



# Characters in Conflict: A Study of Intergenerational Tension in Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu*

**M. Vijayalakshmi**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Kaliswari College (A), Sivakasi*



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## Abstract

*Literature reflects the complex nature of relationships, bonding, morals, values, and emotions over time. Demonstrating characters from various generations, literature exposes the difference they face among them. Intergenerational conflict takes place when numerous social and cultural values, experiences and expectations separate one from another. It ultimately builds a tension among them. Sudha Murthy's Dollar Bahu depicts family relationships and the conflicts. It revolves around the characters as a part of accomplishing their individual identities. The novelist describes the gap between generations. There the elder of the family sustains traditional values, while the younger wishes for changes. In this novel, Gouramma, a character demonstrating traditional life, is in difference with the character named Jamuna. She is known for her new modern life. They response to the situation with the support of their past memories and experiences and they direct them to the decision that they take. Their culture and society, emotional demands and expectations, drive them to response to the conditions. The differences they have form conflict and tension. It pulls them to have communication problems, emotional distance and misjudgment. With these characters, writer evidently describes the intergenerational tension. With the use of Generational Cohort Theory and Family System Theory, this paper studies how the characters get into intergenerational tension. Further it examine how it disturbs their personal lives in the novel.*

**Keywords:** traditional values, struggle, intergeneration, tension, family relationship

Literature portrays human lives and experiences. It imitates the complexities of relationships, values, and emotions over time. It shows different characters representing various societies, cultures and periods. Demonstrating characters from various generations, literature depicts the change they face among them. Intergenerational conflict happens when various social and cultural values, experiences and expectations separate one from another. It ultimately creates a tension among them.

Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* depicts the family relationships and the conflicts. It revolves around the characters as a part of receiving their individual

identities. The novelist depicts the gap between generations. There the elder of the family stands with traditional values. The younger one desires for changes. It directs them into interpersonal conflict, and misunderstanding among characters. Further it challenges their family bonding. In this novel, Gouramma, is a character representing traditional life. She is in contrast with Jamuna. Jammuna is known for her new modern life. Through these characters, the writer obviously establishes the intergenerational tension.

The generation gap becomes the reason for conflicts and misunderstandings between people of



diverse age groups within the family as well as in the , group, community, locality and society. These tensions are molded by the society, culture and the time they belong to. The changes they have generate conflict and tension. It also pulls them to take part in communication problems, emotional distance and misjudgment.

Generational Cohort Theory by Karl Mannheim insists that an individual can be a part of a generational group based on the period one belongs to. Individual becomes the supporter of the common society, and value and he or she takes behavior and attitudes. In *Dollar Bahu*, Gouramma, is a representative of traditional life. She is a mother of three children. They are Chandru, Girish and Surabi. Her mind is filled with traditional values, and customs. She practices tradition and rituals throughout her life. But her daughter-in-law, Jamuna, is noted for her modern lifestyle. Their relationship and bonding explain the intergenerational tension between them.

At the outset of the novel, Gouramma desires to lead her life with diamond, gold and a big house. She confidences her children will fulfill her dream. When Chandru, the eldest son, gets a chance to move to U.S., she feels satisfied and dreams about her future. It clearly explains her wishes for a luxurious life to show off to her neighbours and friends. But her husband, Shammana has a different opinion about life. He wishes his children to get a good education in their life. It builds a conflict between the characters in this novel.

Supporting Gouramma's view of life, her son, Chandru has the plan to settle down in his life. It gives a space to arrange his brother, Girish's marriage. Shamanna asks his wife, Gouramma to begin the marriage proposal for the son, Girish, with the family of a girl, as he is interested in marrying her. But Gouramma strongly opposes his idea saying that they are the family of a boy and it is not preferable to approach first and she believes that it is the responsibility of a girl's family to do. As the parent of a boy, she expects the parents or the relatives of a girl to come first to discuss their interest regarding their children's marriage. It shows her attitude as a mother of a man. She behaves with the support of the lesson

she got in her past, the generation she belongs to.

Being a mother, Gouramma treats her daughter as a princess when she expects her daughter-in-law to do all sorts of house hold work endlessly. She justifies her decision by asking others to make her free until her marriage. She feels that she will get all sorts of responsibilities after her marriage and she may not have time to enjoy her life. It demonstrates her wish to allow her daughter to enjoy her life whereas she expects her daughter-in-law to get into a struggle. On the other hand, it pictures the emotional struggle the daughter-in-law, Vinuta, faces as a consequence of the fault-finding nature and dominant attitude she gets both from her mother-in-law, Gouramma and sister-in-law, Surabi.

In contrast to Gouramma, who gives importance to money, Vinuta, the daughter- in-law of Gouramma and wife of Girish, gives preference to family bonding. When Chandru comes to his house from U.S., Vinuta asks her mother-in-law, "Amma, you go to the airport. Tell me what Chandru like and I will get everything ready" (DB 45). She approaches everyone with love and care. She never thinks anything selfish, instead she is willingly adjust with the whole family. She takes all her responsibilities cheerfully. She has different opinion from her mother-in-law. But her earlier life experience makes her to bend with her family and community. She gets involved in arranging her sister-in-law, Surabi's marriage. She desires to get a noble husband for Surabi. She wishes to accept Surabi, even though Surabi behaves with her as a rival. It exposes different personalities of the characters, Gouramma, Surabi and Vinuta. It also portrays the conflict and difference they have in their relationships.

In contrast to Vinuta's desire, Gouramma wants her daughter to settle in US and she needs to show off others with pride that her children are in US. When she understands that her lovable daughter falls in love with Gopinath, she counsels her daughter to come out from the thought of marrying him. She points out Vinuta's struggling life, as a life without having essential income. She warns her escape from a worst life like Vinuta's. She trusts that her own daughter may suffer to have a normal life and she cannot spend



her money as she wishes and she has to concentrate in saving money for future and could not enjoy her life till the end. She advises her daughter by portraying the life of Vinuta's. Vinuta after overhearing Gouramma's advice to her daughter raises a question herself, "Should a marriage be arranged on the basis of love and understanding or on the love for Dollar" (DB 59). It details the preference of these characters in the concept of marriage and life. The author here shows the conflicting relationship between these two characters, Gouramma and Vinuta.

When Girish approaches Madan to enquire about Shekhar with whom they decide to get Surabhi married, Madan's father is not prepared to give any sort of bad remarks on him. He is known for his traditional life. He considers that one could not give any false statement about anybody especially when it is associated with the marriage proposal. Thus like Gouramma, Madan's father also has some sort of belief. He believes that one should not utter any undesirable words about others.

But Madan is unable to tolerate his father's old generational belief and says that his father is old fashioned. He explains the real nature of Shekhar. But Gouramma takes it in different way. She cannot bear to take their words as granted. She expresses her anger saying, "This is a story made up by the people who can't bear our happiness and are jealous of us" (DB 63). Her words create a great confusion among the family members particularly for Girish, Vinuta and Shamanna.

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory explains family as an interconnected system of interdependent individuals. According to this concept, in a family, each individual influences another individual and one begins to respond and react to other's actions and attitude. An individual's action and decision also disturb the others in the family. According to family system theory, the family is seen as an interlinked emotional system. There can be intergenerational conflict, when an individual in a family can't show or keep his identity. In this novel, when Vinuta is pregnant, Gouramma says, "If you want to buy anything or eat anything, you can go and eat outside with Girish" (DB 77). Gouramma also

shows all her anger on poor Vinuta. She scolds her saying that she saved her money in her marriage by saving her house. These make Vinuta feel bad about her state of position in her family and she says that she does not want to compete with anybody in the family. She also feels that the family she belongs to does not accept her love and care for them and they are also not willing to accept her. "I'm sorry, but that's the truth" (DB 72). It shows how an individual's action and decision disturb the others in the family.

Regarding family systems theory, an individual's performance is the outcome of factors that he or she experienced in his past life. They react to the situation with the support of their past memories and experiences and it leads them to the decision that they take. Their culture and society, emotional demands and expectations, family and the institutions they belong to drive them to react to the conditions. Shamanna, in this novel, explains the reason for Gouramma's attitude towards others, especially towards Vinuta. He says, "the poverty during her childhood, lack of education, the sudden surge of money, have obviously affected her" (DB 139). Gouramma desires more luxurious gifts from her son Chandru and her daughter-in-law, 'Dollar Bahu' Jamuna. Jamuna, in contrast, senses that her money is being abused by Gouramma and Surabhi. This constructs confusion and emotional parting.

Generational Cohort Theory clarifies that one is influenced by the socio-historical environment where he lives and experiences. Thereby he becomes a part in the progression of shaping the future. Gouramma goes to US and expects Jamuna to welcome her by touching her feet with respect. She desires to see her in a sari with gold and diamond. She had rehearsed herself for better result. She wishes to uphold tradition throughout her life. She also needs others in her family to accept her thoughts and believes others to follow in their lives too. But she is disappointed. Jamuna, chooses the lifestyle which allows her to move easily and express herself as she wants. She desires to get away from the traditional methods and customs. She enthusiastically accepts changes and new social trends. This generates confusion among family members and leads characters into conflict in this novel.



Gouramma is powerless to change her life style in U.S. She becomes shocked and shouted, when Jamuna takes her to have a bath using a tub. She is not satisfied and in need of a bucket for her bath. Chandru approaches her that she cannot demand everything as she wishes. He requests her to adjust the alteration. But she is surviving her life associating with the traditional and conventional life and she cannot adapt herself to a new modern way of life style. It creates a tension between her and her son and daughter-in-law.

Following the customs of India, Gouramma desires to perform a ritual of giving to the mother-to-be. But Jamuna rejects her idea. She says to her that none will attend such programmes on a working day. She convinces her “We will invite everyone after the delivery” (DB 86). Gouramma cannot accept Jamuna’s words easily. Her traditional life questions her inability to accept modern lifestyle or convince her daughter-in-law to welcome her proposal. Her poor stage makes her feel disturbed. The novelist explains the intergenerational tension and character conflict through this realistic depiction of a family which is divided by cultural values and emotional misunderstandings, and thereby highlights the balance between tradition and modernity.

When Jamnua is admitted for her delivery, Chandru is willing to go into delivery room to take lessons about delivery. But Gouramma becomes shocked. She cannot understand why a man is allowed inside the delivery room. For her, in her time it was not a normal practice in the society. Gouramma also gets stoned when she listens that a mother can come home and has a normal life from the hospital immediately after giving birth to a child. But in addition, she is also tensed when Jamuna makes her newborn child to sleep alone in the room. She enquires herself that how could people expect a connection between parents and children if they prefer to grow up their children amidst loneliness. It creates a tension with Gouramma and she is powerless to accept their way of growing their child. The novelist pictures the different approaches practiced by two generations and reveals the tension they experience in order to stand on their life style.

Gouramma likes to do her role as a grandmother. She takes the child to have an oil bath. But Jamuna stops her saying, “No. I don’t like that sort of thing. .... I shall follow the childcare book to raise my baby” (DB 88). As Gouramma never studied any book for childcare in her life, it becomes a great shock to her. Gouramma also dislikes Chandru’s involvement in helping Jamuna in the kitchen and ironing her clothes. According her, men are not suppose there to help women in household work especially in the kitchen. But Chandru opposes her when she expects him to stop helping Jamuna. He says, “Amma, .... Actually I enjoy helping out” (DB 103). Jamuna who is approaching a new and trendy lifestyle opposes Gouramma for her advice to her son, Cahndru. She questions Gouramma and expects her to stop her advice regarding the sharing of household work to her son. Gouramma feels that her tradition and means of life are degrading in the lifespan of the new generation.

As the novel progresses, Gouramma feels miserable when there is no celebration for Ugadi. She expects puja with the decoration of neem and mango leaves. But Jamuna is not interested and explains, “It’s a working day, Amma. We get only a few days’ leave in a year. We have to save it for emergencies. .... If you are keen, we will celebrate it on Sunday” (DB 102). Gouramma thinks that it is not practical or approachable to celebrate a day on a convenient day. For her, it takes to be celebrated as it is fixed. This creates a great tension between Gouramma, an old generation lady and Jamuna, a woman noted for her modern approach.

Thus throughout the novel, the writer, Sudha Murthy, depicts the intergenerational tension and conflict among characters. It undoubtedly explains the clash between tradition-bound elders and the change-seeking younger generation. It also highlights the societal expectation experienced by the family and an individual through the characters, Gouramma, Chandru and Jamuna. Thus the writer details the life experiences between family members, by revealing the fact that generational gaps and personal ambition become the root of family damage and thereby explains that they also develop the reason for



weakening the emotional bond even in the closest relationships.

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