

FROM SILENCE TO SELF-ASSERTION: FEMINIST VOICES IN SUDHA MURTHY'S *GENTLY FALLS THE BAKULA* AND *HOUSE OF CARDS*

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Abstract

Sudha Murthy's fiction frequently centres the emotional, ethical, and social struggles of middle-class Indian women, revealing the contradictions between societal expectations and individual aspirations. Her novels *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008) and *House of Cards* (2013) present two compelling female protagonists—Shrimati and Mridula—whose lives illustrate the complexities of patriarchal relationships, the invisibility of women's emotional labour, and the transformative power of self-awareness. This paper, titled "From Silence to Self-Assertion: Feminist Voices in Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* and *House of Cards*", investigates the journeys of these protagonists from compliant silence to empowered self-assertion.

Using a comparative feminist framework influenced by liberal feminism, domestic feminism, and feminist ethics of care, the study examines how patriarchal ideologies operate subtly within everyday marital life and how Murthy critiques these through emotionally grounded storytelling. Shrimati's intellectual erasure and Mridula's emotional manipulation demonstrate two different but convergent experiences of women constrained by duty, sacrifice, and marital expectations. Through close textual analysis supported by feminist theoretical insights, the article argues that Murthy's portrayal of empowerment is neither confrontational nor sensational; instead, it is rooted in everyday acts of courage, dignity, and self-respect. The analysis concludes that Murthy's feminist voice emerges through her emphasis on women's interiority and their quest for selfhood. Both Shrimati and Mridula challenge patriarchal norms not through rebellion but through ethical self-assertion, which redefines their identities outside of marriage. This work positions Sudha Murthy as a significant contributor to contemporary Indian feminist literature and highlights the relevance of her narratives in understanding the lived realities of Indian women today.

Keywords: Patriarchy, feminism, empowerment, self-assertion.

I. Introduction

Sudha Murthy, one of India's most widely read contemporary writers, has earned recognition for her clarity of expression, moral courage, and sensitive portrayal of everyday Indian life. Her writing is accessible, yet profound; simple, yet impactful. Murthy's novels do not operate in the theoretical or philosophical realms of feminism, but in the quiet corridors of middle-class homes, marriages, aspirations, and sacrifices. This is where her feminism becomes most powerful—through the intimate, emotionally resonant stories of women who discover themselves after years of silence.

Two such novels—*Gently Falls the Bakula* and *House of Cards*—offer fertile ground for understanding the dynamics of gendered expectations and the emergence of female agency. Shrimati and Mridula, the protagonists respectively, embody two different forms of patriarchal conditioning: the erasure of intellectual identity and the exploitation of emotional labour. Yet their journeys converge in one central feminist awakening: the recognition of their own worth.

The primary question posed by this research is: How do Shrimati and Mridula transform from silent, self-effacing women into assertive individuals who reclaim their agency? This study also examines Murthy's narrative technique, symbolism, and contemporary relevance. The paper argues that Murthy's feminism is grounded in realism, dignity, and ethical selfhood—a feminism that resonates deeply with the lived experiences of Indian women.

II. Feminist Theoretical Framework

To examine Murthy's portrayal of women, this study adopts three interconnected feminist perspectives:

1. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism advocates education, self-development, equal rights, and autonomy. Shrimati's journey, especially, reflects these ideals. She is intellectually gifted, but her marriage suppresses her potential. Her final decision to pursue academic work aligns with what Betty Friedan calls "the problem that has no name"—the silent suffocation of educated women confined to roles of service.

2. Domestic Feminism

Domestic feminism focuses on the household as a political space. For Mridula, the home is where exploitation occurs, disguised under love, loyalty, and marital duty. This aligns with Adrienne Rich's concept of marriage as an institution that often transforms women's labour into invisible service.

3. Ethics of Care

Both novels foreground emotional labour—care, affection, moral support—as obligations naturalised for women. Feminist scholars like Nancy Chodorow argue that society socialises women into caregiving roles, often at the cost of their own identities. Shrimati and Mridula embody this tension between care for others and care for the self. These frameworks help unpack the nuanced ways Murthy critiques patriarchy.

III. Silence as a Feminist Problem

Silence is not merely the absence of speech; it is a socially constructed expectation placed upon women. In Murthy's works, silence is both a symptom and a tool of patriarchy.

1. Silence as Virtue

In Indian middle-class contexts, a "good woman" is often one who remains patient, forgiving, adaptable. Shrimati's silence is romanticised by those around her, while Mridula's silence is seen

as maturity. But Murthy reveals silence as a mechanism of emotional control, a strategy of patriarchal dominance and a force that erases women's individuality.

2. Quotations Illustrating Silence

Shrimati is described as “the silent shadow that followed Shrikant” (*Bakula* 67).

Mridula “always gave more than she received” (*House* 112), highlighting emotional asymmetry. Silence, in these novels, is both the cage and the key—because it ultimately leads to awakening.

IV. Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula*

Shrimati represents the tragedy of intellectual suppression in patriarchal marriages.

A. Intellectual Brightness vs. Marital Expectations

Shrimati is academically gifted. Her teacher praises her as “one of the brightest students of her generation.” But once married, Shrikant expects her entire world to revolve around his career. He tells her: “Your work is not important. My career needs you more than your books do” (*Bakula* 92).

This statement epitomises patriarchal entitlement. Shrimati's identity shrinks to Shrikant's support system.

B. Emotional Labour as Invisible Work

Shrimati manages Shrikant's social relationships, His emotional stability, His home life, His professional image. Yet Shrikant interprets these as natural duties of a wife, not as sacrifices. Murthy subtly criticises how women's intelligence is often redirected into sustaining men's ambitions.

C. Symbolism of the Bakula Flower

The Bakula flower symbolises love, devotion, memory and unspoken sacrifice. As long as Shrimati clings to the Bakula metaphor, she remains captive to past choices. When she leaves, refusing to glance back at the flowers, she symbolically cuts ties with a love that demanded too much silence.

D. Shrimati's Feminist Awakening

Shrimati reaches a point of emotional exhaustion:

“I gave you my silence, my time, my youth. But I cannot give you my future” (*Bakula* 171).

This is not rebellion born of anger; it is self-realisation. She chooses academia—a space where her mind is valued. Her departure is dignified, deliberate, ethical and feminist. Murthy shows that intellectual independence is powerful resistance.

V. Mridula in *House of Cards*: Expanded Analysis

Mridula's struggle is different but equally compelling. While Shrimati's oppression is intellectual, Mridula's is emotional and psychological.

A. Emotional Manipulation and Marital Betrayal

Sanjay begins as a loving husband, but his ambition corrupts him. He repeatedly deceives Mridula, exploits her savings, and disregards her emotional wellbeing. Murthy writes:

“She had married a man who loved only himself” (*House* 188).

This realisation is the cornerstone of her transformation.

B. Domesticity as a Space of Violence

The novel shows how emotional betrayal can be as damaging as physical violence. Sanjay's manipulation is subtle gaslighting, selfishness, disregard for her sacrifices, infidelity. Mridula

becomes emotionally drained, mirroring millions of women whose emotional labour is taken for granted.

C. Economic Independence as Empowerment

Mridula's work as a nurse becomes the backbone of her emancipation. Nursing, often undervalued, represents resilience, compassion, and professionalism. Her declaration to Sanjay is a powerful moment:

"I can stand on my own feet. I don't need your name to survive" (*House* 214).

Unlike Shrimati, Mridula is not intellectually suppressed but emotionally robbed. Her return to her profession restores her dignity.

D. Leaving the Marriage

Her departure is calm, not dramatic:

"She walked out not in anger but in dignity, carrying only her self-respect with her" (*House* 212).

According to feminist ethics, reclaiming dignity is a central component of selfhood. Mridula's quiet exit illustrates Murthy's belief that agency need not be loud to be revolutionary.

VI. Comparative Feminist Analysis

A. Similarities Between Shrimati and Mridula

- Both are caring, dutiful women shaped by traditional expectations.
- Both invest deeply in marriages that exploit their silence.
- Both reach a point of clarity where they recognise their worth.
- Both finally choose themselves.

Murthy shows that patriarchy operates regardless of class, temperament, or circumstance.

B. Differences That Add Depth

Shrimati	Mridula
Intellectual suppression	Emotional exploitation
Subtle patriarchy	Overt manipulation
Escape through education	Escape through economic strength

Quiet, inward-looking personality Practical, resilient personality

Their differences enrich Murthy's feminist landscape, proving she does not offer one-dimensional heroines.

VII. Marriage, Patriarchy, and Power Dynamics

Murthy exposes marriage as a culturally sanctioned institution where women's dreams are often secondary, men's careers overshadow domestic life, emotional labour is assumed to be women's duty, male entitlement goes unquestioned.

Shrikant believes his success is a family priority; Sanjay believes his authority is unquestionable. Murthy does not villainise them; rather, she reveals how patriarchy shapes male behaviour as much as it suppresses women. This nuanced portrayal aligns with Gerda Lerner's argument that patriarchy is both a structure and a cultural inheritance.

VIII. Education, Work, and Women's Autonomy

Murthy asserts that a woman becomes empowered not merely by rejecting marriage but by finding a self outside it. Shrimati's autonomy Comes through intellectual recognition, academic

work, scholarly identity. Where as Mridula's autonomy Comes through earning independently, professional ethics, financial self-reliance. Murthy suggests women must cultivate a life that is not tied solely to familial roles.

IX. Sudha Murthy's Feminist Vision

Murthy's feminism is compassionate, grounded in realism, deeply ethical, centred on dignity and rooted in everyday experience. She is not confrontational like some Western feminist writers. Instead, she offers a feminism of insight, choice, and moral courage. Her heroines speak not through rage but through self-respect. Shrimati leaves because she wants to grow. Mridula leaves because she refuses to be diminished. In both cases, Murthy affirms: "A woman's silence is not her virtue; her voice is."

X. Conclusion

This comparative study reveals that Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* and *House of Cards* articulate a profound feminist message—one that is subtle yet transformative. Through Shrimati and Mridula, Murthy demonstrates how patriarchal structures operate inside homes, marriages, and emotional relationships. She exposes the undervaluation of women's emotional and intellectual contributions while portraying their inner journeys toward selfhood. Shrimati's and Mridula's transformations from silence to self-assertion highlight the importance of self-awareness, education, economic independence and emotional clarity. Murthy offers a feminist vision deeply rooted in Indian social realities, advocating empowerment through everyday acts of courage and ethical agency.

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