



The Achievers Journal

Volume 6, Issue 2

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296

April- June 2020

Beyond Patriarchy: Challenges and Trials of the Female Protagonists of Sudha Murthy

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Abstract

With the dawn of Indian independence, there has been a progressive change in outlook and approach towards women. It was sincerely realized that India cannot fulfill its dream vision of making overall and significant advances in various fields without the upliftment of the marginalized gender. Sudha Murthy is recognized as one of the most prolific and realistic authors of Indian English fiction as she has the potential of delving into the depths of the inner landscapes of her female protagonists and portray their changing psyches with the changing time. This paper is an attempt to trace the journey of the leading female characters in the select novels of Sudha Murthy from darkness to dawn. In these novels, a picture of an evolved woman is seen who seeks to assert and establish her own identity by refusing to succumb to the norms of a patriarchal society.

Keywords: marginalized, darkness, dawn, evolved, succumb, patriarchal, landscapes

Introduction: Indian woman authors selecting English as a medium of their expression has become a distinct phenomenon in today's world. K.R.S Iyengar rightly remarks,



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“When an Indian author of fiction uses a learnt second language like English, he is actually recording a kind of half-conscious translation (from the mother tongue into English) that has taken place in the mind. Most of our writers are bilingual, some equally proficient in English and the mother tongue, and some more in one than in the other. The background and the situations are usually Indian but the characters may often be drawn from bilingual milieus. The need for expressing the values, verities, and heartbeats of one culture in the language of another poses its own problems and there is doubtless the inner urge to render in English the rhythms, idiosyncrasies, images, idioms, and proverbs of the local speech.”

Through their creative output, they have powerfully witnessed the victimization of the Indian woman. Their literary craft is also a medium for voicing the strong urge of the new and awakened women for their liberation from patriarchal pressures and self-identification.

As time progressed there were many ideological revolutions in the society. With the gradual rise of science, many social norms and concepts which were till nurtured and nourished by patriarchal values were totally shattered and toppled. It includes the position of man and woman in society also. Earlier women were portrayed within an idealized framework as suffering and sacrificing, but in the post-independence era, some female writers have changed this approach.

Sudha Murthy holds a key position in this respect. Dr. Sudha Murthy, the recipient of various awards for her contributions in the different domains of the society is from Shiggaon, North Karnataka. She completed her M.Tech in Computer Science from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and became the first engineer in Telco. Currently, she is a chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. As a dynamic author, she has the credit of writing twenty-four novels, three nonfiction books, and four books for children. Sudha Murthy’s female characters are distinct in themselves. They are well-educated women, having the inherent courage of facing the challenges of being the ‘second sex’ and emerging out successfully. An analysis of the select novels of Murthy will be evidential in this regard.

Gently Falls The Bakula: Sudha Murthy’s debut novel ‘Gently Falls The Bakula’ is a story of marital disharmony and discord as a result of ambition and self- interest. The story serves as a



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representative of all Indian women who give priority to traditional ideologies and family commitments over their own aspirations. In the series of their meek and mute sacrifices, their own aspirations are suppressed and crumbled down. This psychological development leads to suffocation, absurdity, and identity crisis.

Srimati Deshpande, the protagonist of the story is an incarnation of a dutiful, devoted, sincere, and affectionate wife who with her unconditional support to her husband Srikant Deshpande helps him in reaching the pinnacle of success in IT profession.

Srimati is a well-educated and a sharp woman having soaring ambitions during her University days. But after getting married to Srikant she sacrificed all her professional aspirations and took herself to be lucky in dedicating her whole life for the cause of her husband's success. She thought that it is an ideal way through which she could achieve a blissful family life. But Srikant's negligence and failure to recognize and appreciate her service and devotion to him shattered her to pieces. Srikant's failure resulting out of his preoccupation with a patriarchal stretch of mind but it definitely proved to be a turning point in the life of Srimati. Her pent up emotions compelled her to take a bold decision that was definitely against the strict norms of a patriarchal society. She refused to succumb anymore to the familial atrocities and decided to move away from Srikant,

“Shri, I am getting a scholarship. I have thought over this matter for the last few weeks before taking this decision. I did not bring anything with me when I got married to you. Now also I am not taking anything from this house. My flight is scheduled for tonight... now. I can leave peacefully. (GFB, p.160)

Through the character of Srimati, Sudha Murthy has portrayed a strong new woman who is guided by her conscience and who moves ahead in life for finding her own identity.

Mahashweta: It is a story of Anupama, who nurtures an intense and unconditional love for her husband, Dr. Anand. But unfortunately, her love remained unresponded from the other side. Anupama although a thoroughly sincere and dedicated wife, sensed a sort of disharmony in her



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marital relationship. The reason which contributed towards this discord was leukoderma, an almost incurable disease with which Anupama started suffering after marriage.

Dr. Anand was although in a medical profession, despite that took the disease as a social stigma and started neglecting his wife very badly. His patriarchal construct of mind prohibited him to respond to the pure love, dedication, affection, and other strong emotions of his wife. The continuous coldness and unresponsiveness and negligence of Dr. Anand were very challenging for Anupama. She started suffering from emotional barrenness and a feeling of absurdity in life. She failed to convince her husband anyway.

“No Artist can recreate the vibrant colours of nature on canvas. We think we all know all about beauty, but we understand is that external beauty is short lived.” (MS 132)

Although extremely disheartened by the oppression of Dr. Anand, Anupama was a strong woman who was not ready to surrender before her circumstances. She left the house of her husband and learned to live independently with self-respect. Gradually she started ascending the ladder of success and finally with her knowledge and education became a college professor.

Later in life after acknowledging Anupama’s success Dr. Anand’s stand towards her was entirely changed. He traced her address and begged for her forgiveness. But Anupama, who remained a prior victim of his continuous humiliation and neglect, refuses to forgive him. She says,

“You know that I did not have this disease before our marriage. You could have told your mother... but you didn’t. You were scared that I would be disfigured because of this disease... I ended up a victim because you chose to dishonor the vows you took.” (MS 147)

She further asserts, “We met accidentally, but we were not made for each other. Let us part with a good grace.” (MS 149)

In this novel, Murthy has beautifully carved out the transformation of her female protagonist. Previously she was a meek, submissive, tolerant and enduring lady totally dependent on her husband for herself respect and survival but later she emerges out as a confident, self-sufficient,



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independent, guiding, and a respectable woman. She is portraiture of a confident lady seeking her own identity.

House of Cards: It is the story of Mridula who is the female protagonist of the novel. Despite her unconditional and absolute faith and trust in her husband Dr. Sanjay, she is helplessly betrayed by him. After their marriage, Sanjay gradually started reaching the pinnacle of success in his life. He became a doctor and a lecturer in a govt hospital in Bangalore. After attaining the heights of success in his career Dr. Sanjay became very arrogant and egoist. His arrogance and pride led him to look down upon his wife Mridula as an ignorant and foolish person. Taking her to be an inferior creature Sanjay started manipulating her in other ways also. Mridula was extremely shocked and shattered at the dubiousness of her husband whom she worshipped as God. She felt as if she was mocked at by the compelling circumstances of her life. She was filled with extreme anguish and despair. The betrayal of mutual trust in the marital relationship led her to alienation. She became alienated from her own self as well as from her husband. She tells her friend Anita,

“Anita, it is not about money. Money can be earned and lost. It’s about faith that a wife has in her husband. That’s more vulnerable than money and gold. Faith sustains marriage and brings joy to the family. Without it we have nothing. How can Sanjay destroy the faith and trust I had on him? (HOC 186)

Dr. Sanjay’s duality and cunningness penetrated into the depths of Mridula’s heart and she found herself to be nowhere in this world. Leigh K. Cunningham illustrates,

“Trust is something that is difficult to establish. It is very fragile that needs to be taken care of. Once trust breaks or shatters into pieces, it is very difficult to rebuild it.”

But Mridula was not a fragile woman. She recollected herself and decided to fight back with all the odds and challenges of her life. She convinced herself that marriage is not the final destination of her life. With a philanthropic bent of mind, she realizes that it is better to remain alone but happy rather than to be with someone who makes you feel inferior, unwanted, and inadequate every moment.



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Mridula came out with a determination and communicated about her stand and decision to Dr Sanjay in very clear terms,

“No I have spent twenty five of my most valuable years with you, and yet, I never felt like I belonged to you or your family. I am still an outsider... 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 Shishir can visit me whenever you want.” (HOC, p.218)

Even after undergoing several trials, Mridula is still nurtured within her immense enthusiasm which stimulated her to live a meaningful and complete life.

Dollar Bahu: This story revolves around the vitality of money in one's life. It also tells how this money corrupts all human relationships and forms the foundation of the split in a family.

Vinuta, the female protagonist of the story is married to Girish who is a bank clerk by profession. Vinuta tries to adjust herself in the new family by tirelessly working throughout the day and doing her best efforts to please and satisfy every member of the family. Out of her devotion and caring nature, she even ignores the ill behavior of her mother-in-law. She remains in the role of a silent sufferer. Things get worst when Girish's elder brother Chandru who works in the U.S decides to get married. Vinuta was let down by her in-laws through the constant comparisons between her and Girish's wife who was lovingly called 'Dollar Bahu' by them. Unconditional love and respect were showered upon her as her husband earned immense money in dollars which brought the family its recent affluence. Money overweighed the unconditional services and sacrifices Vinuta rendered to her family. Constant comparisons made Vinuta restless. She lost her peace of mind as well as her physical health, as all her sacrifices for the family went in vain.

She feels frustrated and when it crosses its limit she moves ahead to have a word with Chandru. It is way, through which she communicates about her pent-up emotions she tells him,



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“to be honest with you, I am not at all that happy either. All the time there is a comparison between Jamuna and me. I don’t want and I can’t compete with anybody. But it’s evident that family does not need me anymore...finding him more a friend than a brother-in-law.” (DB 72)

At last, she leaves the house with an inner confidence in giving meaning to her meaningless life.

In Indian society, women are mostly supposed to remain within the constraints of patriarchal culture which assigns them a subordinate and marginalized status. She has no independent identity; rather she is identified by her father in her childhood, by her husband in her youth and by her son in her old age.

“Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is very simply what man decrees...she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex absolute, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential.” (The Second Sex 76)

Conclusion: The above study makes it clear that the contemporary Indian woman though educated and progressive lives in a state of dilemma. She finds herself caught up between tradition and modernity, passiveness, and aggression which takes her in the state of bewilderment. But even then the new Indian woman is very strong and more aware of her personal space. She knows well how to strike a fine balance between her responsibilities and self-identity. When she feels suffocated and burdened with the patriarchal constraints imposed upon her she knows the way to release herself from these constraints and soar high with her ambitions and uniqueness.

Dorothy Parker writes,

“I cannot be just to books which treat woman as woman...My idea is that all of us, men as well as women should be regarded as human beings.”(Sociology 143)



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