



THE SOCIAL AND ETHICAL VALUES IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SUDHA MURTHY

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Abstract

Purpose/Objective of the Study: Sudha Murthy through her novels empowers women and motivates them to be courageous in adverse situations. The main purpose of this piece of research is to study the struggle faced by the women protagonists in the Select novels of Sudha Murthy titled ‘Gently Falls the Bakula’ ‘House of Cards’ and ‘Mahaswetha’ and how they rise above their mundane existence in search of a meaningful life and start a new life to fulfill their aspirations.

Methodology: To achieve the purpose of the study, a systematic review of research literature was undertaken. Three novels namely ‘Gently Falls the Bakula’ ‘House Of Cards and ‘Mahaswetha’ have been critically analyzed. In addition to this, the research articles published in the Peer-Reviewed Journals were also examined. With the help of the literature, we were able to study the struggle of women and how they overcome the barriers by finding a solution to lead a meaningful life.

Main Findings: The findings that emerged from the Study reveal the violence, denigration, and exploitation faced by the female characters of the novels such as Anupama, Mridula and Shrimati. It is also found that Man-Woman relationship, social acceptance, and estrangement in modern life, forms the core in all the novels namely ‘Gently Falls the Bakula’ ‘House of Cards’ and ‘Mahaswetha’. It is inferred that the women in the novels such as Mridula, Srimati and Anupama are simple, hardworking and innocent throughout, whereas the males - Sanjay, Srikant, and Anand are strongly influenced by the power of luxury, comfort, and materialism, steadily climbing up the corporate ladder without realizing the value of family life. The man’s greed for power, luxury, and social status has proved to be very expensive to the female characters. The female protagonists realize the fact that artificial values and material success cannot make a person successful. They also work tirelessly to overcome the barriers drawn by male-dominated society to lead a purposeful life.

Implications: Social and Ethical values are delineated in the novels taken for study. Life is depicted as a journey with learning and unlearning experiences meeting with innumerable obstacles and barriers to testing the grit and willpower. These obstacles help us to make a decision as seen in the protagonists depicted by Sudha Murthy. Their choices were hard yet, they gathered courage, purpose, and meaning to create a new horizon. Getting to know our real worth is a relentless task, it helps us to toughen our values and passion. Self-discovery is not an easy ride and it requires pain and understanding. The characters here gather courage and face a new dawn.

Keywords: Sudha Murthy, Social & Ethical Values, Trust, Relationship. Marriage, loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Sudha Murthy, an Indian social worker, and writer have written many short stories and novels in a style so provocative depicting a realistic picture of all social issues, women empowerment, identity crisis and the need for ethical values to make life meaningful. Her Value-based writings focus immensely on ordinary lifestyles wherein the readers can identify themselves in some character. Her writings are embedded in Indian culture and incidents are drawn from day-to-day realities, events, and experiences. These realities reveal that women are unable to speak out on what they richly deserve. Passive sufferings, stoic sacrifice, family relationships, silence, social indifference, negation, loneliness, fear, isolation, rejection, failure acceptance, individualism, loud protest, violating the social norms has remained dormant. Women in the novels taken for the study such as Shrimati, Mridula, and Mahashweta become victims under their own circumstances. At a later stage of their life, they realize their potential and rebound. A woman need not bind herself with limitations and fixed ideas to please society, she has to transcend beyond and awaken herself to several other possibilities to realize her own aspiration. She has to embark on a new journey from within. All these above-said thoughts loom large in the scenic portrayal of the woman characters depicted by Sudha Murthy.

To quote from [Simone de Beauvoir’s book](#) titled ‘The Second Sex’ wherein she asserts that:

“Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble, between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator”.

In all her writings, Sudha Murthy felt that a woman has to break the barricades of psychological captivity situated within. Enclosed domestic restrictions suppressed lives of women and exploited female subjectivity forms the basis in all these novels.



A Woman is depicted as a symbol of sacrifice. She asserts that women have to extricate themselves from their patriarchally constructed social ties. To reconstitute herself, she goes through a saga only to emanate as an individual.

Woman, the epitome of God's creation, needs a shield, a rapport wherein she echoes, the exquisite feminine qualities in her not to be trodden upon by male self-seeking traits, but to reveal her shades of a multitasking force getting to know one's self. We have examples of strong-minded, dominant and opinioned women, who have fashioned their attitudes and behavior and showed their might by fighting for themselves and rebelled against society's stereotypes.

"Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength" ([G.D. Anderson](#))

This situation reminds us of the story "In Search of Myself" by Chhaya Datar, an Indian activist. The story depicts the deplorable predicament of an educated woman who sets herself free from the patriarchally constructed social norms. The novel deals with the woman who has to take a decision in life, whether to follow her passion or abide by the ties of a conservative family's restrictions. She tries to put across her experience as a social worker and a member of the union of farm laborers living in a tribal world. She receives a letter from her husband expecting her to come back to perform a family ritual. Whether she reacts or not is the crux of the entire story, to paraphrase the lines of *Gautama Buddha* 'Not to get upset with people and situations because both are powerless without our reactions'. This novel helps a woman to discover herself and overcome social fear and uncertainties.

Notable Women who have made great inroads in various fields, redefining the stereotyped feminine image needs an appreciation. Cleopatra, Marie Curie, Queen Victoria, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc., stood as icons paving the path to visualize countless characters portrayed by many Indian women writers. This is very true with the feminine characters in Sudha Murthy novels.

To quote [Wilma Mankiller](#) (Wilma Pearl Mankiller was the American who took lead in the community development especially Cherokee Tribe)

"The happiest people I've ever met, regardless of their profession, their social standing, or their economic status, are people that are fully engaged in the world around them. The most fulfilled people are the ones who get up every morning and stand for something larger than themselves. They are the people who care about others, who will extend a helping hand to someone in need or will speak up about an injustice when they see it".

"There is no force equal to a woman determined to rise" ([William Edward Burghardt Dubois](#) - An American sociologist, historian, writer, and editor). So has the road led to self-actualization? Amelia Earhart has validated our expectation that girls can achieve propelling achievement in male-dominated fields- not to give up on their dreams, even when they face financial obstacles, sex bias, and other barriers. Emmeline Pankhurst was the founding member of a women group known as SUFFRAGETTES. This group fought bravely to get women to vote in the United Kingdom. Margaret Thatcher played a vital role in bringing reformations in modern British Politics. Queen Elizabeth ruled the country for 66 years. She is the world's longest-serving monarch. She served as head of the Commonwealth, head of Church of England and the head of Armed Forces. Mother Teresa served humanity with a zeal, Lady with the Lamp, Florence Nightingale from an affluent background, taught, humanity the meaning of service, Rani Laxmibhai- to be brave in the deaths of misfortune and self-respect. The fiery queen proved beyond doubt that girls cannot be confined but can go raring and enthusiastic. The birth of a new thought that women empowerment means emancipation of women from the clutches of societal, economic, political caste and gender-based discrimination to replace patriarchy with equality. The concepts of individual spaces, feminist liberation, and interdependence of women, can be related to the feminine characters of Sudha Murthy's novels.

To quote – [Mark Victor Hansen](#) (An American native, enthusiastic speaker and the author of the bestselling book "Chicken Soup for the Soul").

"Don't wait until everything is just right. It will never be perfect. There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what, get started now. With each step you take, you will grow stronger and stronger, more and more skilled, more and more self-confident and more and more successful".

Thus from the above introduction, it is evident that women play a crucial role in the development of a society and a nation. It is also apparent that the novels of Sudha Murthy focus on the various challenges faced by women. The main purpose of the study is to bring to light the struggle of a woman to overcome the social stigma and fears and the ways and means adopted by her to make her life more meaningful. To achieve the purpose of the Study the select novels of Sudha Murthy have been evaluated. The novels include 'Gently Falls the Bakula' 'House of Cards' and 'Mahaswetha'.

DISCUSSION

Gently Falls The Bakula



The gist: (This was the first novel written by Sudha Murthy. The story revolves around two characters namely Shrimati and Shrikant. They are neighbors. Their homes are surrounded by a Bakula tree. The two families hate each other. In spite of the family disagreement they fall in love and get married. Shrimati sacrifices a lot and Shrikant progresses in life professionally. His greed for power and success blinds his thinking. He ignores her and she takes the decision to depart from him once in for all to follow her vision.)

The story begins in an unassuming background in Hubli portraying the lives of Shrimati and Shrikant. As an extremely vulnerable girl, Shrimati grows up with a jobless father, a dominating grandmother and a shy loving mother. Strong values form the cornerstone of Shrimati's life. Shrikant belongs to the Smarthas. Both were classmates. Shrimati always performs well in the exams compared to Shrikant. They were rivals in the class with small egoistic clashes.

A tree of Bakula (Fragrant flower) separates the two homes. The Bakula tree with its dark green leaves and unusual, unattractive flowers adorning like a crown but with a divine fragrance, flooring the ground as an ethereal carpet, gracefully stood beaming with pride. It was considered venerated. It was neither too beautiful nor aromatic in appeal yet it had an inexplicable attraction and epitomized a symbol of iconic love. Shrikant gets attracted by the simplicity of Shrimati and falls in love with her. Shrimati too falls in love with Shrikant who is handsome and amiable. The Bakula flowers are the attachments to her love letters indicating that the fragrance of their love will never vanish. They get married.

Shrikant was career-oriented and dedicated. He joins an IT company and climbs the corporate ladder rapidly and gains success, leaving behind Shrimati and her academic aspirations. Shrimati fulfills her duties as an obedient wife all through her prime days. She gradually realizes the emptiness in her. The story concludes with Shrimati leaving the house to follow her vision. '*Gently falls the Bakula*' is the story of a marriage that loses its charm because of the greed of her husband.

The conversation between the two at the time of departing is very sad and extremely touching. Shrimati tells her husband that she cannot bear the loneliness anymore. She also tells him that she loved him more than her success. She makes it clear that she is not delighted by the comfort which he provided her. He treated her as an ornament, not as a human being who has emotions and feelings.

After she leaves, Shrikant looks back and realizes that he was cruel towards his wife and he was the sole cause for her departure. *The Bakula Tree* which was the symbol of their love between them had fallen sadly.

The House of Cards

The gist: (Mridula, who is a young and enthusiastic woman, hails from a village in Karnataka. She meets Sanjay, falls in love and gets married and settles down in Bangalore. She feels disappointed looking at the selfish materialistic world. She walks out of the marriage.....)

Materialistic dimensions have differentiated our values demeaning our family ties. True love, understanding, and patience are some of the core values to keep any relationship meaningful, as it is said by, [Antoine de Saint-Exupery](#) (The French writer, poet, aristocrat, journalist, and pioneering aviator). "*Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction*"

'The House of Cards' is a small family drama which depicts the plainness of village life and the complications of city life and also the clash of cultures which has created mayhem in their married life. The writer explores human relationships intensively. Mridula remains the same hardworking and obedient wife throughout and Sanjay is influenced by the power of luxury. Mridula, a bright young woman, sacrifices her ambitions and positive energy to make her husband Sanjay successful and popular.

"Soon, Mridula and Sanjay settled into a comfortable routine. Mridula got up early in the morning, cooked and gave Sanjay breakfast. He carried a lunch box to the hospital and returned home at night. After Sanjay left, Mridula went to school; she cleaned the house in the evenings". ([Sudha Murty 2013](#))

The never-ending ambition, materialism, and corrupt practice gain momentum. Marriage is based on trust; conflict becomes a problem when it is rooted in selfishness which we see in the character of Sanjay. The pain and agony borne by Mridula are evident from the following paragraph taken from the novel:

"Tears rolled down Mridula's cheeks. She thought how did I live with Sanjay for such a long time? Today he's given me money and position in society but he doesn't share my sorrows. I've held his hands 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". ([Sudha Murthy 2013](#)).



Sanjay started behaving rudely towards Mridula. He started comparing Mridula with his sister. He used to criticize his wife and had more trust in his sister than the wife, he used to talk in a polished and refined way with others but with the wife he was brutal. He was a kind of dictator. Sanjay had sent Rupees ten lakh in the form of demand draft to his mother, bought a new car to nephew, bought house and gold jewelry for his sister without the knowledge of his wife. It shattered the trust of Mridula. Mridula was sad and depressed not because he helped his mother, sister, and nephew financially but because he did not disclose it to his wife. When Mridula discovered the truth she leaves her husband's house once for all.

Mahashweta

The gist: (This is the story of a young girl called Anupama and her marriage. She falls in love with a doctor named Anand with dreams to lead a happy life. Vitiligo, a skin disease plays a damaging role in the life of Anupama. Her life goes haywire. Lack of social acceptance makes her life miserable. She goes through a volley of emotions only to emerge as a young beautiful and independent woman...)

Mahashweta means the '**white one**'. The novel features Anupama as the protagonist, a mesmerizing beauty married to Dr. Anand. Anupama's positive image of life shatters with the emergence of the white patch called Vitiligo; she becomes a symbol of 'social stigma', abandoned by her uncaring in-laws and insensitive husband. Her visits to the dermatologist, her pain, anguish, and cry, as well as her inability to voice her thoughts, MAKE HER MORE BOLD AND BRAZEN. Courage steps into her life to make her strong and fight against all oddities in order to establish a life for herself. The reader will actually feel the pain and suffering that Anupama is experiencing, dejected in life, rejected by her husband and isolated in society. Anupama learns to lead her life accepting the disease, constructing her life which is independent, satisfied, and calm, thereby gaining respect and dignity. The values discussed here remain poignant and touching. Society behaves insensitively to the feelings of Anupama. She is castigated and neglected just because she is caught into a disease called vitiligo. This novel is a beautiful, realistic and vivid description of a woman, measured as a symbol of beauty to deck a man's social status, dumped because of vitiligo (here is the reason) and later struggled to bloom as a butterfly, through a series of stages, shedding all masks behind. The inner strength, self-unearthing of this protagonist (Anupama) faces a battle with her own female counterparts such as her step-mother Sabakka and two step-sisters Nanda and Vasudha, mother-in-law Radhakka and sister-in-law Girija.

The social reactions and denials make our hearts go drained and sad. The state of being alleged for no fault of her arouses sympathy in the reader, Anupama does not submit to humiliation, she rises above, which elevates her to the stance of womanhood. A cosmetic disease, non-hereditary, non-contagious, associated with superstitious myths create an uproar in the life of Anupama, shatters her only to emerge, leaving the other female counterparts dumbstruck. She decides what is vital in her life; she takes time to differentiate the real primacies in her life. She adds values to her life, her courage, independence, confidence, and self-respect gain prominence. She never wanted to be socially conditioned and mentally suffocated; she endeavors to accomplish mental peace, inner tranquility, vanquishing all fears, insecurities, and complications. Thus the story 'Mahashweta' depicts the agenda of a broken woman who renews and resuscitates herself, stamps her place in the society, amidst all struggles.

This novel is so powerfully written that we actually are feeling the pain and suffering that 'Anupamas' are going through in today's society. We feel proud of her when she decides to be strong and to fight against all odds in order to create a life for herself. This reminds us of the lines,

"I am thankful to all those difficult people in my life; they have shown me exactly who I do not want to be!" – Anonymous

This novel leaves us in tears with a feeling of admiration and awe for the intelligence and strength of character displayed by the protagonist. All the characters are impeccably portrayed in their natural habitat: their masks thrown aside. This novel portrays that the hidden courage of women which comes out and makes her strong in the situation when even her husband was not in her favor. After knowing that the lady is suffering from Leukoderma (Vitiligo), he did not give a second thought to be with her, as he should have.

Leukoderma changed Anupama's life, but more prominently it transformed how people looked at her, the social reactions, the pity and being blamed for having something like this before marriage. People in Anupama's village reacted as well. Women who have this disease are treated as untouchables in villages and small cities.

How Anupama comes across her snags, looks far beyond and moves ahead, when love and bond don't rescue her from the small village, calls for appreciation. She faces trouble, in the busy going city life, pressures, and threats and how she succeeds with life in this situation gathers a likeness for this character i.e. the boldness with which she faces the problems attracts the minds of the readers.

CONCLUSION

These women characters such as Anupama, Mridula, Shrimati have placed themselves with conviction, amidst social realities



and problems. The travails of these female characters reveal their experience of violence, denigration, exploitation and then break the silence. Man-Woman relationship, social acceptance, estrangement in modern life, forms the core in all these novels. Sudha Murthy covers a wide range of characters, mixed incidents, different scenarios, larger involvement (gallery) of characters depicting a realistic context, restricted mindsets, stereotyped judgments, and stale expectations.

Sudha Murthy textures a prototype in each of her protagonists who emerge victorious as successful individuals, flouting all fears, dilemmas, contradictions, taboos, frustrations and long-suffering endurance. Behind the silence of every woman, there is a voice that remained voiceless. The Protagonist remains predisposed and vulnerable to the society, which has used her to remain like a statuette, emotionless and in vain, an illustration of beauty ONLY. To quote [Sashi Deshpande's](#) title "*That long silence*" creates a stir within only to bring out the "*Women in her*".

The author explores the relationship in depth; Mridula, Srimati and Anupama are simple, hardworking and innocent throughout, whereas the male depiction Sanjay, Srikant, and Anand are strongly influenced by the power of luxury, comfort, and materialism, steadily climbing up the corporate ladder without realizing the value of family life. The family rival, the rift between in-laws relationship, misconception, lack of understanding, antiquated thoughts, holding male domination stands similar in all the novels taken for study. All these female characters have much-untapped potential but are left as doormat types. Symbolism looms large typifying each character as representations of an emblematic behavior, Bakula is related to Shrimati's unassuming, sweet and attractive nature. But this quality goes unnoticed as the story progresses. The flower symbolizes true love which remains constant but shrouded in their world and priorities. They fail to realize that a home is a place of feelings, and every individual relationship stands vital. As goes the age-old proverb: "*A House is made of brick and stone. A home is made of love alone*".

No longer can the protagonists, put up their intolerance. They eventually emerge to announce the fact that artificial values and material success cannot make a person successful. In the social-strata, the woman is just an embellishment, a flashy symbol defining 'His' social status. Every woman living a real-life will feel attached to the stories discussed above. Her novels have vast coverage of the situations with a bigger number of characters and their record of life is evidenced with authenticity where the relationship is built on trust and marriage is a bond for a meaningful existence. This situation reminds us of a small story:

A little girl and her father were crossing a bridge.

The father was kind of scared so he asked his little daughter:

"Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don't fall into the river".

The little girl said: "No, Dad. You hold my hand".

"What's the difference?" Asked the puzzled father.

"There's a big difference", replied the little girl.

"If I hold your hand and something happens to me, chances are that I may let your hand go.

But if you hold my hand, I know for sure that no matter what happens, you will never let my hand go."

There has to be good bonding in any relationship. One needs to hold the hand of a person whom he/she loves rather expecting the other person to hold his/her's hand. Therefore, in marriage, this bond is very important. As young people of today head out on their own, they face many unique trials especially in their marriage but bloom with an accomplishing smile. Here in these novels, realization sets-in in the male inconsiderate characters like Shrikant, Sanjay, and Anand. They recognize their inaccuracies that the female characters have always been ignored, taken for granted and realize that 'care, partnership and responsibility are the key ingredients of a happy marriage, they see life from a different angle, away from their self-centric perspective.

Social and Ethical values are delineated in the novels taken for study. Life is depicted as a journey with learning and unlearning experiences meeting with innumerable obstacles and barriers to testing the grit and willpower. These obstacles help us to make a decision as seen in the protagonists depicted by Sudha Murthy. Their choices were hard yet, they gathered courage, purpose, and meaning to create a new horizon. Getting to know our real worth is a relentless task, it helps us to toughen our values and passion. Self-discovery is not an easy ride and it requires pain and understanding. The characters here gather courage and face a new dawn.

The modules of life in these novels are offered on a platter giving greater clarity and vision, to be resilient and focused, when there are roadblocks. The characters portrayed faced many twists and turns, disappointments and setbacks yet decided to live a purpose-driven life. I conclude with these lines:

"I choose



To live by choice, not by chance
To make changes, not excuses.
To be motivated, not manipulated
To be useful, not used.
To excel, not complete
I choose self-esteem, not self-pity
I choose to listen to my inner voice
Not the random opinion of others”

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