

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426703

WOMEN, PATRIARCHY, AND THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SUDHA MURTHY: A FEMINIST CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Received: 25/10/2025
Accepted: 10/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

Indian English literature has been increasingly used as a powerful medium to give articulation to women's experiences in the midst of an essentially patriarchal social structure. Among modern Indian writers, Sudha Murthy holds a unique position for her realistic presentation on the middle and lower middle-class women and their day-to-day struggle. The present study is an attempt to present a critical view on the theme of representation of women, patriarchy and of self-identity in a few select novels (Mahashweta, Dollar Bahu, Gently Falls the Bakula, House of Cards, and The Mother I Never Knew of Sudha Murthy). Using a framework of feminist analysis and cultural analysis, the paper explores the way Murthy portrays the subjugation of women through marriage, family arrangements, economic dependency, social stigma, and gendered expectations as contrasted with the foregrounding of the resilience of women, their moral strength, and their desire for autonomy. The themes of betrayal within marriage, the corrupting effects of money, societal prejudice, and the inspirational effect of education and self-realization are themes that recur throughout the book. Through a careful analysis of the text, the research proposes that Murthy's female protagonists grow from silent sufferers into self-awareness and question the patriarchal norm and establish their right to dignity and independence. The paper concludes that Sudha Murthy's fiction not only doubles the social realities existent in contemporary India but also adds a lot to the feminist discourse by installing ethical values and gender equality and humane relationships.

KEYWORDS: Sudha Murthy; Indian English fiction; feminism; patriarchy; women's identity; gender discrimination; marriage and society; cultural values; empowerment through education

1 INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has become an important platform of study of social realities, cultural values, and human relations in the light of Indian condition. Over the decades, it has made more prominent the voices of marginalized groups, especially of women, whose experiences of life have for too long been confined within patriarchal narratives. Literature in this sense is not just used as a tool of artistic expression, but as a cultural document of social hierarchies, gender norms, and power structures in society. Contemporary women writers have played an important role in dismantling these narratives and placing women's emotional, psychological and social struggles to the forefront.

Among modern Indian writers, Sudha Murthy is unique for her realistic and empathetic portrayal of women who come mainly from the middle and lower-middle class backgrounds. Unlike those writers of overtly radical feminism, Murthy employs a powerful yet subtle narrative strategy based on the everyday. Her fiction focuses attention on the silent suffering of women in the familial and marital institutions, revealing the workings of patriarchy in the form of emotional neglect, economic control, social prejudice and moral double standards. At the same time, her narratives attest to women's inner strength, ethical clarity and ability to self-transform. The novels selected, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *House of Cards*, and *The Mother I Never Knew*, taken together, indicate several important issues in dealing with issues of gender discrimination, marital betrayal, obsession with wealth, social stigma, identity crisis, and the transformative function of education. These works feature women protagonists that are constrained by traditional expectations but gradually progress towards self-awareness and autonomy. This study aims to analyze the tension between tradition and modernity during the process in which Sudha Murthy's fiction negotiates an ethic and a humane vision within the limitless society and pleads in favor of ethics and gender sensitivity.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Critical Studies on the Indian English Women's Writing has been focussed in its readings on the intersection of gender, culture and identity. Feminist literary criticism in India has moved from a beginning of preoccupations with legal and educational rights to finer shades of domestic oppression, emotional alienation, and psychological trauma. Scholars have noted that Indian feminism is different from Western feminist movements in that it

is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and family structures instead of emphasizing on individual freedom only.

Several critics have come to analyze Sudha Murthy's works as the reflection of lived social realities and not of abstract feminist ideologies. Her narratives have been commented on for their language simplicity, moral clarity and strong ethical foundation. Studies on *Mahashweta* include that of Physical appearance and illness, especially leukoderma, which is an exploration and its devastating effect on the marital life of women. The novel has been widely discussed to be a critique of conditional love and superficial values in marriage.

Similarly, *Dollar Bahu* has received scholarly attention due to its antibyranry of materialism and psychological damage due to economic obsession among families. That is, researchers have highlighted how Murthy lays bare internalized patriarchy, particularly female characterization that reinforces norms of oppression. *Gently Falls the Bakula* has been analyzed as a story of identity loss and recovery in terms of the intellectual suppression of educated women in marriage. *House of Cards*, as often interpreted, is a moral commentary of corruption, greed, and degradation of human relationships, while *The Mother I Never Knew* opens it to include the motherhood, abandonment, and identity outside of biological relationships.

Despite the available researches, there is still room for an in-depth comparative analysis in which these novels are brought together within a common feminist and cultural framework. This paper tries to fill this gap, examining recurring patterns of women's oppression and resistance throughout Murthy's fiction.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research is based on a qualitative research design based on descriptive and analytical approaches, which enables for the deep and interpretive analysis of Sudha Murthy fiction with a feminist and cultural approach. The research interests are the thematic probing on the dynamic on gender, patriarchy and self-empowerment of women in the selected novels, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *House of Cards* and *The Mother I Never Knew*. By analyzing these novels, the study aims to present an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural realities portrayed in Murthy's novels and how it relates to issues concerning gender.

3.2 Textual Analysis

A close reading of the works of the selected novels

serves as the primary method of analysis. This includes a close analysis of characterization, standing inside the internal and external machinery of Murthy's female protagonists, their journey through patriarchal structures, while also the change in psychological and emotional states of her characters and their development throughout the story. The study is also focused on identifying and analyzing the recurring motifs like social stigma, patriarchal oppression, economic dependency, marital struggles and identity crisis. The structure of the narrative is analyzed to understand how author employs the means of realism and symbolism in putting across the social realities, as well as the feminist subtext in the author's storytelling. Additionally, the language and style used by Sudha Murthy is examined, especially the use of common language to convey complex social and emotional truths.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The paper is based on a feminist literary theory approach, primarily to focus on patriarchy and feminism and how Murthy's novels critique the power structure in patriarchal society where the roles and rights of women are delineated by the views of men. The research is also interested in identity formation, as it explores the development of Murthy's female protagonists identity in the face of social, familial and economic constraints. Cultural feminism is another important strand of the theoretical framework - the research examines the interaction of Murthy's fictions with the cultural and social context of Indian societal life, where familial and societal expectations often restrict the freedom of women. Agency and resistance are important concepts examined in the study and how the characters resist or work within oppressive systems to assert their autonomy, even if the resistance is subtle or internalized.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

This study is based on the secondary data, which is mainly the close textual analysis of Sudha Murthy's selected novels. No primary data or fieldwork are involved as the research is concerned with the literary content and themes in the novels themselves. Secondary sources include critical reviews and academic articles of works done by Sudha Murthy, feminist literary criticism (in relationship to gender dynamics in Indian literature), and cultural studies (intersection of tradition, modernity and gender roles in Indian society). These sources assist their contextualization of the novels as well as offer insights into how Murthy's writings fit within larger

literary traditions, Indian as well as worldwide.

3.5 Data Analysis Process

Data analysis in this study is conducted within a thematic analysis approach with the option of identifying the themes and categorizing them as referring to gender, power and identity in Murthy's texts. The process comes with reading the novels several times in order to grasp the nuances in character development, progression of themes, and symbolism. Key passages are coded that illustrate gender-related themes such as marital strife, economic dependency, education as empowerment and others such as the search for self-identity. These themes are then organized under much broader analytical categories such as women's agency and autonomy, patriarchy and gender inequality, social mobility and education, and materialism and familial relationships. By comparing these themes across the novels, the study covers any common patterns or deviations of how Murthy handles the themes of women's struggles and empowerment.

Table 1: Overview of Key Themes Across Selected Novels

Novel	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
<i>Mahashweta</i>	Social Stigma	Marital Betrayal	Empowerment through Education
<i>Dollar Bahu</i>	Materialism and Patriarchy	Economic Dependency	Women's Psychological Struggles
<i>Gently Falls the Bakula</i>	Identity Crisis	Intellectual Suppression	Resilience and Self-Awareness
<i>House of Cards</i>	Greed and Corruption	Marital Alienation	Female Empowerment
<i>The Mother I Never Knew</i>	Adoption and Identity	Gendered Expectations	Family and Social Values

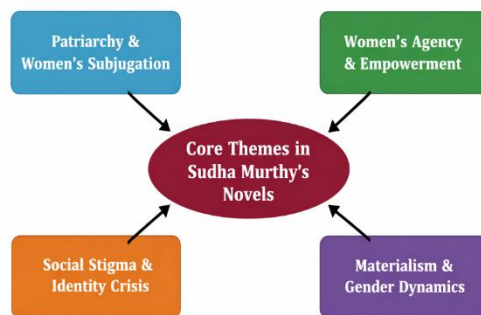


Figure 1: Thematic Framework of Sudha Murthy's Novels

This table summarizes the key thematic concerns addressed in each novel, demonstrating how Sudha Murthy weaves together various socio-cultural and gender issues within her narratives.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical guidelines by ensuring that all secondary data sources are properly cited, including published critiques and analyses of Sudha Murthy's works. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of respecting the author's original voice and intentions while offering an analytical interpretation that contributes to feminist discourse.

3.8 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by the fact that it focuses solely on Sudha Murthy's works, and the analysis is confined to five novels. While these texts offer a comprehensive view of her feminist themes, future studies may consider exploring other novels or extending the analysis to include a comparison with other contemporary Indian women writers. Moreover, as the study is based on textual analysis, it does not incorporate real-world, empirical data from interviews or surveys.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Emergence of Thematic Patterns in Sudha Murthy's Novels

The analysis of Sudha Murthy's novels reveals recurring themes centered on **gender oppression**, **women's resistance**, and the transformative journey of female characters within a patriarchal society. Through the characterizations of Anupama in *Mahashweta*, Vinuta in *Dollar Bahu*, Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, and Mridula in *House of Cards*, Murthy intricately examines how social and familial expectations limit women's autonomy. Despite these patriarchal systems, the protagonists show significant **agency**, often through subtle acts of defiance, such as education, self-realization, and emotional resilience.

The following table summarizes the key themes that emerge from Murthy's selected novels, providing insight into how these themes of oppression, resistance, and self-empowerment intersect.

Table 1: Overview of Key Themes Across Selected Novels

Novel	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
<i>Mahashweta</i>	Social Stigma	Marital Betrayal	Empowerment through Education
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<i>Gently Falls the Bakula</i>	Identity Crisis	Intellectual Suppression	Resilience and Self-Awareness
<i>House of Cards</i>	Greed and Corruption	Marital Alienation	Female Empowerment
<i>The Mother I Never Knew</i>	Adoption and Identity	Gendered Expectations	Family and Social Values

This table encapsulates the core themes found in each of Murthy's novels, reflecting her critique of patriarchal oppression, materialism, and the evolving agency of women through education and self-awareness.

5.2 Materialism and Patriarchy in Women's Oppression

In *Dollar Bahu* and *House of Cards*, Murthy critiques the intersection of materialism and patriarchy as forces that exacerbate the oppression of women. In *Dollar Bahu*, the family dynamics shift when

Gouramma, the mother-in-law, favors the economically affluent Jamuna over Vinuta, the less wealthy daughter-in-law. This preference highlights how material wealth often dictates a woman's value in a patriarchal structure.

Similarly, in *House of Cards*, Mridula's emotional subjugation is exacerbated by her husband's obsession with wealth. Murthy critiques how materialism as a form of patriarchal control creates emotional neglect and economic dependency, leaving women trapped within these structures.

Table 2: The Impact of Materialism and Patriarchy in Murthy's Novels

Novel	Character	Manifestation of Materialism	Impact on Female Protagonist
<i>Dollar Bahu</i>	Vinuta	Sidelined for not being wealthy	Social and emotional marginalization in the family
<i>Dollar Bahu</i>	Gouramma	Preference for wealth over personal traits	Emphasis on financial success over personal integrity
<i>House of Cards</i>	Mridula	Emotional subjugation due to material obsession	Emotional alienation and loss of self-worth
<i>House of Cards</i>	Mridula	Patriarchy reinforced through economic success	Struggle for emotional independence

This table emphasizes how **material wealth** serves as a measure of a woman's worth, particularly in familial settings where **patriarchy** reinforces this idea.

5.3 Empowerment through Education and Self-Realization

A critical finding in this study is the role of education as a tool for empowerment. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's education becomes a sanctuary that shields her from societal rejection due to her skin condition. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's decision to pursue higher education serves as her form of resistance against emotional subjugation.

Education enables the female protagonists to break free from societal limitations, ultimately granting them autonomy and self-respect.

Table 3: Empowerment Through Education in Murthy's Novels

Novel	Character	Education as Empowerment	Impact on Female Protagonist
<i>Mahashweta</i>	Anupama	Uses education to resist societal rejection and stigma	Gains emotional strength and defies patriarchal expectations
<i>Gently Falls the Bakula</i>	Shrimati	Pursues higher education despite marital neglect	Achieves intellectual emancipation and autonomy
<i>House of Cards</i>	Mridula	Seeks independence through self-awareness and education	Breaks free from oppressive marriage and achieves empowerment
<i>Dollar Bahu</i>	Vinuta	Educates herself to assert her dignity	Strengthens her self-worth and challenges familial oppression

This table showcases how **education** empowers Murthy's female protagonists, providing them with the means to resist patriarchy and claim their identities.

5.4 Resistance and Recovery of Identity

Throughout the novels, Murthy explores subtle resistance strategies employed by her protagonists, often through acts of self-realization and personal

autonomy. For example, Anupama's decision to leave her marriage in *Mahashweta* is a powerful act of defiance against societal rejection and emotional oppression. Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula* and Mridula in *House of Cards* also demonstrate acts of resistance by asserting their right to dignity and seeking independence from their husbands and patriarchal expectations.

Table 4: Acts of Resistance in Murthy's Novels

Novel	Character	Act of Resistance	Resulting Empowerment
<i>Mahashweta</i>	Anupama	Leaves her marriage to maintain her dignity	Gains independence and self-respect
<i>Gently Falls the Bakula</i>	Shrimati	Pursues education despite marital neglect	Achieves intellectual and emotional independence
<i>House of Cards</i>	Mridula	Leaves her husband after emotional betrayal	Asserts autonomy and emotional freedom
<i>Dollar Bahu</i>	Vinuta	Resists societal pressure by continuing her career	Establishes her own identity and self-worth

This table highlights the **acts of resistance** that lead to personal empowerment and a reclaiming of autonomy by Murthy's female characters.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

This paper was devoted towards the feminist and cultural analysis of Sudha Murthy selected novels *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently falls the Bakula*, *House of Cards* and *The Mother I Never Knew*. The main aim was to discuss these novels as portraying patriarchal oppression and subjugation of women as well as empowerment through the lives of the female protagonists. The study used the framework of a feminist literary theory to explore that of recurring themes such as gender inequality, social stigma, materialism, education as empowerment, and subversion of the traditional norms of marriages.

The analysis showed that Murthy critiques the ways in which women are typically constrained by patriarchal systems whether it be due to expectations from marriage, dependence economically or being judged by society based on superficial factors such as beauty or wealth. At the same time, Murthy's novels

introduce the reader to women who, despite extremely strict subjugation, are characterised by a great deal of resilience and agency. Education and self-realization become important tools against resistance, allowing these protagonists to regain their autonomy and identity.

The thematic analysis focused on the fact that often materialism also compounded the oppression women are faced with, as in *Dollar Bahu* and *Case of Cards*; where women are valued based on wealth rather than personal worth or intellectual capability. In contrast, education and self-awareness are presented as strong forms of empowerment that empower the female protagonists to confront patriarchal structures in their lives.

6.2 CONCLUSION

Sudha Murthy's works provide a nuanced and multi-dimensional depiction of gender oppression and sociology. Through characters who experience change from passive long-sufferers to self-aware and empowered women, Murthy critiques not only the patriarchal systems that subjugate women but also the materialistic values that make women's

oppression even worse. The focus on education and self-realization throughout the novel shows Murthy's faith in the power of personal growth and intellectual independence for women.

The results of this research highlight the larger implications of Murthy's feminist point of view. By offering complex female protagonists who navigate the intersecting forces of patriarchy, materialism, and societal expectations, Murthy offers valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of feminist resistance in contemporary Indian society. The study is a contribution to feminist literary criticism by pointing out the ways Murthy's works engage with

traditional gender norms and promote a more egalitarian and humane vision of social relationships. Finally, the empowerment of women in the works of Sudha Murthy's fictions is not framed as a gesture of revolt per se but through a process of self-discovery and self-affirmation, as women assert their dignity and autonomy in a manner that is independent of external pressures of society. By presenting such rich and textured depictions of women's struggles and triumphs, Murthy's fiction, apart from laying bare the chapters of harsh realities faced by women, also illuminates their ability to transform and be resilient.

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