
Marriage and Materialism Engendering Gendered Marginalization in Sudha Murty's *House of Cards*

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Abstract:

Sudha Murty's *House of Cards* offers a sharp critique on materialism and its inexorable impact on marital relationship. This novel portrays middle-class Indian families, exploring in depth their temperament, needs and priorities placing it in contemporary Indian society. Though the novel has a patriarchal undercurrent in its portrayal of Mridhula and Sanjay, the mentioned factors become even more gendered as the novel progresses.

The institution of marriage places certain expectations on Mridhula and Sanjay to lead a successful life in contemporary Indian society. The female protagonist Mridhula complies to the gendered expectations carrying all her roles in the right proportion. As a modern Indian woman, she has an economic independence, working as a teacher. In the institution of marriage, she is portrayed as a loving and dutiful wife. But, the conditions are not in the same ratio for Sanjay. He faces continuous injustices and identifies the necessity to involve him into the competitive society to take care of his family and to earn wealth and the status to survive in a community with varieties of expectations.

The only solution he finds to be successful in this modern Indian society is to become materialistic. He sets up a private nursing home despite working in a government hospital and becomes popular. The taste of materialism slowly occupies a space in his mind breeding evil thoughts indulging him in corrupt practices. He starts concealing his acts from his wife who is devoted to him. He repositions his priorities in his marital life. Love and affection were replaced by materialism. Mridhula, the victim of Sanjay's evil acts, on knowing the truth, decides to leave him. Through this, Murty critiques how the societal pressures of materialism on men, combined with patriarchal marital expectations on women, push women into subservient roles. The author also reveals how a woman's decision to stand for herself has the ability to turn the tables.

This paper explores the intersection of marriage and materialism. The ultimate responsibility of Sanjay, being the head of the family, positions him to do anything to earn respect and build a status. Because of this, the emotional labour of Mridhula becomes unnoticed. It also investigates how materialism as an external factor creates imbalance within the marital relationship because of the gendered patriarchal dubiousness created by present-day requirements in India on both the genders.

This study will examine how *House of Cards* highlights the interplay between marriage, materialism and gendered marginalisation, critiquing contemporary societal norms and their impact on gender and identity.

Keywords: Materialism, Marriage and Patriarchy, Gendered Marginalisation, Contemporary Indian Society, Identity and Relationships

India's attainment of freedom from colonization led to an immediate change of situation where it was compelled to care and develop its nation to compete with other countries in the world. Sudha Murty's *House of Cards* presents two major factors in which India has compromised its morality in the path of sculpting its nation into a superpower. These factors include Gender and Economy.

The possession of freedom made India aim to regain its lost economy to level up the possibilities of shaping its country into a well developed nation. This attitude gave rise to industrial development which paved the way for the influence of the corporate world into India. Thus, the social life of the Indians was highly focused on wealth and materialism.

In terms of gender, post-independent India gave rise to gender colonization within the country. A study conducted by Jonathan Evans discusses how a large segment of the Indian population accept women as political leaders yet prefer traditional gender roles in family life, in his article titled "How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Societies". Indian families view men as the breadwinners. Men were educated and permitted to earn money with the expectation that they feed their family and serve the society. Whereas, women were not only expected to play a subservient role within families, but were also allowed to suffer from dowry, child marriage, widowhood, denial of the right to vote and to own property.

With globalisation, the needs of both the factors get altered. On account to Chaudhuri's view that, "Attaining India's freedom from colonialism was seen as a necessary prelude to the freedom of women" (Chaudhuri, 1995), certain needs forced women to fight for their freedom to break the walls of familial imprisonment. The successful growth of women in family and society created new issues which are yet to be thoroughly addressed in this globalised world.

The possible issues and changes in contemporary India are addressed by Sudha Murty in her work *House of Cards*. Being an Indian woman, she is aware of the significant phases in Indian families which include life events like obtaining a job, getting married, giving birth to a child and bringing up the child as a well-mannered individual who is aware of the Indian values and tradition. She takes up plain Indian characters hailing from a middle-class family with their own typical expectations and urge to achieve a settled life filled with love. She places them in the contemporary Indian society which creates new expectations and possibilities that tune their lives.

Marriage is considered as a sacrosanct union in Indian society. In India, marriages take place between two families, rather than two individuals. There is a saying that Education and Marriage are two things which should be decided by an individual. But, parents play an essential part in their child's marriage and this has its own impact on the marital life of the couple, as family plays an indisputable role in Indian culture.

Sudha Murty discusses various kinds of problems a woman and a man encounters in modern Indian society after marriage. Her female protagonists are submissive in nature, but always possess self-respect which ultimately forces them to become rebellious and go in search of their freedom. Whereas, male characters are forced to sacrifice their values as a result of the societal pressure and the expectations put up on them by their family members. But, Murty's novel ends up saving humanitarian values by creating a compelling situation in women's life. This kind of ending also reassures the fact that women hold the power to destroy corrupt attitudes and values and set right situations in contemporary Indian families.

The institution of marriage in contemporary Indian society is seen as a factor which disturbs and destabilizes the psychological and the emotional state of women. In the novel *House of Cards*, Mridhula is portrayed as a girl who has enormous enthusiasm and energy for life. She is given freedom unlike other girls to choose her education and marriage. She marries Sanjay who has similar expectations towards

life. Even though Sanjay hails from a poor family, he is neither rapacious nor materialistic. He loves Mridhula and feels comfortable with her.

Mridhula too loves him despite Sanjay's short arm and poor background. She prioritizes love and affection more than anything else. She supports Sanjay in all aspects of his life. She mortgages her jewels to financially support him to begin a nursing home. Care and sympathy unite and drive them into a conjugal relationship. But, their family life shatters when Sanjay spends all his time and energy on establishing and extending his nursing home, pushing away his responsibility as a husband. He becomes materialistic in his outlook on life. He fails to see Mridhula behind his success. He wants Mridhula to be proud of her skilled and dedicated husband.

On one hand Mridhula desired Sanjay's time with her and on the other, Sanjay considered it worthless, spending time with his wife. He provides his time based on priorities. And those priorities are equated with profitability. Their ideas and temperaments begin to contradict and take different routes. Mridhula ends up with depression and consults a psychiatrist Dr. Rao. It is through his counsel that Mridhula overcomes her illness and views people and the world from a different perspective. She decides to seek a happy life and leaves Sanjay.

Many critics and researchers inquire and criticise the domination of male characters and the passiveness of females in a familial setup. But, the entire structure of marriage is also seen as a politics in *House of Cards*. It is considered a 'politics' because emotions are materialised and the intrinsic abstracts of conjugal life are annihilated by dynamic events. In the beginning, Sanjay, the protagonist, progresses in his life with the support of Mridhula. She occupies the central position in the novel being cooperative to her husband's needs and career. So love, affection and care, nurture and shape the life of Sanjay. She stands as a ladder for her man to attain success.

Gradually Sanjay and his friend Alex move to the centre as the novel advances and materialism gains prime importance. The strategies of the male protagonists - Sanjay and Alex alter with time. This resembles a similar act in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, where the seven commandments are abridged into a single phrase as "All animals are equal; but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 68).

But Anita, wife of Alex and Mridhula remain unaffected by materialistic surroundings, because of which they regress from the axial point of the novel. Being

unable to bear such changes, they are instituted to consciously avoid expecting genuine affection from their partners in order to find peace and happiness.

External factors influence the male characters which in turn traumatizes the foundation of marriage. Mridhula and Anita remain prisoners of outdated perceptions and expectations which stand irrelevant to the materialistic worlds of their husbands. Sanjay and Alex become dictators of their family. Sanjay being an introvert by nature, avoids sharing his experiences with anyone. He even looks down upon Mridhula when she comes forward to share her personal problems. He never shares anything about his work with her, as power and money gave him a new confidence to dominate Mridhula. He plays an authoritative role, concealing his activities and plans from his wife. He makes unilateral decisions and persuades her until she accepts his opinions. Mridhula was averted even from cognitive liberty. He takes advantage of Mridhula's support for him.

He later conceals his act of managing a joint account with his sister Lakshmi, spending money on her family and sending money to his mother. He even indulges in corrupt practices possessing black money without the knowledge of Mridhula. She is not given any significant role in Sanjay's life. Trust shatters, because of which their conjugal life gradually disrupts. A distance grows between them. The more he distances himself from Mridhula, the more he excels in his own business world, but fails in his marriage as a husband.

Sanjay grows more arrogant and prideful. He begins to depart from Mridhula emotionally, once he decides to begin a private nursing home with Alex, resigning his government job. Mridhula supports her husband economically and psychologically with his decisions. But, continuous success prevents him from realizing Mridhula's contributions in it. The only thing which Mridhula expects from her husband is to earn legally and ethically. But Sanjay fails to follow even that. Lakshmi and Rukumma being the sister and mother of the deceiver, take sides with Sanjay and conceal their transaction with him from Mridhula. She breaks down emotionally. Though Sanjay became concerned, he was not too worried about her state. He justifies himself. As a person who is skilled in the politics of handling people, this does not seem a big deal for him. Later the circumstances force Mridhula to realize all the politics involved in her marital life and Sanjay's transformed attitude.

Home becomes the only place which remains unaffected by his politics, and peace prevails as Mridhula manages. But later, the peace at home too gets disturbed through Sanjay influencing his son, Sishir. Sishir views his dad as a hero and looks

down upon Mridhula. Sanjay teaches his re-framed strategies of leading a successful life to survive in the contemporary Indian society to his son, because of which Sishir grows dominant and prideful. Sanjay is no more a son or a student who follows what his father and professor taught him. He finds their ideas irrelevant to the prevailing society. Consequent to such altered values, Mridhula loses her respect as a mother and a wife.

These circumstances kindle her self-respect which enables Mridhula to step out of her familial roles to find her own happiness. Alex, the friend of Sanjay, also cheats his wife Anita, maintaining an illegal relationship. Thus, all the factors like love, trust and respect which stood as a foundation for marriage were kept at stake by Sanjay and Alex. Mridhula and Anita, being innocent, valuing love and affection more than money, become the victims.

As an outcome of the patriarchal and societal structures, Sanjay and Alex enjoy privileges as men, but these same factors tie them to societal expectations that alienate them from their own ethical and emotional fulfilment. They stand as victims of the society because their decision to impose ethical and emotional marginalisation in their lives stand as a result of the society's expectations towards them. Society expects men to conform to a materialistic and career focussed life. The emotional needs of men are marginalised by society. So, here men fight and work hard on themselves to comply with societal views towards masculinity.

Being an individual hailing from a poor background, Sanjay rises as an innocent and hardworking individual. His shift in the environment from Hubli to Bombay prepares him to chase worldly pleasures. More the change in the surroundings, the more he experiences and becomes rational in his attitude. Though he holds on to his principles, continuous exposure facilitates him to explore the politics behind work, which makes him step out of the crowd in search of his individuality, money and power in order to survive in such a materialistic surrounding. So he reframes his strategies.

Economic insufficiency and lack of connections stand as a primary cause of marginalisation in all of his experiences. Sanjay was denied the opportunity to attend a three week AIDS training programme because of his inability to get a sponsorship from a private institution. Only people from wealthy backgrounds were provided sponsorship in the private sector. Justice is unseen even in government hospitals and they provide space for privatization. Dr. Lata used to often express her connections at her work place because of which people were scared to approach and blame her.

But, a poor person like Sanjay falls prey to such people. He was utilized by the authorities making him work for long hours, cancelling the working hours for people from influential backgrounds. Sanjay was blamed by the Head of the Department Dr. Saroja unnecessarily in order to save Dr. Lata from a VIP case, as she was from a well-to-do family. He is transferred to Bellary to prevent Sanjay from letting out this incident. Though he makes an attempt to get his transfer cancelled through the recommendation from the Health minister, it turns out to be a failure. Even the minister's Personal Assistant treats Sanjay in a rude manner as he is a commoner. Through all these continuous injustices, he identifies the necessity to learn the strategies to survive in a society adopting smart ways to build a successful life.

Combined with these experiences, he learns from his friend Alex the ways of living in modern India. Being a victim of corruption and biased treatment in Government Hospital, he is convinced that the only way to earn wealth and respect is by setting up a private nursing home. He begins a private nursing home named Sushruta with Alex to indulge himself into a capitalistic society. Alex is a person who possesses a strong sense of practicality because of his continuous exposure to the Middle East and other foreign countries. He teaches Sanjay certain essential moves that are to be made before establishing a nursing home. He urges Sanjay to go to England to learn for at least six months and another six months to work in the Middle East, as he considers exposure and experience as necessary tools to attract people and to gain respect in a short span of time. He also suggests that he buy a car to show off and to conceal his poverty.

Within a few years, Sanjay learns these tricks himself. Readers can witness the psychological impact of money on Sanjay as he begins a nursing home. He identifies that patients approach clinics with high consultation fees as they equate the amount to the popularity and experience of the doctor. This tells the materialistic view of people. They don't take treatment and cure as yardsticks to measure the skill of the doctor, rather the fees. So he sets a high fee. As VIPs demanded C-sections for delivery, he opted for C-section despite the huge possibility for normal delivery. He utilizes the weakness of his patients. He appoints experienced doctors under him because of which his treatment turns out to be a business rather than a service. Gradually, he finds it unnecessary to show all his accounts for income tax and maintains black money. Thus, he learns the emotional, psychological and rational ways of earning wealth.

Though all these practices bring him wealth, respect, status and fame, it destroys the fundamentals of his life. It brings dramatic changes within family life. It brings an end to his conjugal relationship. He suppresses Mridhula emotionally and mentally. Money provides him the confidence and audacity to make fun of Mridhula's job forgetting the fact that it was her salary which helped them at their difficult times. He expects her to compromise her opinions. Even Alex cheats Anita, maintaining an illegal relationship but fails to admit it. Sanjay and Alex set bad examples as fathers to their children, as a result of which their children end up growing arrogant and headstrong.

The conversation between Anita and Mridhula reveals the concept of privatisation. Being the victims of materialistic society and as individuals who prioritise emotions over money, they reveal the impact created by the acquisition of wealth within their families. They feel that if it were a government job, then there would be a stable income and they would be aware of the expenditures. But, that is not the case with a private practice. They are unable to keep a check on the source of income as well as the expenditure. They discuss how the time spent together as a family was reduced; and that everyone has separate televisions, computers, and friends. This symbolizes the emotional and mental isolation of the family members. The materialistic changes happening in the inner selves of the male protagonists is revealed by Anita when she says "infidelity, deceit and lies are like close knit brothers. All liars don't deceive. But all deceivers are liars. All deceivers are not cheaters. But all cheaters are deceivers" (*House of Cards*, 147)

Sudha Murty through the above portrayal criticises how the contemporary Indian system facilitates an effortless path for influential people. She also lets the readers know that the situation remains the same even in government institutions. She presents how such a biased society forces people to prefer private jobs to gain wealth, respect and fame. She portrays the fact how Indians prefer to move to foreign countries to create a better life in India. The novel also clearly features the impact of money on the personal lives of individuals, irrespective of gender.

Thus, marriage and materialism engenders gender discrimination for both the genders. Women being emotional seekers, suffer from absence of time and love from their husbands, despite the constant support and sacrifice. On the other hand, being a victim of the system that demands relentless material success, Sanjay and Alex work on themselves to learn the smart ways to bring up their family to achieve a certain status. Their choices and actions serve as a mirror to societal flaws. Society ties their

identity to their professional achievement providing little time for self-reflection and emotional growth. This societal flaw disturbs the emotional need within the familial setup pushing women to break their marital relationship to find their own space. Thus, both the genders face their own discriminations as they stand as victims in a society caught in a tug-of-war between patriarchy and modernity.

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