

Cultural Values and Human Relationships in the Select Novels of Sudha Murthy

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Abstract: Sudha Murthy occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English writing because her fiction speaks in a plain, accessible idiom while engaging with the deepest anxieties of the Indian middle-class family: the pull between tradition and modernity, the value placed on money against the value placed on relationships, and the quiet negotiations that hold households together or pull them apart. This paper undertakes a thematic and textual study of cultural values and human relationships in four of her select novels - Dollar Bahu, Mahashweta, Gently Falls the Bakula, and House of Cards. It examines how Murthy uses ordinary domestic situations - a mother-in-law comparing daughters-in-law, a wife abandoned after an illness, a career woman drifting from her husband, and a family corroded by ambition - to dramatise the collision between inherited cultural values such as sacrifice, loyalty, and filial duty and the pressures of migration, materialism, and professional ambition. Using a qualitative, interpretative method grounded in close reading, the study argues that Murthy neither romanticises tradition nor uncritically celebrates modernity; instead, she locates ethical worth in characters who sustain relationships through empathy, patience, and self-respect, regardless of whether they are termed traditional or modern. The paper concludes that Murthy's novels function as moral narratives for a transitional Indian society, offering a humanistic framework in which cultural values are validated not by their antiquity but by their capacity to nurture genuine human relationships.

Keywords: Sudha Murthy, Indian English Fiction, Infosys Foundation, Middle-Class Family, Cultural Values, Human Relationships, Materialism, Migration and Diaspora, Gender Roles, Tradition and Modernity

Introduction:

Sudha Murthy is one of the most widely read voices in contemporary Indian English writing, admired as much for her simplicity of style as for her insight into the everyday moral life of Indian families. A civil engineer by training and a philanthropist by vocation as the founder-chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, Murthy brings to her fiction a practical, grounded sensibility rather than an ornate literary one. Her novels are populated not by extraordinary heroes but by ordinary men and women - daughters-in-law, working wives, ambitious husbands, anxious mothers - whose small decisions accumulate into large statements about what a family, a marriage, or a community owes to its members.

The present study concentrates on four of her most discussed novels: Dollar Bahu, which follows two daughters-in-law of a Bangalore household, one married within India and one to an NRI in the United States, and the mother-in-law's growing infatuation with the dollar economy her American daughter-in-law represents; Mahashweta, the story of Anupama, whose husband Anand deserts her after she develops a skin disorder, and her long journey toward self-respect and independence; Gently Falls the Bakula, which traces how the professional success of Shrimati gradually estranges her from her once-devoted husband Shrikant; and House of Cards, which shows how the medical ambitions of Sanjay draw his family into a spiral of corruption, infidelity, and emotional bankruptcy. Read together, these novels form a connected meditation on a single question that

runs through nearly all of Murthy's fiction: what happens to human relationships when they are measured against money, status, and ambition rather than against loyalty, empathy, and shared history.

Cultural values in Murthy's novels are rarely presented as abstract ideals. They surface instead in small domestic gestures - in who serves whom at the dinner table, in how a mother speaks to her daughter-in-law, in whether a husband notices his wife's exhaustion. Because Murthy sets her stories within recognisable middle-class Karnataka households and within the increasingly transnational world of the Indian diaspora, her fiction becomes a useful lens for examining how globalisation, migration, and economic aspiration are reshaping - and sometimes eroding - the relational fabric of Indian family life.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

To examine how traditional Indian cultural values such as filial duty, sacrifice, and joint-family loyalty are represented and tested in the select novels.

To analyse the major human relationships depicted in the novels - marital, parent-child, and in-law relationships - and the strains placed upon them by materialism and migration.

To explore Murthy's treatment of gender roles and women's agency within the framework of the Indian family.

To assess how Murthy positions humanistic and ethical values as a corrective to the erosion of relationships caused by ambition and consumerism.

To situate Murthy's fiction within the broader critical conversation on Indian English domestic and diaspora writing.

Literature Review:

Scholarship on Sudha Murthy's fiction has grown steadily over the last decade, with a consistent emphasis on the social, ethical, and gendered dimensions of her work. Grace and Sivapurapu (2026) [1] offer a feminist reading of *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, and *House of Cards*, arguing that Murthy's protagonists resist patriarchal structures not through open rebellion but through moral agency, emotional resilience, and self-realisation, framing this resistance within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals relating to education, gender equality, and reduced inequality. Adhisakthi et al. (2018) [2] focus on the psychological and emotional conflicts of the female characters in *Dollar Bahu*, tracing how Vinuta and Gouramma embody competing notions of worth within the same household. Alapati Purnachandra Rao (2018) [3] examines the same novel through the specific lens of financial relationships, showing how the discourse of dollars and rupees becomes a metaphor for the commodification of familial affection. Abhinaya (2018) [4] reads *Dollar Bahu* as a critique of the modernity that privileges material success over inherited cultural values.

Nivetha (2018) [5] studies *Gently Falls the Bakula* as a narrative of identity, arguing that Shrimati's professional ascent comes at the cost of the emotional identity she once shared with her husband. Devi (2017) [6] frames the same novel as the story of a rejected woman whose endurance eventually becomes a quiet form of revolution, while Revathy (2015) [7] argues that over-ambition and self-interest are the root causes of the marital alienation between Shrimati and Shrikant. A study published in *Feminism in India* (2023) [8] reads the novel as a meditation on the balance between an affluent career and a happy marriage, and a further study in the *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* (2022) [9] situates Shrimati's growing dissatisfaction within the broader cultural framework that shapes an individual's choices.

Kallur (2017) [10] approaches *Mahashweta* from a narratological perspective, analysing Murthy's use of coincidence, the epistolary method, and intertextuality as devices that heighten the novel's emotional and moral resonance. Selvi and Vaishnavi (2023) [11] examine the social stigma surrounding leukoderma in *Mahashweta*, showing how Anupama's affliction becomes the occasion for her family's conditional affection to be exposed,

while Balamurugan (2021) [12] reads the novel through the lens of traditional belief systems and the pressures they place on a woman's identity. Kangne (2018) [13] situates Wise and Otherwise within a framework of cultural-socialism, showing that even Murthy's anecdotal non-fiction reflects the same humanistic value system found in her novels. Parvathi et al. (2016) [14] read Murthy's female protagonists as engaged in a shared quest for selfhood that cuts across the individual plots of her different novels.

On House of Cards, Kesur (2016) [15] examines the subjugation of ethical value to materialism and hedonism in the marriage of Mridula and Sanjay, while a further study on patriarchal ambiguity in the novel (2016) [16] highlights how Sanjay exploits his professional and social power at the cost of his family's trust. A New Materialist reading of the novel (2025) [17] extends this analysis by examining how material objects and infrastructures shape the ambitions and relationships of the novel's characters, and a study on crosscurrents in the text (2020) [18] traces the internal and external conflicts that erode Sanjay's inherited value system once money becomes the measure of social worth. Sahila (2024) [19] provides a broad survey of Indian values across Murthy's fiction, noting in particular how House of Cards dramatises the way unchecked ambition for wealth and status leads to the breakdown of both individual integrity and family life. Finally, a comparative study of violence and resistance in Indian women's writing (2021) [20] situates Anupama's endurance in Mahashweta alongside other feminist narratives of survival in contemporary Indian fiction.

Taken together, this body of scholarship converges on three recurring observations: first, that Murthy's novels are structured around a tension between traditional familial obligation and the material aspirations unleashed by economic liberalisation and migration; second, that her women protagonists, though often silent sufferers for much of the narrative, ultimately achieve dignity through endurance, self-respect, and quiet resistance rather than confrontation; and third, that Murthy consistently privileges empathy and humanistic values over wealth, status, or social prestige as the true measure of a relationship's worth. The present paper builds on these findings by reading the four select novels together as a connected study of cultural values and human relationships, rather than as isolated case studies of a single novel.

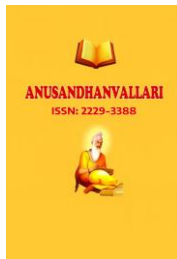
Cultural Values In The Select Novels Of Sudha Murthy:

A. Family, Tradition and Continuity

Across all four novels, the joint or extended family functions as the primary unit through which cultural values are transmitted, tested, and sometimes betrayed. In Dollar Bahu, Gouramma's household embodies a traditional value system in which a daughter-in-law's worth is initially measured by her devotion, her cooking, and her care of elders. Yet Murthy complicates this picture by showing how quickly such values can be displaced by the glamour of dollars once Chandru settles in America: Gouramma begins to prize Jamuna, her US-based daughter-in-law, over Vinuta, who lives dutifully under the same roof in Bangalore. The novel thus stages tradition not as a fixed inheritance but as something continually renegotiated against new economic realities.

B. Materialism versus Humanistic Values

House of Cards offers Murthy's most sustained critique of materialism. Sanjay's transformation from an idealistic young doctor into a man willing to compromise his ethics for wealth and status shows how the pursuit of material success, when detached from humanistic values, corrodes not only professional integrity but also the emotional core of a marriage and a family. Mridula's growing isolation within her own home dramatises the human cost of a value system that equates a person's worth with income and social visibility. Dollar Bahu extends this critique to the transnational context, where the American dollar itself becomes a stand-in for a value system that measures affection in terms of remittances rather than presence and care.



C. Gender, Marriage and Social Expectation

Murthy's fiction repeatedly interrogates the social expectation that a woman's identity should be subordinate to her husband's or her family's needs. In Mahashweta, Anupama's leukoderma becomes the occasion for her husband and in-laws to reveal the conditional nature of their affection, exposing a cultural double standard in which a woman's physical appearance is treated as central to her marital worth while a man's conduct escapes similar scrutiny. In Gently Falls the Bakula, the novel reverses the more familiar pattern by showing a woman, Shrimati, whose career success unsettles a marriage built on the unspoken assumption that the husband's ambitions would always take precedence. Murthy does not simply valorise the modern career woman over the traditional homemaker, or vice versa; instead, she shows both roles as capable of sustaining or damaging a relationship depending on the empathy and communication that accompany them.

D. Diaspora and Cultural Dislocation

Dollar Bahu also functions as an early and accessible fictional treatment of the Indian diaspora's effect on domestic cultural values. Chandru and Jamuna's life in the United States is depicted with both its material comforts and its emotional costs - loneliness, cultural distance, and the erosion of the very family bonds that migration is often undertaken to secure. Murthy uses this diasporic strand to suggest that cultural values of warmth and belonging cannot simply be exported along with economic success; they must be actively practised, wherever a family happens to live.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SUDHA MURTHY:

A. Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Relationships

The relationship between Gouramma and her two daughters-in-law in Dollar Bahu is the novel's emotional centre and Murthy's clearest illustration of how relationships are damaged when they are evaluated in transactional rather than affective terms. Vinuta's quiet, sustained care of her mother-in-law goes largely unacknowledged because it is not accompanied by the visible markers of dollar-funded prosperity that Jamuna, at a physical and emotional distance, is presumed to represent. Murthy allows the irony of the situation to unfold gradually: it is Vinuta, physically present and emotionally invested, who embodies the very values of duty and devotion that Gouramma claims to prize, while Jamuna's absence is mistaken for success.

B. Husband-Wife Relationships

Marital relationships in the select novels are consistently tested by external pressures - illness in Mahashweta, career ambition in Gently Falls the Bakula, and professional corruption in House of Cards. Anand's abandonment of Anupama after her diagnosis in Mahashweta represents the most stark failure of marital loyalty in the four novels, and Murthy uses Anupama's subsequent journey toward independence and eventual reconciliation to argue that self-respect, not dependence, is the foundation on which a genuine relationship must be rebuilt. In Gently Falls the Bakula, by contrast, the marriage of Shrimati and Shrikant does not collapse through betrayal but through slow neglect, as growing professional distance replaces the small daily attentions that had once sustained their intimacy - a subtler, and in some ways more contemporary, portrait of marital erosion.

C. Parent-Child Relationships

Parent-child relationships in the select novels often mirror the same tension between duty and neglect that structures the marital and in-law relationships. Children in these novels are shown observing, and eventually internalising, the value systems their parents enact - whether the quiet endurance modelled by Vinuta, the moral compromises normalised by Sanjay in House of Cards, or the resilience Anupama demonstrates for her own son

fter the collapse of her marriage. Murthy consistently suggests that cultural values are transmitted less through explicit instruction than through the lived example of how parents treat each other and their extended families.

D. Friendship, Community and Human Solidarity

Beyond the immediate family, Murthy's novels give considerable weight to bonds of friendship and community that offer support when familial relationships fail. Anupama's recovery in Mahashweta is enabled not only by her own resilience but by mentors and well-wishers who extend to her the empathy her own family withholds. These relationships of chosen solidarity function in Murthy's fiction as a humanistic supplement to, and sometimes corrective for, the failures of inherited family structures, reinforcing the paper's central argument that Murthy locates ethical value in empathy and care rather than in the formal status of a relationship.

Discussion

Reading the four novels together makes visible a consistent moral architecture in Murthy's fiction, as summarised in Tables 1 and 1 and Figures 1 and 1 above. Cultural values - filial duty, hospitality, sacrifice, respect for elders - are never dismissed by Murthy as outdated; rather, she shows what happens when such values are hollowed out and retained only as social performance, as in Gouramma's selective affection in Dollar Bahu, or as personal ambition, as in Sanjay's professional rise in House of Cards. At the same time, Murthy does not suggest that modernity itself is to blame for the strain on relationships. Careers, migration, and financial independence are not villainised in her fiction; what is villainised is the substitution of empathy with calculation. Vinuta's continued dignity despite being overlooked, Anupama's rebuilding of her life despite abandonment, and Shrimati's eventual efforts to repair her marriage all suggest that Murthy's ultimate value system is humanistic rather than strictly traditionalist: relationships endure not because they conform to custom, but because the individuals within them choose empathy, patience, and honesty. This positions Murthy's fiction as a form of accessible moral realism for a middle-class Indian readership negotiating rapid social and economic change, which may also explain the sustained scholarly and popular interest in her work noted in the literature reviewed above.

Conclusion

This study has examined cultural values and human relationships in four select novels of Sudha Murthy - Dollar Bahu, Mahashweta, Gently Falls the Bakula, and House of Cards. The key findings include:

Murthy's novels consistently dramatise the tension between inherited cultural values of duty and sacrifice and the material pressures introduced by migration, careerism, and economic ambition.

Relationships within the family - particularly the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law bond and the marital bond - are shown to weaken when they are evaluated in transactional or material terms rather than through empathy and presence.

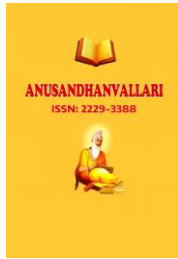
Murthy's women protagonists achieve dignity and agency primarily through endurance, self-respect, and quiet moral resistance rather than open confrontation, a pattern consistent with existing feminist readings of her work.

Murthy does not oppose modernity to tradition in absolute terms; instead, she affirms a humanistic value system in which the worth of a relationship or a value is judged by its capacity to sustain genuine care between people.

The select novels together function as accessible moral narratives that speak to the anxieties of a transitional, increasingly globalised Indian middle class, which accounts for their continuing relevance in both popular readership and academic scholarship. Future research may extend this study by undertaking a comparative analysis of Murthy's treatment of cultural values against other contemporary Indian English novelists, or by examining her children's fiction and non-fiction as complementary sites for the same humanistic value system explored here.

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