

## India through Sudha Murty's *House of Cards*

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**Abstract:** Indian writing in English came to the forefront in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Its pioneer was the trio of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao. The representation of India in literature has always been a concern for the Indian English writers because "English is the language of our intellectual make up, not our emotional make up" (Meenakshi Mukherjee). As a reader I observed that the subject matter and the content have undergone significant changes from the earlier decades of the twentieth century to the inception of the twenty first century. The concerns are no more the atrocities inflicted by the Britisher's upon Indians, no more are they to invoke patriotic jingoism.

The new Indian English novel deals with the modern issues of women, child labour, familial ties, subaltern, and the other marginalized sections of a developing India. My motive here is to bring up the issues dealt with in the new Indian English novel. Sudha Murty, along with being one of the most celebrated and widely read Indian English writers, portrays the new India eloquently in her novel *House of Cards* published in 2013.

Her novel *House of Cards* as the name suggests, deals with home, family ties, work place, and the balance that is needed to be kept among all to keep these ties functional and in a robust state. The gist of the novel is: Sanjay and Mridula, a married couple, work to earn a living. They are altruistic and honest people who put the service to humankind before themselves. However, Sanjay's altruistic nature doesn't do him any good. Disillusioned by the corruption prevalent, he ultimately abandons his morals and takes on the path of deceit and corruption to earn a fortune. He puts up a hospital in partnership with his friend and charges very high. Money starts pouring in and eventually he becomes egoistic and more self-centred. Meanwhile, Mridula retains her morals and this disturbs the concord between the two. Sanjay also grows to become a domineering husband and doesn't let Mridula play an equal role in the upbringing of their only child, Sishir, rather guides him towards the path of deceit to make a name for himself. The discord gradually deepens and ultimately Mridula leaves Sanjay.

This novel is another typical novel of Sudha Murty with petty bourgeois Indian family, corrupt roads taken, a subjugated woman, and the ultimate transformation of and some bold step taken by the female protagonist. Her simple language and easy narration makes her every literary piece an easy read and comprehensible to a layman as well. These qualities contribute a lot in making her top the chart of the most widely read Indian English writers of the twenty first century. Her novels are a vivid description of the issues of our times that trouble the thoughtful people of today.

One of the greatest concerns of today's world is the rampant and all engulfing greed for money. This story holds a mirror to it. Doctors are deemed to be the Gods alive, the saviours. Sick people being considered an ATM machine by doctors is an alarming situation and a trailer of the naked dance of the corrupt, avaricious, and bleak future of the humankind, aptly showcased through the character of Sanjay.

Politics of the current times is sadly attributed with money heist, and the prime servants of the people behaving as prime rulers, a role which supposedly changes with the timing of elections. But as they say, there is no smoke without a fire. The narrator in her novel, *House of Cards*, once goes on to say,

"One thing was certain: the Health minister was not bothered about other people's time." (Penguin Books India, 2013, 122)

This incident happens when Sanjay and Mridula call on a minister to seek promotion for Sanjay (before he resigns from the government job in Mumbai and sets up his own business, a hospital in Bangaluru, in partnership with his friend Alex).

Murty takes up the issue of herd mentality. As we observe, the values of Indians have undergone a drastic change in a few decades. It was not long ago that India was trying to stand up on its own feet being a newly born nation, and the

motive of the educated mass was to educate and awaken people on the other side of the fence of formal knowledge, time and again they emphasised on the dearth of scientific approach, research, and indigenous development. In the India of today people have diverted all the more from these higher causes and are more inclined towards money minting. The LPG reform of the 1990s, although put India on a global front but failed to inculcate the scientific temper required for a nation to pioneer in the innovation for the betterment of all humankind. Being a developing nation has its own ramifications. Petty bourgeoisie comes inadvertently. The novel shows that the least preferred option in the new India is teaching, being a low paid job. We become witnesses to an example of such thought process engrossing people when Alex, Sanjay's best friend, says to him,

*“Come on, Sanjay, who wants to be a professor? I want to earn a lot of money. If you want to earn money in a government job in India, then you have to be corrupt. But if I work hard for four years in the Middle East, come back and open a hospital here, I can mint money.”* (Penguin Books India, 2013, 8)

S. Murty also deals with the issue of kinship and networking. To survive in this cut throat competition and rapidly modernising world, one needs to develop and nourish ties with people who could be of some help at any point of time in life, relations are thus degraded to utility. In a multicultural country like India, sharing a common language and culture then becomes a very handy tool for grinding one's axe. In the same novel Alex once explains networking to Sanjay where he says,

*“Though we talk about equal opportunity for everyone, practically, in our country, it is community, language and connections that are important.”* (Penguin Books India, 2013, 56)

This single statement by Sanjay explores and debunks the myth of unity in diversity. Since time immemorial we, Indians, boast about our equality among such diversity. But the truth is revealed at such moments, when we have to compete among ourselves and, to excel, we do not hesitate in going to any extent for knocking the other person down. The officers and the ministers today are marketable. The party offering the highest amount will gain the maximum benefit out of the power of the approached officer. Common language and community serves as the cherry on the cake. At such times, we tend to forget the diction of equal opportunity for everyone and the hard work one might have done to reach a certain position. We become utterly selfish and see nothing before our ambitions. Many of us might be worthy of whatever positions they attain in their lives, but nevertheless bribery helps a lot of them to the pedestals higher than they deserve and in that process, hard-working and honest people like Sanjay suffer.

We live in the twenty first century and talk about equal opportunities for and fair treatment of both the sexes. On papers and superficially we have advanced a lot and keep a high approach about women. We boast of having overcome traditional and orthodox approaches towards women. We feel proud of perceiving a broadened mindset where women are not looked down upon or called names for doing things which have generally, since time immemorial, been ascribed to the domain of men. I would cite a conversation between Mridula and Sanjay from the same novel,

*““Well, she's a woman, she shouldn't drink.”*

*“Who said that you have to be a man to drink?”*

*Sanjay wanted to support his son and said, “Sarla's worked hard and made loads of money. She has a right to enjoy it too.”*

*Mridula got irritated. “What do you mean? Haven't I earned money with hard work too?”* (Penguin Books India, 2013, 160)

We see Mridula not approving of Sarla's drinking habits merely because she is a woman. Patriarchy works in various forms and it works best when it is internalized by its victims. Mridula here serves as a very good example of the triumph of patriarchy where it is unquestioningly accepted by its subject. She judges people on the basis of their sex and the choice of their lifestyles in accordance with it. Sanjay however seems to have mentally progressed along with economic progress that has come through his way. Interestingly Mridula is supposed to be a modern woman who has a life apart from home, she earns a living and contributed to the family's finances, also coming from a village, she seems to be a little ahead of her time, as the narrator of the novel says,

*“Mridula was not like everybody, she was different. She had enormous enthusiasm for life and unlimited energy for reading, cooking and sketching. She wanted to spend every minute of the day fruitfully. It seemed that the sun rose for*

her and the rainbow colours were meant only for her. Every day was to be lived to its fullest and every beautiful moment to be enjoyed.” (Penguin Books India, 2013, 2)

Mridula, despite acquiring these artistic skills thinks lowly of women who take alcoholic beverages or, to be more precise, those who eventually adopt the western life style (since intake of alcohol by (Hindu) women is not considered to be a part of the Indian etiquettes). Nevertheless, here, Mridula represents a larger section of the female sex of our country who despite of having gained riches and luxury have not evolved fully as far as their thinking towards their own kind is concerned.

As aforementioned Sudha Murty is the biggest selling author of India of the twenty first century. A novel by her is not merely a piece of black and white production to be consumed in free time. The issues she deals with are the issues of concern of the modern India. On drawing a comparison between the issues of the early twentieth century and the early twenty first century we find a prominent difference among the topics that are dealt with. The concerns of the modern times are no longer the trauma of partition or the atrocities inflicted upon the Indians by the Britishers, nor do they dwell on the difference between a country side and a town (since it was in the twentieth century that India started urbanizing). The new Indian English novel deals with a potpourri of the day to day lives of the families, the conflicts and differences within the families, corruption, modernization, and life in a newly born country, rather than out and out talking about the differences that are to be found outside of the circumference of a familial bond.

India is one of the fastest growing nations. In current times, Indian value system is in a hazy state. We are oscillating between the Western value system, which we learnt from the Britishers and our centuries old traditions. Especially in the past thirty years, with the LPG reforms and India becoming a full-fledged member of the global village, it has witnessed a tremendous change in the lifestyle and value system of its people. The generation gap has deepened more since ever. In the middle aged generation of our society, only those who adapt to the change and try to jell with the encroaching western lifestyle live happily; while those who still try to hold on to their old traditions and values are deemed to be social outcasts, especially by the youth, and undergo mental torture of not consenting to the societal obligations and hence being unable to walk hand in hand with their children or grandchildren, or being a misfit in today's world. This discrepancy within families is what makes the familial ties weak and vanish with the due course of time.

In *House of Cards*, Sanjay has adapted to the tide of capitalism and become a mercenary doctor. Initially he was a man of high morals who wanted to serve the human kind with his skill of rectifying what went wrong in the human body. He wanted to research more in the field of biology and make new discoveries and find the cure of many supposedly incurable diseases. But along with capitalism comes greed. He realizes that being honest would do him no good and establishes a hospital and becomes a businessman. He starts charging high, prescribing unnecessary medicine and operating unnecessarily and thus filling his ever-deepening pockets. While Mridula retains her morals, remains charitable, hospitable and remains down to earth even after accumulating riches. This difference in the opinions of the two makes their ties bitter. An undesired, strange and ever deepening void comes between the two. Both of them try to impart their son with their respective morals, but the son shows more inclination towards the avaricious morals of his father and belittles his mother. However, when he moves abroad for higher education he realizes the value of his mother's morals and regrets for not having given her due respect. At this point of time, in the novel, we witness the confusion regarding the value systems in the young generation of the modern India. On one hand it wants to be called modern by adapting to a life style foreign to the old Indian culture, one that of being a party animal, having alien hair style, alien clothes, and fighting to be independent of their parent's expectations of them, and on the other hand it looks back to its own culture to find warmth, love, and repose, in the same culture which it has known since ever yet is not to the liking.

The fact that Sudha Murty is one of the biggest selling Indian authors reflects that the gentry of India can relate itself to the subject matter of her books. She is appreciated because what she writes holds significance for the Indian readers. 'Indianness' is purely reflected in her works. She chooses real Indian locales to situate her characters which make her work more relatable. She locates her works in specific geographic locations. Here also Murty talks strictly about villages in Karnataka, Bengaluru, and Mumbai. She brings to the fore the changing value system of the Indian families and the discord in the familial ties arising due to this change. She talks about the politics, greed, kinship and how it has degraded to utilitarianism. Neither does English, a foreign language, come as a barrier to her. These efforts give her novel that rare quality of Indianness which makes a novel instantly Indian by its very content and subject matter.

#### References:

1. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire*. The Anxiety of Indianness. OUP, New Delhi, 2000. Print.
2. Murty, Sudha. *House of Cards*. Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2013. Print.