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DEPICTION OF WOMEN'S INDIVIDUALITY AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND SUPPRESSION IN SUDHA MURTHY'S GENTLY FALLS THE BAKULA AND HOUSE OF CARDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores women's individuality against patriarchy and suppression in Sudha Murthy's novels *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008) and *House of Cards* (2013). Individuality is what distinguishes a person from others, yet in India a woman still has to struggle with society for the right to exist as an individual. The paper examines the roots of women's suppression and the related themes of family, marriage, money, and social norms, reading both novels through feminist theory and through Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy. The protagonists, Shrimati and Mridula, begin as dutiful, educated, middle-class wives, gradually recognize that their identities have been absorbed into those of their husbands, and finally move beyond tradition by leaving unfulfilling marriages to begin lives of their own. The paper argues that Murthy presents domestic oppression as a cumulative process, and that her heroines' departure is an affirmation of selfhood and not an act of revenge.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Individuality, New Woman, Suppression, Education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Indian English writing owes much of its range to women novelists who treat varied themes with care. The tradition has a long history, which M. K. Naik surveys from its nineteenth-century beginnings to the early 1980s. Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Meena Kandasamy, Manju Kapur, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Sudha Murthy are among its notable contemporary voices. India has had a patriarchal social order for centuries. Before independence, the Indian woman was treated as a symbol of burden and sacrifice, and her only aim in life was to fulfil the needs of her family. Through the feminist movement, Indian women fought for their rights and improved their condition. Indian feminism is not against men; it highlights the socio-cultural problems responsible for the pitiable condition of women in a male-dominated society.

Many Indian women writers have taken up pressing issues such as patriarchy, gender inequality, child marriage, family dynamics, and ethics. Their female characters are mostly married women who face discrimination under a patriarchal society, and three shades of such women can be distinguished. The first treat their husbands as *Pati-Parmeshwar*, or husband as God. The second fight for their individuality without crossing the boundaries of marriage. The third are ready to break social norms when they find it impossible to adjust to their husbands. Postcolonial Indian women writers

concentrate on realising women's individuality, breaking stereotypes, and redefining a woman's relation with society. They trace the transformation of an ideal woman into a self-confident one who quests for her true self. Among them, Sudha Murthy is a crucial figure writing for the empowerment of women.

This study examines patriarchy, male dominance, and women's individuality, together with the sub-themes of socio-cultural dynamics, family relationships, money, and marriage, in *Gently Falls the Bakula* and *House of Cards*. The protagonists are well-educated, married, middle-class women who are suppressed by male authority. For a long time each has one identity only: that of being someone's wife. Their husbands change as money and status grow, and through neglect and false appearances the marriages lose their way. The women then emerge as new women who go beyond tradition and discover identities of their own. The method of the paper is close reading supported by feminist theory. Because two works by the same author are cited, parenthetical references to the novels carry a shortened title.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PATRIARCHY AND THE MAKING OF THE WIFE

A discussion of individuality requires a working definition of the force that opposes it. Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family, extended to women in society at large (239). Kate Millett argued that the relation between the sexes is political, sustained through ideology, family, and education and not through force alone (23). Sylvia Walby separates patriarchy into six interlocking structures: paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state (20). Her model suits Murthy's fiction because both novels show oppression not as one dramatic cruelty but as an accumulation of unpaid household labor, emotional neglect, and cultural expectation.

Simone de Beauvoir's declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283) remains the most useful starting point for reading a character who is gradually made into a wife. Beauvoir also describes woman as the Other, defined in relation to man and not as an autonomous subject, and contrasts the immanence to which women are confined with the transcendence men seek through projects of their own (26).

In India patriarchy is also bound up with caste and religion. Uma Chakravarti uses the term Brahmanical patriarchy for a system in which control over women's sexuality and labor within marriage helps to maintain caste and class hierarchy (579). The ideal of the *pativrata*, the wife whose worth lies in devotion to her husband, expresses that system and survives in the popular expectation that a good wife will adjust, sacrifice, and keep silent. The essays collected by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid show that such domestic ideologies were reworked in the colonial and nationalist periods and were not simply inherited.

Elaine Showalter's three phases of women's writing, the feminine, the feminist, and the female, loosely parallel the three shades of married women described above (Showalter 13). Although she derived the scheme from British novelists, it serves here as a heuristic: Murthy's protagonists first accept the model of the dutiful wife, then protest inwardly, and finally turn toward self-discovery. Nivedita Menon, however, cautions that Indian feminism is plural and that individual choice must be read against the family, caste, and class structures within which it is made (175). That caution is kept in view below when the paper considers how far the heroines' freedom depends on education and income.

3 SUDHA MURTHY AND HER FICTION

Sudha Murthy, a computer engineer by training, is known as a teacher, social worker, and philanthropist. She was born in 1950 in Shiggaon, north Karnataka, and is married to Narayana Murthy, co-founder of Infosys. As chairwoman of the Infosys Foundation, she has supported libraries, orphanages, and rural schooling in Karnataka, and she has named J. R. D. Tata as the inspiration for her belief in giving back to society. She received the Best Teacher Award from the Bangalore Rotary Club in 1995, the Padma Shri and the R. K. Narayan Award for literature in 2006, and the Padma Bhushan in 2023.

Murthy writes in Kannada and English, and her many works include *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *House of Cards*, *Mahashweta*, *The Mother I Never Knew*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, *Wise and Otherwise*, and *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*. Her books have been translated into several Indian languages, and they often focus on human relationships, gender, Indian values, and patriarchy. Her women protagonists are educated yet trapped within male authority; after much suffering they recognize their inner strength and emerge as new women.

4 WOMAN'S INDIVIDUALITY IN *GENTLY FALLS THE BAKULA*

Gently Falls the Bakula, published in 2008, centres on a woman's pain, sacrifice, discrimination, and alienation under patriarchy, and on how she comes out of that condition to find her individuality. It is a simple yet realistic story about two people, Shrikant and Shrimati, who are neighbors and classmates in Hubli, Karnataka. At first they dislike each other

as rivals, but in college they fall in love and marry after graduation. Shrikant takes a job at an IT company and, with Shrimati's moral support, is promoted and climbs the ladder of success. Although she is very ambitious and passionate toward her career and doing Ph.D in History, she sacrifices her studies to care for her husband and his family. When he asks her why she would pay his loan, her answer shows her devotion towards her husband, "When you are mine, your loan is also mine. I cannot say I want only my husband. His joys and difficulties are also acceptable to me" (71). On the other hand, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law insult her constantly as Gangakka says, "The quality of the saree depends on its thread and the nature of a daughter depends on her mother's" (65). She taunts her for not bearing a child even after 5 years of their marriage, "Shrimati, wasn't Sharada your classmate? It seems she delivered her third child last week. I had gone to Vandana's son's birthday and she told me. Her son is very good-looking" (78). But whenever Shrimati asks Shrikant to have a child, he denies by saying, "I am hardly twenty-eight years old. Let us first settle down... Let's not be in a hurry to have a baby" (78). She says nothing, tries hard to keep Shrikant happy, and becomes his uncomplaining shadow.

As time passes Shrikant becomes absorbed in his materialistic life and forgets his wife. When he becomes managing director, he proudly tells Shrimati that she is now the managing director's wife, yet he never asks why she has given up her studies, though she is ambitious and keenly interested in history and literature. She remains silent and celebrates every moment of his success. Gradually things change. In a conversation with Professor Collins, she realises that her life would be different if she had continued her studies. She is offered a scholarship for a doctorate in the United States, but whenever she tries to discuss it with Shrikant he says they will talk later, without listening. Realising this, she decides to go. She closes her eyes and, using all her willpower, tells him, "Shri, I am leaving, and I don't have any plans to return" (160). She continues, "When I was thinking about my life so far, what my goal has been, I have realized what I want" (161). Shrikant thinks that no one in a male-dominated society will appreciate her step. She does not divorce him; instead, she kisses his forehead, hugs him warmly, and leaves. What people will think no longer bothers her, and she acts on what she feels is right.

Murthy's choice of name is itself a comment on the theme. Shrimati is the customary honorific for a married woman, comparable to *Mrs.*, so the protagonist is identified by her marital status and not by anything she has done. When Shrikant announces that she is now the managing director's wife, he repeats in speech what her name already says: her standing is derived from his. This is the process Beauvoir describes when she shows woman being defined in relation to man. The wife's identity is given to Shrimati by the household, and the novel's movement is a movement toward taking her own identity back.

Silence is the novel's most telling device. Shrimati does not protest her in-laws' insults, does not demand time from her husband, and does not speak of her own ambitions while she celebrates his. Beauvoir's contrast between immanence and transcendence illuminates the arrangement: Shrikant pursues a career and moves outward into the world, while Shrimati is confined to the home, the emotional support of her husband, and the care of his family (68). Shrikant's habit of promising to talk later shows how this confinement is sustained in ordinary speech. No one forbids Shrimati to speak; she is simply postponed until the conversation becomes unnecessary. In Walby's terms, the household is the site where patriarchal relations quietly organize one person's labour for another's benefit (Walby 20).

The novel also complicates any simple opposition between men and women. The taunts about childlessness come from the mother-in-law and sister-in-law and not from Shrikant, which suggests that patriarchal norms are enforced partly by women who have been shaped by them. Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy suggests why: where a woman's value is tied to her reproductive role within marriage, other women in the household become everyday guardians of that expectation. Shrimati's oppression is therefore located not in one villain but in the structure of the family itself.

Education is the force that breaks the pattern. Professor Collins does not rescue Shrimati; he makes her see that the life she has is one of several she might have had. The scholarship then supplies what Virginia Woolf treated as the material basis of intellectual freedom, the means and the space to work independently (4). Woolf's argument that a woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction was made for a different purpose, but it applies here, since Shrimati's ambitions were set aside for her husband's career. Her departure is announced and not negotiated, and her refusal to divorce Shrikant, together with the kiss and embrace with which she parts, shows that leaving is not revenge. Murthy presents autonomy as a calm act of self-definition.

5 WOMAN'S INDIVIDUALITY IN *HOUSE OF CARDS*

House of Cards, published in 2013, unlocks the issues of patriarchy and gender inequality that create barriers in a woman's quest for individuality. It explores suppression under male authority, marriage, family dynamics, ethics, money, and power. The novel tells the story of Mridula, a village girl from a wealthy family. The family environment highlights the importance of individual choice through her father, Bheemanna's belief that "Education and marriage

should be according to our children's wishes because these are forever" (13). She has her own identity as a teacher when she falls in love with and marries Sanjay, a doctor from a poor background whose family consists of his mother, Ratnamma, and his sister, Lakshmi. Sanjay is a good-hearted man who helps people without greed. Mridula teaches in a government school and takes care of his family, and the couple settle in Bangalore with their son, Sishir.

As time passes Sanjay is attracted to the materialistic life of the city and indulges in corrupt practices to earn more money and power. He says nothing to Mridula because she is indifferent to money and perceives her career in teaching with ethical values. Her assertion, "I enjoy and respect my work. I'll never leave it. It is oxygen to me and not just a source of income" (141), reveals her refusal to surrender toward money because employment is not just a source of earning money but as something necessary for her existence and identity. Her intellectual purpose challenges the patriarchal assumption that a successful husband can make a woman's professional identity unnecessary. She has blind faith in him and performs her duties as wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and mother with devotion, never raising her voice against her husband. Sanjay, however, begins to ignore and cheat her. His increasing preoccupation with money makes him distant from her. He becomes stubborn to produce more wealthy and luxurious life. She sacrifices her whole life for him, but he never spends time with her or cares about her feelings. She suffers in the name of norms and culture, becomes depressed, and visits the doctor thrice a week. She receives neither emotional companionship nor recognition in return. The turning point occurs when she realises that luxury and status cannot compensate for the loss of dignity and freedom, "Every woman values her freedom to choose- much more than her husband's money or position" (212). Her recognition of emptiness of materialistic life proves her individuality is more significant than the material facilities marriage provides her. The suppression of her emotions clearly visible when Sanjay and his friend, Alex, discuss business ideas and regard her ethical values as an obstacle where Sanjay complains, "She doesn't cooperate with us. In fact, she'll create problems because she's an idealist" (215). It also reveals that her moral integrity has become a problem in his way of corruption. Finally, she fights her fears. On their marriage anniversary her confidence shows when she appears in a white cotton saree with a glow of peace. She tells him, "I was packing my things, I've been transferred" (218). Sanjay is surprised and asks when she will be back; she answers that it will probably be never, and he assumes she is going to her father's house. Without anger or disappointment in her voice she says, "No, I've spent twenty-five of my most important years with you, and yet, I never felt like I belonged to you or your family. I'm still an outsider. My father's house now belongs to Vatsala, and I don't want to burden my brother and her" (218). In Indian society a separated woman is often mistreated, but Mridula rejects socio-cultural norms that tolerate men who cheat on their wives, and she makes a firm decision to separate from Sanjay.

Mridula's announcement borrows its vocabulary from her working life. A government school teacher is posted and transferred by an authority, and by describing her departure in these terms Mridula suggests that she has been moved between positions of service all her life, first as daughter and then as wife, and that she now issues the order herself. The flat tone also deflates the drama a departure might be expected to carry. Sanjay's assumption that she will go to her father's house shows that he cannot imagine her in any place not defined by a male relative.

Her second speech identifies the material core of her predicament. Although born into a wealthy family, she finds that her father's house now belongs to Vatsala, and she will not burden her brother and his wife. A daughter has no secure claim on the natal home, while marriage, even after twenty-five years, leaves her an outsider in her husband's. This double exclusion is closely related to the patrilocal and patrilineal arrangements that analyses of Brahmanical patriarchy emphasize (579). It also confirms Beauvoir's point that woman is made the Other, never fully at home in the world that defines her (26).

Two other details deserve notice. The white cotton saree is, in many Hindu communities, associated with widowhood, so the image may carry an ironic charge: Mridula appears to mourn a marriage that has died while her husband is alive. The same image suggests simplicity and detachment from the display of wealth that has absorbed Sanjay. Her depression and regular medical visits, meanwhile, register in the body what she has been unable to say aloud. Like Shrimati's silence, her illness is a suppression that has not yet found language.

Mridula's capacity to leave is also bound to her employment. Her salary gives her a footing outside the household, and Menon's caution applies: her choice is not purely a triumph of will, because it is made possible by education, work, and a middle-class setting in which a woman can leave without losing every means of support (175). The novel does not claim that every woman can do the same, but it invites the reader to withhold the condemnation that society directs at separated women.

6 TWO JOURNEYS, ONE PATTERN

Read together, the novels follow a similar arc. In each, a love marriage begins in companionship; the husband's success transforms his attitude and replaces partnership with neglect; and the wife's devotion is taken for granted while her suffering is expressed in silence or in the body. Shrikant changes through legitimate success and the pride that

accompanies it, Sanjay through corruption and betrayal. The comparison shows that a wife's neglect does not depend on the husband's moral character but on a structure that lets him treat her time and feelings as free resources. Walby's insight that oppression is cumulative across several structures is thus borne out twice (Walby 20).

Money is the third term in both marriages. Shrikant's promotion and Sanjay's illicit earnings alter the household's hierarchy of value: income becomes the measure of worth, and the wife's unpaid care disappears from that accounting. Shrikant assumes that Shrimati is content because she has money and status, as though comfort were the same as fulfilment, and Sanjay keeps his corruption from Mridula because she has never cared for wealth. In both cases the wife is offered material security in exchange for the surrender of her own aims. Murthy's heroines refuse that bargain, and in doing so they challenge the widespread belief that a woman who is provided for has no further claim to selfhood.

The two exits differ instructively. Shrimati leaves toward something, a doctorate that restores the education she gave up, while Mridula leaves from something, a marriage in which she never belonged, and no destination is named in her speech. In Showalter's terms both pass from imitation through inward protest to self-discovery (13), but Shrimati's journey is the more intellectual and Mridula's the more social. Neither woman leaves in the manner of melodrama: Shrimati kisses her husband's forehead and Mridula speaks without anger. Murthy thus separates self-assertion from hostility, keeping her heroines within the moral vocabulary of Indian family life while moving them beyond its constraints. A reading that celebrates these exits should also note their limits. Both heroines are educated and middle-class, with resources that many women lack, and the resolutions are individual and not collective. They leave largely untouched the institutions, such as the joint family and customs of property and inheritance, that produced the suppression. This does not diminish Murthy's achievement, since her aim is to dramatise the awakening of self-respect, but it shows why her fiction is best read alongside structural analyses of patriarchy.

7 CONCLUSION

The study shows that Murthy creates strong female characters who reject patriarchy and the social norms that suppress them. Her novels explore domestic oppression, gender inequity, husband-wife relationships, family dynamics, and materialism, and they show how suppression operates in every sphere of a woman's life. Read through Beauvoir, Lerner, Walby, and Chakravarti, Shrimati and Mridula emerge as women who are made into wives by their households and who then unmake that identity through education, self-recognition, and a calm refusal to remain invisible. Their willpower encourages readers to go beyond tradition, follow their passions, and question social norms. Murthy highlights *Naari Shakti*, or women's empowerment, without reducing it to hostility toward men, and the enduring relevance of her novels lies in that balance. Shrimati and Mridula stand as symbols of strength and determination, encouraging readers to raise their voices against suppression and to find their individuality against patriarchy.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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