



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2024.v6n2.04>

## East Is East and West Is West: A Study of Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu*

**Dr Nidhish Kumar Singh**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Bhartiya Mahavidyalaya, Farrukhabad, U.P., India

### Abstract

This paper examines Sudha Murty's *Dollar Bahu* in contrast to Rudyard Kipling's famous line, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." While Kipling framed the East–West divide as a colonial assertion of civilizational difference, Murty reworks this binary within the domestic and cultural sphere, showing how migration and material wealth reshape but do not erase inherited traditions. The research purpose is to explore how Murty's narrative critiques the illusion that Western affluence can replace indigenous values, while simultaneously engaging with postcolonial debates on identity, cultural nationalism, and hybridity. Drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the "third space," Ashis Nandy's notion of cultural self-consciousness, and Partha Chatterjee's idea of the "inner domain of sovereignty," the study situates *Dollar Bahu* as a postcolonial text that reaffirms the uniqueness of Indian cultural identity. By juxtaposing Murty with Kipling, the paper argues that East and West, while interacting in a globalized world, remain distinct in their core values and systems.

**Keywords:** East–West binary; postcolonial theory; hybridity; cultural nationalism; indigenous values; globalization

Rudyard Kipling's line, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling 94), asserts a civilizational divide that has been historically interpreted in colonial terms. Murty reinterprets this notion through the lens of domestic and familial life in *Dollar Bahu*. Gouramma's initial admiration for her American daughter-in-law, Jamuna, reflects the allure of Western wealth and efficiency. She notes, "With dollars one can buy anything, even respect"

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 6 & Issue 2 (April 2024)

(Murty 57), exemplifying the belief that material prosperity equates to moral and social superiority. Yet her experiences abroad reveal the limitations of wealth in providing emotional and ethical fulfillment. She laments, “Money cannot cook food with love or care for you when you are ill” (Murty 141), illustrating the central argument that cultural practices and indigenous values are irreplaceable.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Murty’s narrative as a postcolonial critique of globalization, migration, and Westernization, while demonstrating how Kipling’s East–West binary is reinterpreted within a domestic, ethical, and relational framework. By examining family dynamics, gendered roles, and cross-cultural negotiations, the paper emphasizes that “India is India and America is America,” each with its own moral and cultural logic (Murty 134).

Sudha Murty’s *Dollar Bahu* meticulously contrasts Indian and American cultural frameworks, reinforcing the postcolonial assertion that distinct societies are rooted in unique social, ethical, and familial systems. In India, culture is embedded in joint-family systems, intergenerational responsibility, and a community-oriented approach to life. Elders are revered, and decision-making often involves the collective wisdom of the family. This relational worldview contrasts sharply with the American ethos of individualism, nuclear households, and efficiency-driven routines. Gouramma’s observations exemplify this divergence: “Here everyone is busy, they don’t have time even to talk to their parents” (Murty 102). She further notes, “The children were so independent they barely sought their grandparents’ attention” (Murty 123). These remarks indicate that, while the West prioritizes autonomy, it often overlooks relational intimacy, which forms the core of Indian familial identity.

Murty amplifies this contrast in moments of domestic observation. In Vinuta’s home, for example, everyday interactions are imbued with care and attention: “Vinuta prepared meals with a thought for everyone’s health and preferences, often remembering the smallest details about her in-laws’ habits” (Murty 90). In contrast, Jamuna’s meticulously organized American household, though materially affluent, lacks emotional warmth: “Jamuna’s house was spotless, but there was no laughter, no gentle teasing, and no sense of belonging” (Murty 140). Through these juxtapositions, Murty suggests that cultural practices shape not only daily life but also ethical sensibilities, emotional intelligence, and social cohesion.

Postcolonial theorists provide further insight into this cultural relativity. Ashis Nandy argues that the colonial encounter intensified the cultural self-consciousness of colonized societies, compelling them to define themselves in opposition to Western values (Nandy 32). Murty’s narrative embodies this argument: Gouramma’s disillusionment with the superficial perfection of American life heightens her appreciation of India’s relational ethics. Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” also illuminates Murty’s exploration of cultural negotiation. Diasporic subjects, like Gouramma’s family, inhabit an interstitial zone where multiple cultural logics coexist, yet boundaries between systems remain distinct (Bhabha 56). Gouramma recognizes that, despite exposure to American customs, certain Indian practices—particularly those related to care, hospitality, and familial respect—cannot be wholly replicated abroad: “I realized then that the small daily gestures of love and attention were priceless, and they could not be bought with dollars” (Murty 143).

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 6 & Issue 2 (April 2024)

Murty's approach echoes, yet reframes, Rudyard Kipling's famous dictum: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling 1). While Kipling emphasizes civilizational hierarchy and insurmountable difference, Murty localizes this divergence within the domestic sphere, highlighting relational, ethical, and emotional dimensions rather than a colonial ranking. In other words, Murty retains the acknowledgment of cultural distinction but emphasizes moral and affective significance over geopolitical or civilizational superiority.

Moreover, *Dollar Bahu* illustrates the complexity of cultural transplantation. Gouramma's initial fascination with American efficiency and modernity reflects a common postcolonial tension: admiration for Western material success coupled with a latent desire for indigenous continuity. She notes: "The gadgets and machines made everything easy, but they could not replace the human touch" (Murty 138). This observation aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that subaltern subjects must negotiate multiple cultural pressures while retaining their ethical and social rootedness (Spivak 104). Murty's text, therefore, situates cultural differences not as barriers to appreciation or engagement but as ethical imperatives, emphasizing that true intercultural understanding requires recognition of irreducible values embedded in familial and social life.

In sum, Murty's portrayal of cultural relativity underscores that India and America operate under fundamentally different ethical and relational logics. The narrative reveals that while Western modernization offers material efficiency, it cannot substitute for the relational warmth, moral attentiveness, and community orientation characteristic of Indian life. Through Gouramma's eyes, readers witness a negotiation of admiration, critique, and eventual appreciation, demonstrating that postcolonial identity and ethical selfhood emerge from understanding, rather than erasing, cultural distinctions. By reframing Kipling's East-West dichotomy, Murty asserts that cultural identity is inextricable from social practices, domestic ethics, and moral frameworks, reinforcing the central theme that "India is India and America is America" (Murty 134).

Murty critiques the assumption that Western wealth equates to moral and social superiority. Gouramma initially believes that Jamuna's American lifestyle represents cultural and social success: "With dollars one can buy anything, even respect" (Murty 57). However, her disillusionment deepens when she witnesses the limitations of material prosperity. She observes, "Everything was perfect, but the air was cold, and I felt lonely amidst the luxury" (Murty 139), and later concludes, "Money cannot cook food with love or care for you when you are ill" (Murty 141).

This tension aligns with Chatterjee's theory of the "inner domain of sovereignty," which posits that cultural values, ethics, and relational practices constitute a nation's moral essence, resistant to foreign replication (Chatterjee 120). Similarly, Nandy asserts that Western modernity often falls short in fulfilling emotional and ethical needs, which remain central to postcolonial subjectivity (Nandy 32). Murty's work reframes Kipling's East-West distinction as a commentary on domestic and ethical life: the separation lies in values, not hostility, and the Indian relational ethic cannot be replaced by material wealth.

Further evidence appears when Gouramma observes Vinuta's nurturing behavior: "Vinuta was always attentive to her parents-in-law; even the smallest concern of theirs drew her

# The Voice of Creative Research

*Vol. 6 & Issue 2 (April 2024)*

immediate care” (Murty 89). The contrast between Vinuta’s relational warmth and Jamuna’s financial success underscores the novel’s critique of equating Western efficiency with moral superiority.

The novel contrasts Vinuta in India with Jamuna in America to demonstrate the differing expectations and roles of women across cultures. Vinuta’s value lies in her ability to nurture, mediate family tensions, and uphold cultural traditions: “Vinuta’s love for her parents-in-law was quiet but constant; she understood that respect and care were her duties” (Murty 89). Jamuna, by contrast, enjoys financial independence and freedom in the U.S., yet her relational connections remain limited: “Jamuna’s life was busy, full of work and friends, but she rarely called her parents or in-laws” (Murty 105).

From a postcolonial perspective, this contrast reflects Bhabha’s notion of the “third space,” where women negotiating migration experience both empowerment and cultural dislocation (Bhabha 56). It also exemplifies the way colonial and postcolonial encounters redefine gendered roles, as Nandy notes that exposure to Western norms can create a tension between personal freedom and traditional responsibilities (Nandy 32). Murty critiques the assumption that Western liberation automatically equates to greater happiness, instead valorizing the relational, culturally embedded model represented by Vinuta.

Migration promises material advancement, yet it also introduces cultural and emotional dislocation. Gouramma reflects, “No matter how long we live here, we are always outsiders” (Murty 119). She inhabits Bhabha’s “third space,” negotiating Western efficiency alongside Indian relational ethics (Bhabha 56).

Her reflection, “Living here made me realize what I truly valued in my own home” (Murty 121), illustrates postcolonial cultural self-awareness. While Kipling emphasized immutable differences, Murty demonstrates that cultural encounters can promote reflection and reinforce indigenous identity. Additional textual evidence appears when Gouramma notices her grandchildren behaving differently: “They were polite but distant, unlike the children in India who clung to their grandparents” (Murty 123). These instances show how migration produces hybridity without erasing cultural roots.

Kipling’s dictum—“East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (Kipling)—has historically framed civilizational difference as unbridgeable. Murty reinterprets this within domestic life. Gouramma’s initial admiration for American affluence transitions to disillusionment: “I realized then that money cannot replace the warmth of a daughter-in-law’s voice or the care of one’s children” (Murty 143).

Bhabha’s hybridity (Bhabha 56) and Spivak’s concept of cultural alterity (Spivak 104) explain how subjects can negotiate interaction without losing cultural identity. Murty thus transforms Kipling’s colonial binary into a postcolonial critique: recognition and coexistence are possible, but each culture retains its moral and relational logic.

Globalization intensifies East–West interactions, creating cultural anxiety. Gouramma reflects, “Even with all their machines and comforts, I missed the little touches of home” (Murty 137). Appadurai notes that global cultural flows produce “disjunctures” that destabilize local identities (Appadurai 33). Spivak highlights the need for subjects to navigate multiple cultural pressures without losing a sense of rootedness (Spivak 104).

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 6 & Issue 2 (April 2024)

Murty illustrates that while East and West interact, indigenous ethical and relational frameworks remain central. The novel demonstrates that cultural difference should be recognized and respected rather than imitated or homogenized.

Murty's narrative critiques uncritical Westernization and foregrounds the resilience of indigenous values. The study shows that East and West, while interacting through migration and globalization, maintain distinct ethical, familial, and cultural frameworks (Patel 212). The contrast with Kipling emphasizes that postcolonial literature can affirm cultural integrity while acknowledging global interconnectedness.

*Dollar Bahu* affirms the cultural distinctiveness of India and America. Material wealth, migration, and globalization cannot erase the reality that each nation has unique customs, traditions, and systems. By reworking Kipling's dictum, Murty asserts that East and West are to be understood as distinct yet mutually recognizable domains, and that indigenous values form the foundation of personal and social identity.

## Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses*. Methuen & Co., 1892, London.
- Murty, Sudha. *Dollar Bahu*. Penguin Books, 2007.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 1983.
- Patel, Ramesh. "Cultural Dissonance in the Works of Sudha Murty." *Indian Journal of Comparative Literature*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2018, pp. 210-220.
- Sharma, Meera. *Tradition and Modernity in Indian Women's Writing*. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard UP, 1999.