecofeminism into a structured academic discipline “institutionalized theoretical field” (Kaur 102), Vinuta’s specific affinity for her flora is best interpreted through a cultural ecofeminist paradigm. Her labor among the vegetation transcends mere horticulture; it serves as a primary manifestation of her inherent kinship with the biosphere, acting as a silent site of self-actualization. “The radiance of the morning was reflected in her face and echoed in the joy she felt in her heart.” (Murthy, 9)

The Garden as a Confidant: Sites of Non-Human Intimacy

The narrative frequently highlights the profound unity Vinuta experiences with the earth. Within her botanical sanctuary, she encounters a sense of “oneness” with the natural world that provides a vital counterpoint to her domestic misery. This inanimate space evolves into her most significant emotional companion—a silent witness to her internal landscape. Sudha Murty illustrates this clandestine bond, noting how: “.....she shed her tears while watering the garden and no one in the house knew of her sadness...” (14).

Despite being surrounded by a populous household, Vinuta remains fundamentally isolated. The residents either lack the capacity for empathy or deliberately choose to ignore her distress. Paradoxically, this alienation is primarily enforced by other women. While traditional feminist critique often identifies the male figure as the primary agent of subjugation, Vinuta’s autonomy is curtailed by her female relatives. This is exemplified by Seetakka’s dismissive attitude: “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...” (11). In this domestic hierarchy, Vinuta is reduced to a servile status by those who share her gender, with Bheemanna serving as a rare source of compassion. This pattern of feminine-led marginalization persists post-marriage, as Gauramma and Surabhi continue to devalue her contributions.

Ecological Security vs. Material Displacement

For Vinuta, the garden functions as a fortress against loneliness; the vibrant flora provides a sense of protection that her human family fails to offer. Interestingly, the positive ecological impact of her labor is only recognized by an external observer, Chandru, highlighting the invisibility of female ecological stewardship within the immediate patriarchal unit. The systemic devaluation of this labor is best understood through the lens of Vandana Shiva, who argues:

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. (66).

Shiva’s observation clarifies how social structures impose rigid boundaries on female aspirations, prioritizing conventional expectations over personal fulfillment. This collision between sentiment and commerce reaches its zenith when the family decides to liquidate Vinuta’s ancestral property in Dharwad to secure her dowry. Her desperate entreaty falls on deaf ears: “Please let us not sell the house. That is the last remembrance of my parents. I love that garden. My life is in that.....” (29).

The Trauma of Uprooting: Globalism and the Broken Spirit

The demand to sacrifice her heritage reflects the cold pragmatism of a globalized era where material assets supersede emotional legacies. Vinuta is forced to abandon her primary source of joy, bowing to the pressures of a society that views the environment as a disposable commodity. The trauma of this separation is captured in her final act of communion with her plants: “...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...” (29). This departure signifies more than a change of residence; it represents the victory of fiscal logic over the “organic” self, marking Vinuta’s definitive transition into the state of the “urban dispossessed.”

CONCLUSION

The critical exploration of Vinuta's journey within Sudha Murty's narrative illuminates two pivotal sociological and ecological realities: the intra-gender subjugation of the female subject and the profound metaphysical alliance between womanhood and the biosphere. In *Dollar Bahu*, the protagonist's primary antagonists are the women within her domestic circle, a dynamic that underscores the unsettling adage, "Women Are Women's Worst Enemies" (Chattopadhyay). Furthermore, Vinuta serves as a quintessential embodiment of the theory that the feminine spirit possesses an inherent proximity to the earth, characterized by shared qualities of restoration and sustenance.

Her trajectory reinforces the core ecofeminist tenet that the endurance of the human species is contingent upon the cessation of systemic violence against both the environment and the feminine agency. The contemporary era has facilitated a catastrophic degradation of the natural world, manifested in global thermal volatility and erratic atmospheric shifts. Without immediate structural interventions, the viability of human existence faces an existential threat. Across all geopolitical spheres, from developed nations to the Global South, the female experience remains inextricably tied to ecological shifts, as they traditionally occupy roles closest to the rhythms of the earth.

Ultimately, while Vinuta's horticultural endeavors in Sudha Murty's work may seem modest in the face of global industrialization, her sanctuary represents a significant act of resistance. Her garden provided a vital, therapeutic micro-climate within her immediate vicinity, simultaneously functioning as a contribution to the preservation of the planet and a curative for her own psychological isolation. Through this lens, the novel suggests that reclaiming the organic from the material is not merely a personal victory, but an essential step toward planetary healing.

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