

# The sudden wealth syndrome and loss of rectitude in Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar*

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### ABSTRACT

Middle-class mores in the southern part of India are largely homogenous, though even here one can see that there exists the lower middle class and upper middle class. The differences, however, vary in application on a gradient of material possessions and upgradation in lifestyle. What unifies the middle class is the value systems that they practice. A stable job, thrift, financial stability, and most importantly adherence to societal norms characterizes this section of society. When such families experience a windfall of unexpected wealth it can destabilize the family structure, create mistrust and anxiety among members, undermine moral rectitude and ethics, and topple the very value system that held the family together. This paper examines the primary source, the novel, *Ghachar Ghochar* by Vivek Shanbhag, to point out that consumerism and materialism, if not balanced with reflection and introspection, can stunt spiritual growth and lead towards a loss of basic human ethics and morality. The narrator's family members, hitherto used to a steady income from a salaried job, switch to becoming entrepreneurs, trading in spices and ready spice powders, and enjoying a bounty of wealth. They fall back on unethical business practices and their wealth multiplies, changing their lifestyles and bringing up cracks in their relationships. They are blasé about the sudden wealth and splurge on luxuries as if in haste to wipe out their middle-class upbringing, letting go of the middle-class values of moral rectitude and ethical living that had held them together and made them upright citizens.

**Keywords:** Middle-class, Rectitude, Wealth, Family, Ethics

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Vivek Shanbhag has published five short story collections, three novels, and two plays. He writes in Kannada and has edited two anthologies, one of which is in English. He is the founding editor of the literary journal *Desha Kaala*. His novel *Ghachar Ghochar* has been translated into 18 languages and was one of the New York Times critics' top books of 2017, one of Vulture's 100 best books of the 21st century and a finalist for the LA Times book prize in fiction. *Ghachar Ghochar*, a novella of 117 pages, originally written in Kannada, has been translated into English by Srinath Perur. Srinath Perur is the author of *If It's Monday it must be Madurai*, a travelogue. He is well-known as the translator of two short novels by Vivek Shanbhag - *Ghachar Ghochar* and *Sakina's Kiss*; and Girish Karnad's memoirs titled *This life at play*. Cooper (2022) [4] refers to *Ghachar Ghochar* as being part of a rich array of translated works, now being enjoyed by both Indian and international audiences, with a growing focus on regional literature in India. Goyal (2019) [5], while ruminating on the concept of global Anglophone literature, points out that the supremacy of English in world literature might need to be considered with a pinch of salt, if one looks at the global reach of novels like *Ghachar Ghochar*, which was originally written in Kannada and translated to English. Overall, global Anglophone literature is a growing field that celebrates the richness and diversity of writing in English around the world. Translation adds wings to global Anglophone literature.

The novel subtly builds suspense and unease, leaving the reader increasingly on edge. It has, at its heart, the travails of a middle-class family whose members attempt valiantly to keep the family together, turning a blind eye to all unpleasant aspects of the incidents that take place in their lives due to the changes in their fortunes - they have become more affluent than they could ever imagine - but seem to come apart at the seams when any outsider attempts to enter and upset the applecart by questioning them. The narrator's family can be described, in the words of Dan Elnav, as "a poor family, who switch

from financial to moral bankruptcy when they suddenly come into money” (as cited in Shrestha, 2021) [11]. The novella portrays a family in a newly prosperous India, reflecting the struggles of many a family in a similar situation. As unforeseen wealth takes hold, traditional values seem to be eroding, leaving everyone feeling powerless to address this moral decline.

The family consists of Appa, the narrator’s father, and his mother, Amma, his father’s younger brother Venkatachala, referred to as Chikkappa, his sister Malati and his wife Anita. When the novel begins, the narrator’s family is an affluent one.

His childhood was unremarkable in that they lived a life of thriftiness and frugality. They were happy enough, as most families who look out for each other are, and did not lack daily necessities. Living in a small rented house, they never experienced a lack of cohesion, since there were no secrets among them. Appa was an employee in a firm dealing in tea and his salary just about covered the expenses of running the house and providing education to his children and his brother. They rarely ate out, and had no money to spare for luxuries, but had no discontent either.

One day Appa understands that he is on the verge of losing his job and that is when Chikkappa floats the idea of starting a business in spices. Appa offers his severance money as an investment and thus is born Sona Masala, which catapults the family into a different financial strata and life is never the same for the family.

They move into a large house, do not ever need to count pennies and affluence becomes the norm. Appa is made a partner, though he does not need to contribute either time or effort towards the running of the business, as is the case with the narrator, who whiles away his time in Coffee House, a café that has an ambience of sophistication, redolent of a gentler, more relaxed time. He is comforted in his ruminations about the goings-on in his life by Vincent, a waiter who seems to be a wise, non-intrusive but caring individual. Malati is estranged from her husband and lives with them. It is the entry of Anita, the narrator’s wife that sets the cat among the pigeons because Anita questions the happenings in the house and is, in a way, a threat to their tightly-knit circle of silence about aspects of their business and private lives that need examination but are swept under the carpet, with pragmatism and utilitarian considerations taking precedence over all else.

The study aims to examine the impact of sudden wealth on the belief systems and lifestyles of the narrator’s family.

## 2. METHODOLOGY :

This study employs an exploratory approach, analyzing content from the primary source, a novel by Vivek Shanbhag titled *Gachar Gochar*, as well as peer-reviewed articles, scholarly papers, and relevant online sources. The researchers utilized Google Scholar to conduct a comprehensive literature review of the topic.

## 3. RESULTS :

An examination of the plot points and analysis of the character arcs of the characters in the novels brings out a clear relation between a situation of sudden wealth accruing to a middle-class family, and its inability to hold on to its moral compass and humanitarian values. Relationships go for a toss, there is a loss of accountability in interpersonal interactions and a desperate fear of losing wealth dictates their choices. Ethics, honesty, integrity and righteousness are lost on the slippery slope of unaccounted, sudden wealth.

## 4. DISCUSSION :

### The Middle-class Family

Family values are a set of principles, often traditional, that are believed to be important for a well-functioning family and a strong society. The values of commitment, care, honesty, hard work and trustworthiness, in addition to general humane values of concern and compassion for all beings, are practised, modeled and passed down through generations. The term middle-class family used in this research work is meant as an indicator of financial ability, specifically of a unit that can just about afford three simple meals a day and perhaps offer government-subsidized education to the children, where the members live within their means, and have no way of adding to their income beyond the salary earned. The narrator’s family was a true illustration of this term, also reflecting the cultural beliefs that go with being a lower middle-class family in Bangalore. They

knew exactly how much their earning member, Appa, earned. They participated in his professional chores too, helping him balance the accounts before he went to bed. "Appa's work was the whole family's work" (Shanbhag, 2016, p.23) [10]. There was conversation, discussions and banter at day's end. There was a calming hum of rituals and daily routines. Many of the family's domestic appliances were conference gifts. The narrator, while speaking of how they did not enjoy luxuries, is quick to point out that they did not want for anything too, and were not unhappy or dissatisfied. "... we simply did not desire what we couldn't afford. When you have no choice, you have no discontent either" (Shanbhag, 2016, p. 24) [10].

The most important value for the middle-class family in India is cohesion, the rule that whatever happens within the family stays within the family; one needs to present a façade of normalcy to society. Societal norms, encompassing cultural as well as religious practices, are to be adhered to, and going against the grain is not an option.

In the narrator's family, before the setting up of Sona Masala, the needs are met from a salaried income, Appa's. Financial misconduct is a strict no-no. A sweet, moving occurrence of a day's accounts not tallying and causing a major upheaval in the household, is surely proof of how much honesty, conscientiousness, and uprightness were valued and practised in the house. When the error is spotted and the accounts tally again, the air is cleared and it is as if it is a celebration. They will not be accused of financial misconduct by Appa's employers, his reputation is still intact.

There was a festive air in the house that made it feel like it was the morning of Deepavali. ... It felt like we had all come together and averted a calamity. ... There was a closeness beyond reason that morning in our kitchen. (Shanbhag, 2016, pp.27-28) [10]

Predictability is the norm in a middle-class family. Routines and rituals are observed as a means of maintaining stability during times when unforeseen events might rock the boat. It is what keeps the unit going.

Affluence is surely welcome in any family. It can, however, be a double-edged sword if the financial power is not balanced with morals, ethics, values, and principles of life. While there is nothing wrong at all in making profits in a business, not questioning the methods of making those profits is surely the beginning of the end of integrity and moral uprightness. Every person's values might differ. However, there are universal values that guide one's moral compass, and muting one's conscience about doubtful business practices is a surefire way to one's downfall, a slippery slope. Luxury in itself is not evil and one need not act puritanical in one's consideration of luxury. It is the way one utilizes the freedom to enjoy luxury that is significant. Moran (1901) [8] opines that an outright ban on luxuries is impractical. It lumps together things like art, music, and travel with harmful indulgences such as gambling and gluttony. In fact, many luxuries can improve our lives. They can help us grow as individuals and as a society, both morally and intellectually, especially when we travel and see the world or delve into art and literature.

#### Sudden Wealth Syndrome

Chen (2020) [2] posits that an unexpected windfall of wealth can be a shock so much so that people who go from living on meagre incomes to suddenly having a lot of money might develop Sudden Wealth Syndrome (SWS). Sudden Wealth Syndrome isn't a formal psychological term. Therapists who treat people who get rich quickly actually came up with the idea, which can make them act impulsively. This rapid change in financial status can be confusing and lead to an identity crisis as they adjust to a new, wealthier lifestyle. It is highly probable that they go on spending sprees, splurging on luxuries that can destabilize their value systems. People who suddenly strike it rich can experience a range of negative emotions, including feeling isolated from old friends, guilty about their new lifestyle, and constantly worried about losing their money. Yet, it's not like one can do nothing to avoid it. Planning for meaningful ways to utilize the newfound wealth, approaching big spending decisions with caution and due diligence, and being discreet about the windfall can help families navigate this transition smoothly. None of these strategies were practised by the narrator's family, obviously. The money was there to be spent and the spending was done with carefree abandon, never once questioning the methods involved in the inflow.

#### Sona Masala - Gift or Curse?

The starting of Sona Masala is in the family kitchen, with the ubiquitous middle-class family wholeheartedly agreeing to place Appa's only available savings - his voluntary retirement benefits and provident fund amount, totally adding up to a lakh of rupees, in Chikkappa's hands to start a business.

Chikkappa too, promises Appa a half share in the business, and keeps his word. So far nothing untoward is sensed by the reader. It is as events take place that have no connection to the business per se, that the reader senses the slow slide into moral depravity.

Narrator - A life without purpose

The first chapter itself is cause for reflection on the lifestyle of the narrator. He tells us that he comes to Coffee House to escape from domestic strife. While this is not unheard of, making a coffee shop visit a daily ritual surely signals that all is not kosher in the household. Wasn't a constant flow of money supposed to make life easier? Does not seem so. The narrator, it is clear, is a troubled person. His intense need to unburden himself to Vincent is because he is haunted by his family's ways of conducting themselves. Hawley (2022) [6] spells it out succinctly when he says, "Arguably, this desperation and the isolation that occasions it arise from the precarity of the family's moral compass" (p.122).

As a youngster, with very meagre financial resources, he seems tranquil and unruffled, but not so as an affluent person. As one reads more, one understands that he leads a life devoid of purpose or significance. His contribution to the business is nil. He had tried to make his presence felt by attending office, but it fell to naught. He now whiles away his time by reading newspapers in the warehouse, taking naps, and being at Coffee House till dusk. How can any person not feel like a freeloader, without purpose or meaning, when he is paid merely for existing, with a designation of Director, to fulfill legal requirements? The narrator clearly faces an existential crisis. Anita, when she gets to know that he earns a salary for doing nothing is shocked.

Why did you cheat me?' she asked, furious. 'Why did you marry when you are living off others...I want you to have a respectable job, whatever it is. At least can you not go to the warehouse regularly and accept only the pay you deserve for your work? How can you not feel ashamed of living off alms?' (Shanbhag, 2016, p. 87) [10]

Before getting married, the narrator had never envisaged that his wife's perception of self-dependence and his own might differ. As we hear Anita questioning him, it is, clearly, a juncture when his relationship with Anita takes a turn for the worse, right at the beginning of their married life.

The greater tragedy for him, however, is the fact that he is distinctly uncomfortable with the way Amma and Malati treat Suhasini, Chikkappa's lady friend, who comes home to offer him masoor dal curry that she had prepared; yet he is unable to pick up the courage to intervene and put a stop to their inhumane treatment of her, and falls in the eyes of Anita. According to him, not joining them in their tirade against the lady is enough to save him from blame. When Anita confronts the family, the narrator is unhappy. He'd rather she sweep everything under the carpet and pretend acceptance, play mute, all in the name of domestic harmony. He thinks that she is out to destroy all of them, with her forthrightness. The fear of upsetting the applecart has dumbed down his conscience and it is difficult for him to go back on that road again.

Even when he hears his sister sob in her room after she cuts off relations with her husband's family, he is unable to console her. It is as if their relationship has crumbled and there is really nothing between them except the greed for their inheritance. He seems to have succumbed to the lure of lucre and become a mere shadow of his former self. When he sees Chikkappa unloading the sacks of spices from the lorry one night, in the place of an injured worker, he is again plagued by inertia, unable to go forward to help him. Again, he loses whatever respect he commanded with Anita.

However, the worst is when he hears his family, at a time when Anita has gone off to visit her family in Hyderabad, casually discussing ways by which some families get rid of their members who pose problems, by murdering them in cold blood. The family members, including the narrator, seem relieved that Anita, the narrator's wife, the one who might place a spoke in their wheel of unbridled consumerism sans ethics, is not present with them at the time of the discussion. "But the scene is reminiscent of a Martin Scorsese film - an oddly amoral celebration at the dining room table after the interloper who had threatened the family's ill-gained security has been dissolved in acid" (Hawley, 2022, p.122) [6]. Most



of these acts being discussed are murders of women of the house - of people known to the narrator's family, casual acquaintances - who were a source of bother for the families concerned. The narrator is filled with dread, but again does not stand up for himself, his beliefs, and his wife. With that act of submission, he loses any vestiges of humanity that he possessed and pretences of principled living. He is fully trapped in the consumerism cage, and rectitude takes a backseat.

Appa – loss of significance

Ståhlberg (2021) [13] analyses the family's most significant changes brought about by their newfound wealth as being about relationships and power hierarchies, rather than about the money itself, as in the case of power sliding into the hands of Chikkappa from Appa.

Earlier, before the tide of their lives was upturned by abundance and prosperity, Appa was the proud provider. His business was the family's business. His word held sway, his values were what the family lived by. An upright person of integrity and honesty, his behaviour at all times is emblematic of decency in public as well as personal life. However, after Sona Masala started thriving, it was as if he no longer had a personality, his opinions did not matter and his presence itself had no significance. Nothing was overt, it was still his family, but the pride of place was now held by his younger brother, Chikkappa, whose ways of conducting business Appa could not fathom. Appa kept away from the business and with that ended Appa's reign as the head of the family. Perhaps, he was the titular head? Every member of the family knew it was Chikkappa who called the shots. The worst part of it all was that Appa could not bring himself to express his concern and disapproval at some of the things happening in the family, like the way Malati's husband's family members were terrorized into handing over her jewelery, with the help of goons.

What is more, he is aghast at the way the family casually refers to murders of women happening in acquaintances' families. "What are you people saying?" Appa asked. He looked upset. "You're all talking as if it's right to kill someone when it suits us" (Shanbhag, 2016, p.112) [10]. He merely gets up and leaves the room, but does not put his foot down at such conversation being entertained in the house, let alone encouraged. Is he too so concerned about upsetting the status quo of the family's mode of functioning that he does not register his disapproval more strongly? What has happened to his inner voice that many moons ago, made him go over the accounts multiple times obsessively when he could not tally a mere eight hundred rupees in the books? Obviously, Appa has not lost his integrity and moral compass, his rectitude, but it is clear that he has also lost his assertiveness and confidence and is only a shell of his former self. Did Sona Masala do that to him? But then, Sona Masala is a man-made non-living entity that can always be dismantled, should the creators choose to. Did his family's desire, to go along with Chikkappa's shady business deals to enjoy a life of unquestioned luxury, do him in? The answer is obvious.

Sunita (2021) [14], while analyzing the changes in social values in *Selection Day* by Aravind Adiga, rues the rise of capitalism in cricket that has tarnished its image as a sport built on national pride. She points out similarities in the theme of *Ghachar Ghochar* by opining that capitalism brought corruption along with it, eroding the moral values and ethical foundations of the game.

Malati and Chikkappa – the road to loss of rectitude is strewn with unaccounted wealth

Malati is the character who predominantly reflects the materialism trap and its downsides to human happiness.

...additional income does not significantly enhance well-being beyond a certain threshold. The nuance of this relationship is often overshadowed by the louder, more ostentatious narrative of consumerism. This dichotomy reflects our struggle to reconcile our ingrained materialistic tendencies with the understanding that true happiness lies in intangible values such as relationships, purposeful work, and personal growth. This raises the need for a paradigm shift in our perception of wealth and success, underscoring the importance of focusing on intrinsic values over external possessions for genuine fulfillment. (Connor-Savarda, 2023, para 4) [3]

Malati is portrayed as an unstable character right from the beginning. Yet, the narrator wonders if she would have been better served if they had not come into money. Her estrangement from her husband, who is trying to make an honest living from his saree shop, was perhaps based on expectations of a higher living standard than one that was possible in that house; and the question arises whether she'd

have made a stronger effort to keep the marriage going were she to not have affluence in her maternal home to come back to. She had gotten used to a life of unbridled luxury and could not adjust to living in her husband's house, an upper- middle-class household, but not one with unaccounted financial resources. More than the inability to adjust to the financial situation is her hubris, displayed in the way she wreaks havoc on them while bringing back her jewellery, and the barbaric and malevolent treatment meted out to them through hired goons. It is as if all sense of right and wrong, even mere civility has vanished. "Malati's restlessness, her lack of peace, touched everyone at home. She was outspoken, rude, ... yet we had lived for years in some sort of harmony. How could that aspect of our life together have vanished entirely?" (Shanbhag, 2016, p. 57) [10].

Malati's depravement reaches a crescendo, when she hears Chikkappa describe his henchman Ravi's methods of arranging for accidents to get rid of people who he had been hired to wipe out, murder in cold blood. She is, shockingly, excited. How could such evil lurk in a woman who has lived life between four walls of the house? Lewis (2021) [7] quotes Roy Baumeister from his work *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, to state that the desire for material gain is one of the reasons why "ordinary, well-intentioned people may perform evil acts" (p. 376-377).

As for Chikkappa, he seems to have accepted that any immoral, unethical act is acceptable, if one wants to amass wealth. The end justifies the means. His acceding to corrupt officials, and keeping a gang of goons in good humour by encouraging their vile ways is proof that he has lost his way on the road to prosperity. He is even unable to bring himself to acknowledge the relationship that he has with Suhasini, his lady friend who visits his home to offer a dish she has cooked for him, and what is more, allows her to be humiliated by the women of the house. It is clear that it is impossible for him to retrace his road to moral redemption and rectitude when the reader sees the way he initiates a discussion about ways to finish off people without leaving traces for the police to persecute them. There is no difference between Chikkappa and the murderers; he has become one, himself - evil, sinister, and powerful to boot.

What is terrifying about this discussion about the skillful murders by people that they know, householders, and so-called decent folks of the neighbourhood, is the approval and admiration both Malati and Chikkappa feel about those that got away without leaving a trace. Leave alone regret, they sound like they would not hesitate to carry out something like that in their own house. They sound like pure evil. Paliwal (2020) [9] remarks about how, in Anita's absence, the reunited family sharing tea suggests a resolution to the danger she might have faced if she had returned. This gathering symbolizes that the threat is gone.

Amma – misogyny and silence as the price for financial gain

As Paliwal (2020) [9] mentions, Amma's persona would probably have been moulded by her role as a homemaker, focusing solely on childbearing and domestic duties, as is common in patriarchal societies. She sounds like the typical hard-working lower middle-class housewife whose world revolves around her family, the home is almost like her temple and the kitchen the altar. Anything that challenges the unity of the family is to be destroyed at any cost, be it ants, Chikkappa's lady friend, or Anita. She treats ants with obvious cruelty and Chikkappa's friend as well as Anita with unhinged misogyny. All those who challenge the status quo are enemies of their continued financial well-being, perhaps? Money trumps her gentle side on all these three occasions, though it is shown that she disapproves of Malati's violent methods of dealing with her husband's family. Amma is complicit in all acts of violence that are part of the happenings in the novel. She has decided to muzzle her conscience in the face of financial gains for the family. Aydin (2014) [1], in a study about happiness, points out how happiness demands that we be in touch with our inner selves, and observes how human beings cannot aspire for happiness without looking inward to understand themselves and introspect. He mentions that Greek philosophers of yore, as well as many other scholars, have emphasized that it is "impossible for any person to reach authentic, pure, and lasting happiness without becoming aware of the key elements of the inner universe and knowing how to utilize the elements that lie within that universe" (p. 257).

Singh (2019) [12] mentions that while economic progress is often seen as a key measure of a developing nation's success, there's a lack of Indian literature directly exploring the complex relationship between money and people's lives. He points out that R.K. Narayan's *Financial Expert* is a notable exception. *Ghachar Ghochar* fills that gap by delving into the challenges faced by ordinary Indians as they navigate the complexities of their evolving economic landscape by following the life of an Indian family that grapples with the dramatic shift in values and lifestyle that often comes with sudden wealth. Ståhlberg (2021) [13] quotes an American professor of Finance who was of the opinion that *Ghachar*

*Ghochar* was a brilliant comment on globalization in India. Continuing in the same vein he reports that a writer friend of his, while viewing the novel and its reflection on the value systems of India, said that, “..... the money has helped to bring out what was feudal, exploitive and the worst in it” (p. 263).

*Gachar Gochar* moves at a gentle pace. Nothing happens outside the four walls of the home. Yet, it is clear that homes can be uprooted with an unexpected inflow of luxury items and expendable income. Relationships can go for a toss, morals are discarded, humanity is forsaken and ethics relinquished, all in the name of family. The hypocrisy and deception have a façade of care and affection. It is a sham, shallow, and frivolous.

The loss of rectitude is real and the Sudden Wealth Syndrome trap is menacing because it ensnares the family. The members have become willing victims.

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