



Reclaiming the self: Women's Identity and Empowerment in 'House of Cards' by Sudha Murthy

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Abstract

Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards* presents a compelling portrayal of a woman's journey toward self-identity and empowerment within the confines of a patriarchal society. The novel traces the life of Mridula, an educated and ambitious woman who sacrifices her personal aspirations to support her husband's professional success. As her husband's career flourishes, Mridula gradually becomes marginalized, revealing the fragile foundation of marital relationships built on ego, material success, and gender inequality. Through Mridula's experiences, Murthy highlights the emotional struggles, silent endurance, and inner conflicts faced by women who are expected to subordinate their identities for familial stability. Ultimately, the novel underscores the importance of self-respect, independence, and inner strength as essential components of empowerment. Mridula's transformation from a self-sacrificing wife to a self-aware individual symbolizes a woman's quest for identity and dignity. *House of Cards* thus serves as a powerful commentary on women's empowerment and the need for equitable relationships in modern society.

Key Words: Emotional Autonomy, Emancipation, Inner resilience etc

Introduction

Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards* (2013) is a novel that highlights everyday realities of contemporary middle-class Indian life which shows the deeper social issues that shape individual destinies. At its heart, it is the story of Mridula, a young woman from a Karnataka village whose journey through marriage, ambition, betrayal, and self-discovery offers a compelling lens into women's quest for identity and empowerment in a patriarchal society. Set against the backdrop of urban aspirations and shifting moral values, the novel traces Mridula's evolution from a devoted, traditional wife into a woman who reclaims her self-worth and autonomy. Through plot, characterization, and symbolism, Murthy explores how women negotiate personal agency within deeply embedded social norms.

This paper analyzes *House of Cards* as a narrative of female struggle and transformation, situating the protagonist's journey within broader themes of gender roles, patriarchal expectations, and empowerment.

Drawing on literary criticism and feminist perspectives, this paper demonstrates that Mridula's emancipation represents a nuanced but powerful critique of gender inequality in contemporary Indian society.

Contextual Background

Sudha Murthy is a celebrated Indian author whose writings often portray ordinary lives to illuminate universal human experiences. Known for her simple yet impactful storytelling, she frequently explores human relationships, morality, and social change from empathetic perspectives. *House of Cards* fits this mould, offering a vivid account of family life, ambition, and moral compromise, but it also foregrounds deeper issues related to gender identity and women's empowerment.

Plot Overview and Feminist Themes

House of Cards centers on Mridula, a bright, enthusiastic woman from a rural background who marries Sanjay, a talented but initially poor doctor. They relocate to Bangalore, where economic success and material aspirations increasingly dominate Sanjay's life. Over time, he transitions from a compassionate physician to a status-driven professional willing to engage in unethical practices. Mridula, whose cheerful optimism is tested by her husband's transformation, eventually discovers that the person she married has abandoned the values and integrity she cherished. She was taken aback when she heard Sanjay's philosophy; He said, "Nothing is black or white in this world. The cow gives milk for its calf. But we drink that same milk. isn't that wrong? Trees have life but we cut them down and use their wood. isn't that wrong too? Mosquitos and bugs are also living creatures. Don't we kill them because they trouble us? A big fish always eat the small fish. Is that Right?" (Murthy 176). Mridula was flabbergasted by Sanjay's hierarchy of verbal conflict and was compelled to reevaluate her feelings for him. Mridula felt cheated and manipulated. "At that moment, something inside her shattered into pieces. When the foundation of trust cracked, how can a marriage remain the same? Mridula felt like she was drowning. Her thoughts haunted her" (Murthy 183). This revelation triggers a profound internal transformation, culminating in her decision to leave the marriage and seek a life of her own.

This journey embodies several feminist themes:

1. Identity Formation in Patriarchal Contexts

From the outset, Mridula's identity is shaped by the social roles prescribed to her: dutiful daughter, affectionate wife, and supportive partner. Murthy contrasts Mridula's traditional worldview with the fast-paced urban ethos that prioritizes wealth and status—values that eventually reshape Sanjay's character but leave Mridula's core intact. The narrative exposes how patriarchal prescriptive roles can erode self-identity when women are expected to remain silent and self-sacrificing in the face of neglect and moral compromise.

2. Personal Choice as a Site of Empowerment

Rather than depicting empowerment solely as radical rebellion, Murthy's narrative emphasizes empowerment through choice and dignity. Mridula's initial response to her husband's moral decline is loyalty, reflecting societal expectations that women endure hardship for familial stability. However, when Sanjay's values contradict her own, she exercises agency by choosing to step away—an act that symbolizes both liberation and personal integrity. This choice, rooted in self-respect rather than revenge or dramatic confrontation, reveals Murthy's subtle feminist framework.

3. Economic and Emotional Autonomy

While *House of Cards* does not frame Mridula's empowerment in dramatic career achievements, her emotional journey reflects a shift toward self-reliance and autonomy. Scholars argue that Murthy's female protagonists often gain empowerment through inner strength, resilience, and moral clarity, challenging the notion that economic independence alone defines empowerment. In Mridula's case, her decision to redefine her life and reevaluate relationships underscores the importance of emotional self-worth in the pursuit of identity.

Characterization as a Vehicle for Empowerment

An important element of Murthy's narrative is her multi-dimensional characterization—especially of Mridula:

Mridula: The Embodied Quest for Empowerment

Initially presented as warm, optimistic, and culturally rooted, Mridula embodies the virtues associated with traditional Indian womanhood. However, as the narrative progresses, she confronts the harsh reality that unconditional loyalty and patience cannot sustain a marriage shaped by ambition and moral compromise. Mridula begins to question the legitimacy of a life built on neglect and ethical erosion. Gradually she has awareness of self worth. Mridula thought, "How did I live with Sanjay for such a long time? Today, he's given me money and position in society, but he does not share my sorrows. I've held his hand and walked next to him on the thorny path to success. When a girl gets married, the extent of her happiness depends upon the husband's commitment and communication with her. A few kind words, a little appreciation, and small gifts like flowers can make a girl feel special. But Sanjay just wanted to show that he was the boss." (Murthy 214). Eventually, Mridula, who was suffering silently in that suffocating environment, decided to free herself from the fragile threads of those relations that were stifling her. Sanjay would become such selfish and disloyal man. . "Mridula felt that there was an intense vacuum in her life. The huge nursing home, this big house and its servants were of no consequence to her. Money had taken away her happiness. She could not even raise her son the way she wanted to. Her husband did not understand her. What was the use of life? (170)". Her choice to leave the marriage—despite cultural stigmas attached to separation—signals defiance against norms that prioritize spousal duty over personal dignity. She didn't divorce her husband; she divorced the painful feeling he gave her. "Mridula came out in a white cotton saree with a glow of peace on her face. She said, no, I've spent twenty-five of my most important years with you and yet I never felt like I belonged to you and your family. I'm still outsider. My father's House now belongs to Vatsala and I don't want to be a burden on my brother and her. Sishir is independent and you can take care of him better than I can. My duty towards both of you is over. I've fulfilled all my duties as a wife, mother, and daughter in law. Now, I want to live for myself. I have my job, my school, and my village. You don't have to worry about me any longer. You and Sishir can visit me whenever you want." (Murthy 218). This way, Mridula moves from silent suffering to emancipation.

Sanjay: A Contrast and Catalyst

Sanjay's ascent into material success and moral ambiguity serves as a counterpoint to Mridula's journey. His character highlights how ambition, unchecked by ethical grounding, can erode relationships and personal integrity. Sanjay seems to have been influenced by the patriarchal hegemony which let him dominate his educated wife. His transformation indirectly propels Mridula toward self-reflection and empowerment, underscoring the novel's critique of patriarchal systems that equate male success with financial achievement at the cost of human values. The pursuit of wealth and material possessions can overshadow the importance of emotional connections within families. Once his friend Alex says to 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" (109).

While it has the potential to bring comfort and security, it can also wreak havoc on the delicate fabric of family relationships.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

Murthy's portrayal of Mridula's quest for identity must also be understood within larger social and cultural frameworks:

Patriarchy and Gender Norms:

Through Mridula's experiences, *House of Cards* critiques the subtle yet pervasive influence of patriarchy on individual lives. The narrative illustrates how cultural expectations—particularly around marriage and gender roles—shape women's identities and choices. Male authority, societal judgment, and emotional labor disproportionately fall on women, whose empowerment is often constrained by entrenched norms.

Respectable Femininity and Moral Strength:

Framed within Indian cultural values, Murthy's depiction of empowerment does not reject traditional spaces such as marriage or family. Instead, the narrative redefines them as arenas where women can assert agency and moral strength. Scholars note that this empathetic form of feminism does not alienate tradition but reimagines agency within cultural contexts, making it more relatable to Indian readers.

Comparative Insights: Murthy's Feminist Approach

Comparatively, Murthy's subtle feminist themes differ from Western feminist literature that often foregrounds radical socio-political rebellion. In *House of Cards*, empowerment arises from personal integrity, inner resilience, and ethical clarity rather than overt confrontation with patriarchal institutions. This approach aligns with scholarly analyses that describe her feminist narrative as grounded in real lives and cultural realities rather than abstract ideology.

This positions the novel alongside other Indian literary works where female protagonists seek equilibrium between individual aspirations and societal expectations—an interplay that both tests and reinforces their agency.

Conclusion

House of Cards by Sudha Murthy offers a richly textured narrative that explores the quest for identity and empowerment through the lived experiences of its female protagonist, Mridula. Rather than depicting empowerment through overt defiance or radical rebellion, Murthy presents a subtle, culturally grounded journey in which personal choices, ethical consistency, and emotional resilience become the instruments of a woman's emancipation.

Mridula's evolution—from a dutiful wife shaped by tradition to an autonomous individual reclaiming her identity—is both inspirational and instructive. It reveals how empowerment can emerge from within, through quiet resistance and the courage to redefine one's life on personal terms. Through this narrative, Murthy contributes to the larger discourse on gender roles in Indian society, offering a lens that is compassionate yet critical, culturally rooted yet forward-looking.

In essence, the novel underscores that the quest for identity and empowerment is not merely about breaking free from tradition but about asserting one's values, dignity, and voice in a world that often seeks to silence them.

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