



WOMEN, MEN, AND BEYOND

**GENDER DISCOURSES
IN LITERATURE**

VOLUME II

**EDITOR
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Gender Discourses In Literature

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Dr. Shravan R. Banasure

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27. Combination Of Virtuous And Vicious Female Characters In Sudha Murthy's Novels

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Sudha Murthy is an Indian educator, author, and philanthropist. She is also the founder-chairperson of Infosys Foundation. She is a Member of Parliament and a recipient of the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan Awards by the Government of India. Being a feminist writer, Sudha Murthy's novels are full of female characters. She presents a realistic world of Indian women. Her female protagonists are strong-willed. They struggle with the social forces to create their own identity. They rise above the burden of patriarchy and social customs and become independent, free women. They compel an orthodox reader to rethink and redefine gender roles in the modern era. *Dollar Bahu* (2003), *Mahashweta* (2007), *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008), *House of Cards* (2013), and *The Mother I Never Knew* (2014) are the novels selected for the present chapter. All these novels explore domestic issues, social problems, social expectations, and moral values.

There is a variety of characters in *Dollar Bahu*. The three major types of women characters are: victims, victimisers, and dynamic. Vinuta, alias Vinu, is the victim and protagonist of the novel. She is portrayed as a virtuous lady. She suffers a lot as an orphan child reared up with her aunt and cousins in her own house in Dharwad. They treat her inhumanely, making her serve them and do all the household work. Her uncle, a male character, is the only person who supports and cares for her.

The pathetic condition of Vinuta worsens after the death of her uncle due to a heart attack.

After the uncle's death, the family moves to Bangalore. There, Vinuta gets married to Girish, a bank clerk. Now she becomes a part of a typical Indian joint family. But she does not get any relief from her misfortune and wretched condition. It continues even after the marriage. Now, the place of her aunt is taken over by her mother-in-law, Gouramma, who runs after money and does not appreciate the modesty of her daughter-in-law. Here also, the only person who is sympathetic towards her is her father-in-law, a male character. Vinuta never minds the ill treatment by the aunt and Gouramma. She continues her modest nature, and at the end of the novel, she is rewarded for being modest and virtuous.

Jamuna is the "dollar bahu" and victimiser, who makes her mother-in-law and Vinuta work for her. She is again a typical Indian female character, a daughter of a rich family who can afford a huge dowry. She is not as beautiful as Vinuta, but the dowry and gifts in marriage help her marry an NRI, Chandru. She goes to the USA with her husband and earns dollars. She sends some dollars to her mother-in-law; in return, she avoids coming to India. She earns an upper position in the family and looks down on Vinuta. However, her cunning nature, in the end, is identified by Gouramma.

Bhemanna's wife, who is Vinuta's aunt, also comes under this category of victimisers. She is a crook who lives in Vinu's house and treats her like a servant. Her cousins also maintain a distance from her. Another character, Saurabhi, the sister-in-law of Vinuta, wishes to get a rich, possibly NRI, man as her husband. Her elder sister-in-law and wife of Chandru, Jamuna, lives in the USA. So, she likes Jamuna, but hates Vinuta.

Gouramma is the mother-in-law of both Vinuta and Jamuna. As a victimiser, she inflicts much verbal harm on Vinuta. At the end, her character changes from bad to good after witnessing the real nature of her "dollar bahu", Jamuna. Then, she repents over the treatment that she has given to Vinuta. She comes back to India and lives happily with Vinuta.

This study proves that the oppressor and exploiter of females is not a male, but the females themselves. They demand dowry and gifts from the daughter-in-law's family. They also take hold of the major male characters. At both places, male characters support Vinuta, but female characters become the cause of her affliction.

Sudha Murthy's novel *Mahashweta* (2007) has a similar line of characters to that of *Dollar Bahu*. Here also, female characters can be divided into the victims, the victimisers, and the supporters. Anupama is the victim and protagonist of the novel. She is a beautiful and virtuous lady known for her intelligence. She is exploited by her stepmother, her cousin, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law. At the end of the novel, instead of committing suicide, she moves to Bombay with the support of her friends. She proves her existence by working as a clerk and a Sanskrit professor.

Anupama's first exploiter is her stepmother, called Sabakka, who gives her substandard treatment. Sabakka and her daughter are also jealous of Anupama's beauty. Anupama works like a maid servant for the whole family. Sabakka drives her away when she comes back to them to seek shelter after her in-laws, finding a white patch on her arm. She forces her to leave their house. Her character is a typical Indian stepmother who gives tender treatment to her own daughter, and scolds and oppresses her stepdaughter.

Accidentally, Anupama meets Dr Anand, who falls in love with her. Anand's family accepts Anupama despite her weaker financial condition. Eventually, they get married. Now, Anupama's life seems relieved from all the torture and worries. But Fate has planned something different. Here, she meets her second exploiter in the form of her mother-in-law, Radhakka. When her husband goes to London for further education, she gets "leukoderma", a skin disease. Her mother-in-law is a shrewd and orthodox woman. She considers the white patches of leukoderma as a sign of ill omen. So, she compels Anupama to leave the house. Anupama sends letters to Dr Anand, who is in London, but he does not reply to them as he does not wish to displease his mother. He shows no compassion for her in her crucial days. Girija, the sister of Dr Anand, also envies the beauty of Anupama.

She also does not help Anupama in her bad days. Radhakka and Girija are typical Indian mother-in-law and sister-in-law who cannot put themselves in the daughter-in-law's shoes.

The novel also presents supportive female characters: Sumitra and Dolly, Anupama's college friends living in Bombay. With their support, she goes to Bombay. First, she works as a clerk and later as a professor of Sanskrit at a college. Therefore, the novel has a variety of male and female characters.

Like the first novels, *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008) has a mixed range of female characters. Here also, one can find victimised female characters and female victimisers. Shrimati Deshpande is the victim and protagonist of the novel. She is an intelligent but self-sacrificing, virtuous woman. She loves History. It symbolises her love for memory and the past. She falls in love with Shrikant, her neighbour and the son of her family's rival. His favourite subject is IT, which symbolises his emotionless and machine-like character. Yet, they get married.

After the marriage, Shrikant leaves for Bombay to pursue his career in the corporate sector. Shrimati becomes an ideal Indian wife and sacrifices her ambitions to support Shrikant's career. Meanwhile, Gangakka, the mother of Shrikant, who is a traditional, orthodox woman, treats Shrimati very badly. But Shrikant becomes so obsessed with his career that he almost forgets his responsibility towards his wife. Her lonely and 'barren' life leads her to self-realisation. She works in her area of interest. Prof. Collins, a foreigner, helps her obtain a scholarship and complete her PhD. This makes her independent and a stronger individual.

Among the victimisers are the roles played by Gangakka and Anita, Shrikant's colleague's wife. Gangakka treats Shrimati badly in the absence of her son, Shrikant. She is a typical mother-in-law who wants to show her influence over the family. Her behaviour with Shrimati makes the latter feel Shrikant's emotional void in her life. She also calls Shrimati a 'barren' woman. Another character, Anita, is presented in contrast to Shrimati.

Anita is a modern woman reared in an urban locality. Her lifestyle and materialistic views can impress any man. When these two women meet, Anita speaks of fashion and manners in high-class society. In contrast to Anita, Shrimati speaks about academic interests. She is a simple girl raised in a small village. Vandana and Premila are also of the type of Anita. The most supportive character to the protagonist, Shrimati, is a foreigner, Professor Collins.

Another feminist novel by Sudha Murthy is *House of Cards* (2013). Here, Murthy depicts the female characters as ideal, materialistic, practical, but supportive, and modern and extravagant. The virtuous Mridula is the protagonist of the novel. She is a happy village girl. She meets Sanjay, a poor doctor, at a function. They fall in love and get married. Being poor, Sanjay wants to earn more money to live happily with Mridula. So, he leaves the government job and starts his own hospital in Bangalore. Unfortunately, he turns to corrupt and unethical practices. He also hides these practices and the bank account from her. When Mridula learns about these unethical practices, she does not compromise with Sanjay. She leaves him and goes back to her roots in the village. She chooses self-respect over blind loyalty and becomes an independent woman. She represents a typical ideal moral Indian woman.

Lakshmi, Sanjay's sister, is a foil to Mridula. She is ambitious. She believes in materialistic values. She is cunning and influences Sanjay into engaging in greedy, corrupt practices. She supports Sanjay in earning money by hook or by crook. Money is more than relations for her. She looks down upon simplicity. Shaila is another female character who reflects a modern urban high-class lifestyle. Her behaviour is sophisticated. Her character shows how money changes one's behaviour and relationships.

Vatsala is Mridula's closest friend. In the novel, she plays the role of Mridula's confidante. Mridula shares all the pleasant and unpleasant experiences with her. She tries to understand Mridula's condition and suggests a way out. She provides emotional support to Mridula in her most difficult situations. Her character is a perfect balance of modernity and tradition, emotion and practicality. This way, she becomes Mridula's guide, leading her to an independent life.

Her suggestion not to yield before Sanjay's unethical practices finally helps Mridula get Sanjay back as an original, good-natured person.

Therefore, the novel *House of Cards* represents female characters as both virtuous and vicious. They encourage the males to engage in corrupt practices. On the other hand, they also compel males to leave corruption and live an ethical life.

The Mother I Never Knew is a novel by Sudha Murthy, first published in 2014. Murthy, here also, creates female characters who are either victims or victimisers. Bhagavva or Bhagirathi is the first wife of the protagonist (of the first part of the novel), Venkatesh's father. She is the real biological mother of Venkatesh, whom he has never known. When he comes to know it, it is already too late.

The virtuous Bhagavva is the victim of rumours spread by other women. She is innocent, simple and pure-hearted. She is a typical rural woman who suffers without raising her voice against the torments inflicted upon her by society. Her mother-in-law believes the social gossip about Bhagavva's chastity without any proof. The mother compels her son to end the marital relationship with Bhagavva and send her away forever. She, with no other choice, leaves the house and lives a life of poverty. In spite of all this, she remains attached to her child. This shows her stoicism, courage, and endurance.

Champakka is the mother-in-law of Bhagavva. She believes in the rumours about Bhagavva and asks her son to separate from his first wife. Her character plays the role of an oppressor. She is conservative and easily believes gossip without any proof or rechecking. She is merciless in destroying the life of poor and innocent Bhagavva.

Shanta, another character, is the wife of Venkatesh. She is materialistic, money-minded, and less emotional. She knows urban ways and fashions. For her, money is more important than maintaining relationships. Like Champakka, she is authoritative and dominates the decisions of Venkatesh.

In the second part of the novel, Sumati is portrayed as Mukesh's adoptive mother. She is caring, loving, and selfless. Mukesh does not recognise his adoption until the death of his adopted mother and father. Her character shows that motherhood is defined by love, and not by biology.

Like Bhagavva, another unfortunate and victimised female character is Mukesh's biological mother. She is unnamed throughout the narrative. She gives birth to Mukesh under certain socially tabooed conditions. She is a poor, rural, helpless woman. She cannot nurture her son in such crucial conditions. So, the son, Mukesh, is adopted by a middle-class family. She does it all against her will and under social pressure. Her absence in the narrative is also significant. Mukesh intends to find out his mother's identity to console her and to express his gratitude. She is one of those women who bear suffering without fighting against it.

Gauri, daughter of Venkatesh and Shanta, is kind and empathetic. She supports her father in his crucial emotional struggle. Neeraja is Mukesh's sister. She is sensitive and emotional. Although they are not biological siblings, their attachment is no less than that of any biological siblings. Thus, the novel presents a mix of virtuous and vicious characters.

Conclusion:

Sudha Murthy portrays female characters found in all strata of Indian society. They are victims, victimisers, modern, urban, rural, traditional, dominating, meek, and so on. Murthy also faithfully presents vicious female characters. They often influence the males in the narratives to act against other female characters. They also influence male characters to undertake unethical practices to earn money. They also play a major role in the exploitation and victimisation of other women. In all the above selected novels, no doubt, male characters victimise and dominate the central female characters. Still, these males are goaded and inspired by the elder females in their own houses. These elderly women in the family could have saved the other females from suffering and tragic, traumatic experiences. Thus, Murthy shows that the real exploiter or victimiser of women is not men, but women themselves.

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