



Ambiguity in *House of Cards*: Western Feminists Ideology about Third World Women

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Abstract :

Sudha Murthy's "House of Cards" is the vivid description of the life journey of Mridula, a small town woman in India, who went through the complexity of marriage, morality, and individuality in a society ruled by patriarchy. Values of rural simplicity were contrasted with urban ambition, the struggle of women who see changes in personal and societal relations. Through Mridula's journey, the narrative critiques and subverts the stereotypes imposed on women by both traditional and modern frameworks. This paper explores how the character of Mridula, along with others in the story, supports and challenges Western feminist notions of Third World women. While the narrative reflects themes of sacrifice and endurance often associated with these ideologies, it also emphasizes agency and personal growth, thus offering a nuanced perspective on feminism in the Indian context. The novel serves as a bridge between the universal and the local, encouraging a re-examination of global feminist narratives through the lens of lived experiences.

Keywords: Third World Women, Feminism, Indian novel.

INTRODUCTION:

Sudha Murthy, the author of the novel, is notably not only an exceptional writer and philanthropist but also holds the chairperson position at Infosys with her husband, Narayan Murthy. Most of her wit and wisdom come from having a well-read childhood and education. Murthy, through her interviews, gives us anecdotes of her life that are well conveyed in her writing and books. The author focuses on fiction writing not only for adults but for children as well. The novel *House of Cards* brings in several perspectives, not only of feminism but also others like Existentialism, Isolation, Alienation, and several others that did not incorporate as much value when it was published as they do today. Sudha Murthy, in her novel, focuses mainly on the married life of Mridula and Sanjay, which like any plot goes through its own set of turns. The female plotline mainly aims at Mridula's life, but we are drawn to several other minor characters, male or female, that play significant roles in establishing different outlooks on the idea of a Third World Women.

Murthy giving Mridula an exceptionally unexpected ending adds more to the diverse feminist plot that we question here. In nearly all her novels, Sudha Murthy allocates us with disturbed characters similar to those of Mridula, not necessarily female, which also distresses and devastates the audience, and the obstacles she passes through almost make the plot and the readers sad. Unlike *Grandma's Bag of Stories* and *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, which comprise children's fiction yet are stories of wisdom, *House of Cards* is not children's fiction. Murthy's speciality of short stories is challenged when she takes up novels like *Dollar Bahu*, *Mahashweta*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, or this one, which is not a feminist novel per se, but Murthy's portrayal of characters showing femininity turns it into a brilliant case of feminism. Unlike Mridula, Murthy's other female characters do not show a strong case of breaking the glass ceiling by shattering pre-constructed social norms. The author does not seem to intentionally devise for Mridula to be the only strong female character that challenges the alleged norms set up for Third World Women but rather shows us an honest representation of how extremely few women seem to totally break the glass ceiling and the rest remain trying, which still questions the predetermined norms given by the Western Feminists of the Third World Women.

We talk about feminism and femininity, but we cannot deny the fact that the novel comprises not only a "Patriarchal Consensus" but also a Matriarchal one. (Butalia 212). This Patriarchal and Matriarchal Consensus has quite an effect on the readers as well as the characters. While all characters strive to only survive their day-to-day lives, characters like Mridula also strive rather struggle for identity, meaning, and understanding. The nuances of identity of each character may also vary, thus questioning the innate feminism that they are expected to have. This struggle typically resolves to any feminist text of its own. Expecting it to have an extensive feminist plot, we presume to see a transition, but no key transition is seen in the characters that uphold them but rather a downfall from where they start. Murthy also, consciously or unconsciously, represents the typical image of a Third World Women. She, through the characters, even diversifies it, and this diversification also challenges the long-standing ideal image of a Third World Women.

India as a country, its background, culture, and history all play a major role in accordance with the plot and characters. Mridula and the other women in the novel all represent different kinds of women with varied thinking and nature. These women also represent the different types of women in Third World Countries, which in turn breaks an ideal image of women represented. This paper aims at analysing the feminist part of the novel and looking at whether the characters fit in the third world women perspective or challenge it.

1. Mridula shattering the pre-set conjecture about Third World Women by the Western Feminists.

Th Murthy's portrayal of Mridula as a character is so natural that it well embraces both her intrinsic Indian femininity and Third World Feminist ideology smoothly without any preferred inclination. This gives us an exceptionally good idea of Mridula, who is unlike any stereotype for Third World or Indian Women. She instead utilizes her capabilities as a woman without being oppressed by any social or patriarchal norms and, at the same time, following them. Mridula, as an Indian Woman without harshly rebelling, sets an example that how Third World Women are not what the Western Feminists make them to be but as diverse as Mohanty explains them in her essay.

Mridula, by being a financially independent woman and supporting her husband, sets her in an entirely different category of Third World Women as well as Indian Women, which cannot be generalized. Mohanty, with the example of some other Feminist Scholars, deems this financial independence as "development" and "economic development or progress" (Mohanty, "Feminist Scholarship" 71). The author sets us up with several instances where Mridula has an upper hand in the financial situation during the initial phase of her marriage but does not exert any dominance, unlike that of Sanjay in the later half of the book. The lack of communication and drifting apart is mainly created due to the financial development seen after Sanjay's hospital blooms. This economic stability that is supposed to bring them close brings and creates elaborate opposite ideologies that methodologically drift them apart. This creates an elaborate decline in the status of women, which happens with the spouse's economic growth.

The book showcases that female happiness, respect, and desires are questioned, not only her equal status. This questioning of desire establishes resemblance with the women of the West who face similar problems; thus, this similarity of problems annihilates the gap between Western women and Third World Women, who now can be deemed to be similar in more manners than expected. This unconscious imitation also brings forth the parallels of the several generalized categories of Third World Women who may resemble the same. While there are complexities in the storyline, some also reckon it as a, "strange episode between reality and fantasy experienced by the characters" (Abraham and Prabhak, 69).

House of Cards has a distinctive and uncommon feminist plot because, foremost, it does not bind into the traditional feminist perspective but rather a modern one where the protagonist does not have to fight for her basic needs but rather protect herself by placing herself before her husband and children. A concept deemed immoral for any woman, be it Western or Third World. Mohanty, in her essay, elucidates how, "What is interesting for me is to see how and why "difference" has been embraced over "commonality." (Mohanty, "Feminist Solidarity" 504). Mohanty here also accounts for the fact, in reflection, that not only Indian Women and Third World Women tend to be suppressed under hegemonic power but so do Western Women. By commonalities, it is contemplated that even the idea of Western Women is an umbrella category that is similar to that of Third World Women and cannot be generalized as a presupposed category.

It is also ironical how it takes Mridula years of consideration and a whole book to stand up for herself, contradicting her mother-in-law, Ratnamma, who had been living alone for years. Of course, living alone does not constitute for freedom, but Ratnamma as a character and her ability to be oblivious and selfish at times constituted highly. Near the ending, when Mridula abandons the party and leaves for Aladahalli without informing anyone, the act in itself stands for the fact that she finally has freed herself from the shackles of being dictated by any hegemonic power in the pretence of love and duty.

This comparison brings in several categories of women, including Ratnamma, Mridula, Laxmi, and even Western Women into context who break borders and go beyond the idea of generalization which by Mohanty is stated as, "noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders" (Mohanty, "Feminist Solidarity" 503). Here, Murthy gives us a diverse set of individuals, who's fitting into the Western Feminists perspective of the Third World is vague, indistinct, and ambiguous.

The concluding part of the novel brings forth hope for Mridula and reduces the gap between Western and Third World Women with the discussion of mental health into accordance. For always, mental health and its idea have been dominated by the west, and Murthy bringing it into perspective opened new doors to women of the third world, and they now do not limit themselves to the idea portrayed to them by the Western Feminists.

Mridula's faceoff with depression and her seeking help give the women of the third world a newfound confidence to talk about problems that not only limit themselves to physical and hegemonic power. This going beyond limits also acts as a statement for the Western Feminists that Third World Women do not live in a hollow perspective created by them but rather go beyond it. This state of depression brings forth the innate, intrinsic, and fragile femininity that Mridula and any woman pass through. Self-theorizing and analysing also work as crucial agents here, where the person, here Mridula, interprets herself more and more which leads to an extreme generation of self-doubt, thus moving to depression.

Mridula forms a misunderstood, suppressed, and saddening image of herself, leading to a loss of individuality and identity and thus forming a third-world image contrasting to her own. Through the novel, we see her as an example, but there are aspects in the novel that make the readers doubt their own understanding and perception. Murthy throughout the book keeps this ambiguity in certain characters, which does not let the readers form certain assumptions about a character's establishment of large hospitals where hundreds to thousands of patients are treated, it has created a serious problems of biomedical waste management. The seriousness of improper biomedical waste management was brought to the light during summer 1998. In India studies have been carried out at local / regional levels in various hospitals, indicate that roughly about 1-5 kg/bed/day to waste is generated. Among all health care personnel, ward boys, sweepers, operation theatre & laboratory attendants have come into contact with biomedical waste during the process of segregation, collection, transport, storage & final disposal. The knowledge of medical, paramedical staff & ward boys, sweepers about the biomedical waste management is important to improve the biomedical waste management practices. The biomedical waste requiring special attention includes those that are potentially infectious, sharps, example needle, scalpels, objects capable of puncturing the skin, also plastic, pharmaceutical & chemically hazardous substances used in laboratories etc.

2. Sudha Murthy sets a diversity of women characters through the novel.

The book is set in postcolonial India, and Murthy shows ambiguity through different characters and portrays the reality that still persists by showing only one character as a strong character while others lurking around. The diversity of women characters that Murthy portrays comprises Mridula, Ratnamma, Laxmi, Anita, and several others. The fact that they all carry a stark difference in behaviour and in character adds to the plot of how diverse Third World Women can be by enhancing Mohanty's point for the same. It also challenges the White Feminist who generalized this category.

The primal stark difference between the three poses on monetary aspects is what contrasted Mridula from her in-laws in general. While Ratnamma and Laxmi focused on materialism, it is Mridula who leans more towards morals and ideals. The classic example of how money can/cannot buy happiness is presented here, but a very unclear stand is made with no proper conclusion. This nature that Ratnamma and Laxmi possess is not reflected or rubbed off on Mridula, and one of the many reasons for this is her upbringing and childhood. Growing up in Aladahalli or even moving after marriage, Mridula is always content with what they have or believe in facing challenges at the forefront, thus being away from materialism.

The fact that, "Humanitarian perspectives are dominated by the materialistic perspectives" (Shekhar and Kesur, 851) is highlighted here through particularly Sanjay and his family. While Ratnamma fits the narrative of an independent woman, she also poses as a selfish one who is concerned only for herself, striking a similarity with Laxmi, her daughter, who believes in the show-off culture and dwells on her husband for that. Both can be seen helping and rather encouraging Sanjay in his unethical practices. Although we see Ratnamma and Laxmi as similar creatures, they also tend to be different, but one common goal is what unites them. These extreme binaries between Ratnamma, Laxmi, and Mridula indicate, or rather confirm, the domination of materialism over humanitarianism.

Perception plays a crucial role in Murthy's novel in depicting, or rather, exposing, the ways Mridula and Anita are cheated on. The fact that Murthy does not limit cheating to affairs but rather takes it further, involving financial cheating even in marriages, shows a hidden part of society and marriage. The idiosyncratic of the plot lies in the fact of going beyond and not staying in a liminal space or the boundaries of thoughts established by society. Velraj S. states that, "These are the four walls on which the bond of marriage is built. Any deviation in any of these values would demolish the house itself" (100). Ironically, here, the hierarchy is broken when men break these walls and blame it on women. It should also be understood that this unfair behaviour is not limited to any particular culture, thus breaking the monotonous perspective of the Third World that the Western Liberal Feminists talk about. These Western Feminists do make a standpoint of this monotonous perspective in the early 1990s and 2000s, but with the gradual growth of the South Asian literature and the questioning of western ideology, their perspective is made to question. Thus, questioning the life situations of Mridula and Anita.

The contemporary discourse about Third World Women has been extremely protean for the last few decades, which has also led to the breakthrough of several feminist theories. These theories have helped writers like Murthy to create characters like Mridula, who make a standpoint. Individually, Mridula and Anita deal with their situations differently; Anita relies on God and spirituality, while Mridula explores possibilities before opting for therapy sessions. The fact that she can opt for therapy is a concept far from Western Feminists who believe that Third World Women are only of a singular kind that move towards spirituality and religion, which is not entirely false in this case when we take in Anita.

Cheating here has been given forms and is being bifurcated by Murthy, which broadens the category where it grows from the idea of its stereotypical perspective to a wider area of how it is not limited to affair and physical intimacy but also emotional betrayal. Pradeep Kamble, while describing the Indian Patriarchal society, also describes that, "Indian feminist writers explain the domestic discord in traditional Indian families and the suffering of women in a patriarchal world" (107). This domestic discord is simply transferred to cheating, which in turn not only disrupts the harmony of families as individuals but also society in general.

Through the novel, we ascertain Mridula as the flag bearer for women and as an initiator of women for her generation and more, but this headship surely is backed by anxiety of her own, where she, as per her assumption, is exerting this influence over others with much sadness present in her. This feeling of Mridula does not go away. A similar kind of independence is seen in Neha, Shishir's friend. But as opposed to Mridula, Neha does not carry this anxiety and, at times, firmly stands to her point. This determinism towards one's decisions is seen in Neha, while Mridula fights it. This difference could be due to the age gap and both of them being of different generations.

Neha and Mridula are similar personalities with an age difference, and that functions as the main point of voicing of opinions. While the conjecture is that the younger generation is unhesitant to put up a fight for their values and morals, Mridula's generation still believes in fighting the internal battles first, thus taking up therapy instead of talking to Sanjay directly. While the White feminists lay the generalized opinion that every generation of upcoming women may not differ from the other, this dissimilarity between Neha and Mridula shows the growth of women even in the most rural of families.

Neha, in totality, does not hold the position of main character in the book, but her influence as a character brings great change to the reader's perspective. A perspective change both for her and Mridula. We gather that to understand anyone, they must be interpreted, and similar happens with the characters of Mridula and Neha. Samantha Elaine Groulx states in her book review of Mohanty's book that, "Our world is complex, but attempting to open up and understand these complicities is worth the struggle" (5). Thus, representing that the complexity is not simply related to the Western front but also to the Asian and South Asian demographics, which the West has well generalized.

3. Contrasting behavior of characters along the demographic lines.

The novel not only focuses on the binaries between Western Feminist critics and Third World Women but also brings in the inherent gender role ideas imbibed in people. It reflects the thought process of the society and how it tries to cover it by their educated background, but unexpectedly, it is this part of the society that silently exploits it the most. Jala Srilakshmi, talking about gender role in the book, states that, "Gender identity refers to a deeply felt, inner, individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to a person's physiology or gender assigned at birth" (316). The fact that people still cannot differentiate gender

and its attributes and still associate them with one's sex is deeply problematic. These alleged roles play quite a role in Murthy's book, which differentiates the behaviour of people even based on location.

While we associate Mridula as a flag bearer of Third World Feminism, her husband and son tend to be the opposite of that. Even though we are aware of the fact that children learn from parents and rather imitate them, here with Sanjay and Shishir, it comes out as a live example when the younger generation, that is, Shishir, starts adapting to gender stereotypes stepped up by his father. We may at times stir away from such situations by naming it as their care for Mridula, but there is a thin line between both of them.

Shishir or Sanjay are surely not flagbearers of orthodoxy or followers of conventional norms, but with the cosmopolitan life they lead outside the house and career-wise, their actions surely differ from their actual thoughts. The fact that Sanjay believes in having a whole other financial aspect without consulting Mridula enhances how little importance he has of her inputs and how he keeps her in shadow without any remorse. Shishir, even if not fully, is influenced by his father when he, out of behaviour expects the same from Neha as he does from his mother and is disappointed.

The common illusion that people perceive of cosmopolitan people having an open mind and broad thinking is debunked here by Murthy through the portrayal of Sanjay and Shishir as opposed to Mridula's parents. Thus, showing the inherent and imbibed ideas of the same.

Mridula, growing up in Aladahalli, a small town, presents the consensus that her parenting and upbringing may revolve around being conservative and narrow-minded, but contradictorily, we see that in Sanjay and Laxmi at some point. Mridula's parents providing her with everything certainly plays a significant role later in her life when she helps run the household before Sanjay becomes an established doctor. The idea of giving Mridula full autonomy to make her own decisions in all situations possible, possibly even as extensive as marrying Sanjay even after looking at his hand condition, is the type of autonomy rarely seen in villages.

The idea of wanting to imbibe the same values in her son that she got from her parents seems alien to Mridula after a point because she and Sanjay surely do not see eye to eye on a number of subjects. The extensivity that a Third World Women could have such standards and values of modernity from her parents seems a foreign subject to the biased ideology of the Western Feminists. Mohanty emphasises on this point itself that the Western Feminists or Western women are no different from the Third World Women they claim to be, but rather it is the portrayal through imperialization and colonisation that these so-called Third World Women are shown to be at a level below the imperialists.

This depiction of two styles of parenting here shows the ambiguity that Murthy emphasises. Representing how there can be ambiguity in a single person's life can thus extend to the fact that there can be differentiation and ambiguity from the western representation of the third world.

Demographic lines and areas are the foremost motif that define the difference between Western women and the Global south, comprising of women. This showcases the idea that women are limited to a certain area, and thought dwells upon this. Here, Mridula not only breaks the glass of conventionalism and a pre-set, pre-assumed structure of the ideal Third World Women, but rather sets a new bar by diving into all unconventional things with ease.

Either it be her supporting Sanjay and running the household in the absence of his monetary support; either it be her funding her student's education or returning back to her village in the motif of finding oneself. Mridula has certainly at times broken the quintessential conjecture of being an ideal woman, and that too silently. The idea that all women have to adjust has been finely brought forth by Samantha Groulx by stating, "All women are engaged in the process of adjusting, shaping, resisting, and transforming their environment." (5). The thought that only western women go through all the processes of shaping and resisting while others just simply surrender to the needs of society and family is a colonial concept that needs decolonization, and more than decolonizing, it needs the idea of cross-cultural feminism, attaining to it that how feminism also transforms and shapes accordingly. We have to commit to the idea that breaking the glass ceiling of conventionalism is not limited to the western world and its women but rather open for all. It is time we understand that it is the West that is using its power to limit and define the boundaries that Third World Women can reach. The fact that Mridula does not need to be privileged to be able to leave her husband and set an example for women is what redefined the allegedly new Third World Women for Western Feminists.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be stated that Murthy, in her novel, through this ambiguous portrayal of Mridula and several other characters, debunks and also challenges the pre-formed ideology set by the Third World Women for the Women of the Global South. We see that through this ambiguous portrayal, Murthy breaks the structuralism of the allegedly pre-assumed structure that they portray to the world. The author here also, through various themes, changes the course of looking at Third World Women meaningfully career, age, relationships, education, society, and many more. She just does not counteract this western binary through gender but rather through several nuances that add diversity to the subject.

Murthy also portrays a hint of existentialism in her paper, which she also carries through her other female-centric novels. The idea of subtly portraying strong female characters is Murthy's standpoint compared to other writers who emphasise on making feminism the whole identity of the female character. She neither glorifies nor denies the nature of the ambiguity of Mridula and other characters but rather acknowledges it by showing us a diversity of situations. The effects of the past, present, and childhood play a substantial role in influencing them, consciously or unconsciously. The idea that Third World Women have to deal with a specific kind of problem is the limitation that the Western Women shove upon them.

While we see a diverse set of female characters through the novel, we have to acknowledge that each of them individually plays a significant role in breaking the stereotypical stance of commonality that Western Feminists infer South Asian and Third World Women have.

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