

Patriarchal Undercurrents in Sudha Murthy's House of Cards

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Abstract:

The present research paper explores the patriarchal undercurrents in Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards*, a novel that highlighted the complexities of family dynamics, social expectations, and gender roles. Through the portrayal of its female protagonist, the plot unveils the subtle yet pervasive influence of patriarchy in shaping personal identities and societal norms. The story highlights how patriarchal values govern not only familial relationships but also dictate the choices and limitations placed on women, often confining them to predefined roles of sacrifice and submission. By examining the protagonist's struggles within a patriarchal framework, the paper demonstrates how Murthy critiques the social structures that perpetuate gender inequality, while also showcasing moments of resistance and empowerment. The paper also argues that while the narrative portrays the constraints of patriarchal norms, it also subtly hints at the possibility of breaking free from them, offering a nuanced commentary on the evolving role of women in a patriarchal world.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Feminism, Family Dynamics, Empowerment, Social Structures

Introduction

Sudha Murthy, a dedicated writer and technocrat known for her innovative thinking, is widely respected for her charitable work and contributions to literature. Her storytelling is clear, simple, and heartfelt, which allows her readers to easily connect with the worlds she creates. Writing in both English and Kannada, Murthy often focuses on the lives of people in Karnataka's villages and explores themes like resilience, family, and gender roles. Her novels, including *House of Cards*, promote women's empowerment, featuring female characters who face challenges and discover their inner strength. Through her stories, she inspires women to recognize their value, face difficulties with courage, and pursue their own dreams. Murthy's characters are often educated individuals from middle- to lower-middle-class backgrounds, dealing with issues of values, family, and social expectations. Her work fits into the tradition of Indian English literature, where authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy explore social issues while balancing Indian culture with modern views. Like these writers, Murthy uses her stories to address significant social themes, giving voice to marginalized groups and often concluding with positive outcomes.

In *House of Cards*, Murthy highlights how patriarchal expectations quietly shape her characters' lives, especially women's. The story follows Mridula, a kind and determined woman whose marriage and life are influenced by unspoken social norms. Through Mridula's experiences, Murthy raises important questions: How do traditional marriage roles affect self-identity? How can women find personal happiness

while respecting cultural values? Murthy's storytelling captures these tensions, offering a powerful message about self-respect, resilience, and following one's own path.

Discussion

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and dominance, particularly within political, familial, and societal structures. In such systems, men not only govern public life but also exert control over domestic spheres, relegating women to secondary roles. This idea has been a central topic in feminist discourse, emphasizing how the patriarchal system maintains gender-based inequalities. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 295). Beauvoir highlights how the concept of gender is not an innate characteristic, but one that is shaped by societal expectations rooted in patriarchal norms. In this way, patriarchy establishes rigid gender roles that define women's place in society, often confining them to domestic and caregiving responsibilities, while men are allowed to dominate the economic and political arenas. Patriarchy also influences the cultural and institutional systems that govern societies. Cultural representations in media, literature, and other forms of art often reflect patriarchal values, which reinforce the notion of male authority and female subordination. As bell hooks notes, "Patriarchy has no gender" (hooks 5). This statement emphasizes that patriarchal structures do not only affect women but also limit men by imposing strict roles that restrict emotional expression and other aspects of their identity. Patriarchy, therefore, is not just about the control of women but the imposition of rigid societal expectations on everyone, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, patriarchy exerts control over women's bodies and reproductive rights. Judith Butler explains that gender is "an ongoing and performative act that cannot be separated from the systems of power that support it" (Butler 25). Butler's perspective aligns with the view that gender roles are not inherent but are actively constructed and maintained by societal forces, particularly through patriarchal institutions. This construction of gender roles serves to perpetuate male dominance by controlling women's bodies, dictating their sexual and reproductive autonomy. As Andrea Dworkin contends, "Patriarchy is not just a political system; it is a system of oppression that permeates every aspect of life, from our bodies to our thoughts" (Dworkin 42). Dworkin's insight underscores the far-reaching effects of patriarchy, which extends beyond external power structures to shape individual identities and thoughts.

Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards* addresses the subtle yet pervasive impact of patriarchal expectations on the lives of women, particularly within the context of traditional Indian family structures. Sudha Murthy crafts a nuanced portrayal of the protagonist, Mridula, a compassionate and resilient woman who navigates the complexities of marriage, family, and self-identity within a culture that often prioritizes male authority and expectations.

The story details her attraction to Dr. Sanjay, whom she meets at a wedding in Hubli. Sanjay is also drawn to her, though he is initially troubled by the vulnerability he feels around her. Tall with defined features and an athletic build, Sanjay works at a government hospital in Bombay. Despite a physical defect—he has a short arm due to an accident—Mridula accepts him completely, never commenting on his arm or his challenges. A sense of mutual affection and protection develops between them. Recalling his friend Alex's words that "no Indian girl would make a move first," Sanjay proposes to Mridula by letter. Her parents, Bheemanna and Rukuma, support the union. Bheemanna, straightforward and friendly, hails from T. Narasipura, and Mridula's family is known for their simplicity and honesty. (Murthy 31).

Sanjay's family, particularly his mother Ratnamma, is portrayed as a strong influence in his life. Ratnamma, though uneducated, is smart, bold, and knowledgeable, having adapted to life's hardships,

including her husband's death, by running a business selling items for temple pilgrims. Unlike her late husband, who was timid and often defeated, she is a decisive, practical woman, who regards money as both an asset and an investment, believing it essential for stability. Her financial philosophy is reflected in her high-interest lending practices and her view of gold as a means of wealth accumulation. Ratnamma's influence shapes Sanjay's outlook on life, and she advises him to keep his vulnerabilities hidden, as "others will take advantage" of them.

Murthy's exploration of wealth, family expectations, and personal values in *House of Cards* offers a window into the complex dynamics of marriage and family within the framework of traditional Indian society. Through Mridula and Sanjay's story, she reflects on the tensions between personal happiness and social roles, and how the pursuit of wealth can both unite and divide relationships. The novel invites readers to reflect on the value of genuine connections, as expressed in Appa's words: "Every person is an island. You need a bridge to connect two islands. That bridge is called a relationship. In life, real affection comes not through hiding but through expressing your true feelings." (Murthy 38). In her portrayal of Mridula's and Sanjay's families, Sudha Murthy provides a nuanced view of Indian family dynamics, where relationships are shaped not only by love but also by social and economic factors.

Marriage and Gender Roles:

In *House of Cards*, Sudha Murthy intricately explores the theme of marriage and its connection to gender roles, highlighting the ways in which societal expectations shape the lives and choices of women. The protagonist, Mridula, embodies these patriarchal dynamics, as her role as a wife, mother, and caregiver is heavily influenced by societal norms. These roles, though respected and integral to her identity, come at the cost of her personal freedom, individuality, and ambitions.

After Mridula's marriage to Sanjay, they move to Bangalore, where their lives take on a new trajectory. While Sanjay is starting his career at Victoria Government Hospital, Mridula works as a teacher at Yelahanka High School, earning more than her husband. This reversal of the expected income roles challenges traditional gender expectations, but it also underscores the limitations placed on Mridula's own aspirations. Despite earning more, Mridula's financial contributions are often overshadowed by her responsibilities within the household. She takes charge of the family's finances, handling the budget, managing savings, and purchasing items like a TV, fridge, and scooter for their home. However, while she successfully manages their household, she also feels the burden of societal expectations placed on her as a dutiful wife and mother, reinforcing her role as the primary caretaker rather than an equal partner in the broader aspects of life.

The portrayal of Mridula's marriage reflects the often-unspoken struggle faced by many women in patriarchal societies. While she loves her family and is dedicated to her duties, her personal desires and ambitions are relegated to the background in favor of familial obligations. This is further emphasized when we compare her to her sister-in-law, Lakshmi, whose lifestyle is defined by indulgence and excess. Lakshmi's family, in stark contrast to Mridula's, lives a life of luxury funded by dishonest means, highlighting the divergence in the choices available to the women in their family. Lakshmi's extravagant spending represents a departure from Mridula's frugality and responsibility, but it also hints at the ways in which money and materialism influence gender dynamics. Lakshmi's life reflects a different form of female submission, one that is dictated by societal expectations of status and appearance rather than the moral and practical concerns that define Mridula's choices.

The comparison between Mridula and Lakshmi also serves to underscore the limitations placed on women within the framework of marriage. While Mridula strives to create a fulfilling life within the constraints of her role as a wife and mother, Lakshmi represents a more materialistic approach to life, which may appear liberating but is also constrained by different societal pressures. In their respective marriages, both women are trying to navigate the expectations placed upon them, yet they do so in fundamentally different ways.

Sanjay's journey, on the other hand, reflects the possibilities for self-transformation and career success that are available to men, especially in a society where financial independence and professional achievement are markers of masculinity. Sanjay's pursuit of a post-graduate degree in Gynaecology, followed by his establishment as a doctor and lecturer, demonstrates the professional growth and independence that women like Mridula are often denied. As Sanjay adapts to his changing circumstances and builds his career, Mridula remains somewhat static in her role as a wife and caregiver, leaving little room for personal growth outside of the domestic sphere.

The introduction of Dr. Alexander (Alex) into the narrative further illuminates the power dynamics surrounding money and success. Alex encourages Sanjay to consider starting a private clinic, promoting the idea that money is a tool that can either build or destroy, depending on how it is used. He reminds Sanjay: "Money is a useful tool. It's like a knife—you can either kill a person with it or you can cut an apple. It's up to you to decide how to use it." (Murthy 109). Alex's words offer a nuanced understanding of money's role in shaping one's destiny. For Sanjay, money becomes a means to further his career and achieve his goals, but for Mridula, the role of money is secondary to her primary identity as a caregiver and homemaker. The disparity in how money is perceived and utilized by the characters highlights the limitations placed on women's agency within patriarchal marriages.

Self-Worth and Empowerment:

Mridula's journey in *House of Cards* is an insightful exploration of self-worth and empowerment in a world where women's value is often measured by their relationships to men. Throughout the narrative, Mridula grapples with societal expectations that try to define her through her roles as a wife and mother, while she yearns for her own identity and aspirations. This inner conflict reflects the struggles many women face as they navigate the tension between personal desires and societal pressures.

Mridula's evolution represents a subtle resistance to the patriarchal roles imposed on her. In her early life, she is portrayed as self-sacrificing, putting her husband's needs and family obligations before her own. However, as the story progresses, she begins to assert her strength and resilience, gradually seeking ways to build her self-respect. For example, she takes on the responsibility of managing their finances, a decision that reflects her growing confidence and awareness of her capabilities. Her decision to avoid spending money frivolously, and to invest in the future, shows a pragmatic approach to life that is in stark contrast to her sister-in-law Lakshmi's materialistic lifestyle.

Despite the sacrifices she makes, such as mortgaging her jewelry and working long hours, Mridula does not seek recognition for her efforts. Her primary goal is to ensure financial stability and happiness for her family, particularly her husband, Sanjay. She understands the importance of providing a secure future, even at the cost of her own desires. Her personal empowerment comes from this sense of duty and the realization that her actions, though largely unnoticed, are integral to the success of the family and her husband's career.

Mridula's role in Sanjay's success further underscores her empowerment. She not only supports him emotionally and financially but also plays a pivotal role in establishing his private practice. Her sacrifice and hard work directly contribute to the expansion of their nursing home, transforming it into a thriving institution. However, her sense of self-worth is still challenged by the societal pressures surrounding her, especially when it comes to money and materialism.

A key turning point in Mridula's empowerment comes when she begins to recognize the hypocrisy and moral corruption surrounding her. Sanjay's increasing involvement in unethical practices, such as earning black money and engaging in corrupt dealings, causes her to question her marriage. She is disturbed by his actions, particularly his treatment of their son, Shishir, who is being raised with the wrong values—values that Mridula herself cannot reconcile with. This growing moral divide between them leads to Mridula's increasing emotional turmoil, as she feels the weight of both her personal convictions and the expectations placed on her as a wife and mother.

Despite the challenges she faces, Mridula's journey of self-worth and empowerment is one of resistance. She continues to assert her values of honesty, hard work, and financial prudence, teaching these principles to her son, even as her husband fosters an environment of indulgence and materialism. Mridula's emotional distress, stemming from her disillusionment with her husband's behavior and her son's rebellion, reflects the complex realities of being a woman in a patriarchal society. She constantly strives to reconcile her own ideals with the world around her, finding moments of self-empowerment even in the most difficult circumstances.

Through Mridula, Sudha Murthy powerfully illustrates how women can challenge societal norms, confront traditional expectations, and ultimately assert their right to personal happiness and self-respect. While Mridula's empowerment is not the result of dramatic transformations or outward rebellions, it is found in the quiet, consistent resistance she offers to the roles imposed on her. She is a woman who seeks self-worth not through grand gestures, but through her daily actions, decisions, and unshakable commitment to her family's future. In this way, Murthy's portrayal of Mridula becomes a reflection of the resilience and strength of women everywhere who navigate the complexities of gender roles, self-worth, and empowerment.

Conclusion

In *House of Cards*, Sudha Murthy intricately explores the complex dynamics of patriarchy and its profound influence on the lives of women, particularly through the character of Mridula. The novel presents a stark portrayal of how traditional gender roles and patriarchal expectations shape not only personal choices but also the very identity of women. Mridula's journey, marked by personal sacrifices, struggles for self-worth, and a constant battle between her desires and societal norms, highlights the subtle yet pervasive nature of patriarchal control.

Through Mridula's experiences, Murthy underscores the limited roles women are often assigned within the family and society, where their worth is frequently measured by their ability to serve the needs of others—especially men. Yet, in the face of these oppressive norms, Mridula exemplifies resilience and strength, as she navigates her responsibilities while simultaneously seeking her own identity and voice. Her journey is one of both submission and resistance, where she balances the demands of family life and societal expectations with her efforts to maintain a sense of personal dignity and autonomy.

Despite the subtle nature of patriarchal oppression, Murthy's narrative reveals how deeply embedded these structures are in shaping relationships, power dynamics, and individual agency. The way Mridula is

sidelined in important decisions, the way her sacrifices are often taken for granted, and the hypocritical behavior of male characters all serve as critiques of a patriarchal system that continues to diminish women's voices and contributions.

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