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## **A changed perspective of the new woman in present era**

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### **Abstract**

India from ancient times has been a male-dominated country, where women were expected to be meek, obedient, passive, servile and submissive. They were expected to stay within the four-walls of the house. Their opinions and feelings never mattered to anyone. Women were asked to follow the ideals of Sita and Savitri-the perfect wives from mythology. They have suffered silently under patriarchal domination for a long time. But with time, they have started taking small steps towards a life of equality and respect. They have started asserting their rights and protect their own dignity in a relationship. They have started a journey to change the narrow mindset of patriarchal chauvinists. When women started revolting they were termed as the 'New Woman' and this name was given to all those who wanted to do something in their life and create their own identity. According to the male-dominated society, the 'New Women' were a threat to the peaceful family surroundings. But with the passage of time, many writers have started presenting a new perspective of the 'New Woman'. This paper focuses on Sudha Murty's attempt to show how women who sticks with their husbands through their thick and thin, can also walk out on them if the foundation of their marriage, i.e. trust, is broken. She also shows how the new generation prefers equality over riches and status in their marriage prospects. Sudha Murthy in her book House of Cards presents two New Women-Mridula and Neha, who played a very essential role in changing the mind-set of the father-son duo Sanjay and Shishir. This book is a small step towards changing the attitude of the society towards women to command respect for them.

**Keyword:**New Woman, Patriarchy, Equality, Trust

### **Article**

India is known to be a male dominated country since ancient times. Being a patriarchal society, women were treated shabbily and they remained oppressed and suffered silently for a long time. The birth of a girl child was never welcomed. Girls were not provided proper education and were trained from childhood to become an ideal, loyal, chaste and obedient wife. They were given examples of mythological characters like Sita and Savitri. Sita was an ideal wife who went to forest for fourteen years with her husband to serve him and when questioned on her chastity, gave 'agnipariksha' to prove her loyalty, purity and chastity. Savitri was also considered as an ideal wife who was ready to face Yama (the God of death) to save her husband's life. These were the ideals prescribed by the society for women. After India became independent, women also craved for freedom and independent existence and many women revolted against the conventional norms set by the society for women. These women wanted to establish their own identity and become financially independent. They wanted to free themselves from the trammels of the patriarchal domination. They revolted against patriarchal oppression and injustice done to women. These

women were termed as the 'New Woman'. Many writers and poets, at that time, introduced the trend of New Woman as the protagonist in their works. But those new woman characters were presented as rebellious, ambitious, power-hungry and bold and they opposed the institution of marriage in one way or other. This led to a negative impression of the New Woman. She looked like someone who destroys peaceful family surroundings to achieve her goals. This perspective of the New Woman continued for a long time. But with time the old perspective gave way to the new one and many women writers presented in their works the new changed perspective on the New Women and the powerful role they can play in a family and in a society.

This paper aims to analyse how Sudha Murty in her novel *The House of Cards* portrays this new changed perspective of New Women and in this mission, she carves out two female characters Mridula and Neha- two characters who proved that the New Women knows how to maintain peaceful familial surroundings but not at the cost of their self-respect. Mridula- a good daughter, dutiful wife and a loving mother- tried her best to fulfil all her responsibilities, not only in her home but also in her work. She was a good teacher and tried to provide proper education to all the students. She stood by her husband in all the highs and lows of life but when her husband broke the foundation of their marriage, i.e. mutual trust, she was shattered and to save her self-respect, she decided to walk out leaving behind the twenty-five years of love and togetherness of their marriage behind her. This step forced her husband to think how he underestimated his wife and this event changed his chauvinistic mentality and he went to bring her back in his life with all the respect that she deserved. Neha, on the other hand, was a poor and independent girl but preferred equality in a relationship more than money and status. Her thinking and personality helped Shishir to change his chauvinistic attitudes about women and she was the reason who made Shishir give respect to women and specially his mother, whom he had always neglected and insulted. These two strong, independent ladies provided a perfect example to the world about how wrong idea they had of the New Women and how important role these women can play to change the old mentality of the society.

The description of Mridula in the beginning of the book is quite attractive: "for Mridula, nothing mattered. She was swinging without any bondage and with a free mind. From the swing, she could see her house. She was happy. 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 minute to be enjoyed" (Murty, 2). Mridula was very good at studies and after completing her studies, she got a job as a teacher. During one of her visit to Hubli for a wedding, she met Dr. Sanjay and in some time both fell in love. In spite of knowing Sanjay's handicap Mridula agreed to marry him. After marriage, they moved to Bangalore and settled there. As time passed Sanjay started facing problems in the hospital he worked and he decided to quit his government hospital job and start his own nursing home in partnership with his friend Alex. Within fourteen years his nursing home became one of the leading maternity homes in Bangalore. Sanjay "had progressed in leaps and bounds, amassed a fortune and made a name for himself" (Murthy, 140). Sanjay had earned both black as well as white money. Mridula was totally unaware of the black money earned by Sanjay. She took care of the accounts which contained white money earned by Sanjay and the accounts containing black money was handled by Sanjay alone. Sanjay had also spoilt his son Shishir by always pampering him and taking his side even when he was wrong. As Mridula always opposed this, a rift had appeared between Mridula and her son Shishir. Shishir, because of his father's pampering, lived a life of luxury and spent money unnecessarily. As Sanjay accumulated more and more

wealth, he started disrespecting Mridula. He found faults in everything she did and said. He started feeling that Mridula was not fit for his status. “Mridula did not play an important role anywhere in Sanjay’s life” (Murthy, 150). Shishir also followed his father’s steps. He was only thought of money and luxury. He ignored everything that Mridula advised him. She felt as if Shishir was becoming a stranger to her. “Shishir looked like his mother but his voice, mannerisms and thinking were Sanjay’s” (Murthy, 154). Sanjay’s and Shishir’s attitude towards Mridula kept deteriorating and she always felt humiliated whenever she advised them on anything. “She was extremely sensitive to their comments and their words hurt her terribly” (Murthy, 157).

One day when Sanjay was out of country, due to the urgent need of some papers, Mridula visited the nursing home and opened Sanjay’s locker, she was shocked and her trust shattered when she found out that Sanjay had been betraying her since a long time. She found a passbook of a bank account held jointly by Sanjay and her sister Lakshmi and the account balance was close to fifty lakhs. She also found receipt of the money Sanjay sent his mother. When Mridula had suggested that they should send the money to Sanjay’s mother Sanjay had denied but he had sent the money without Mridula’s knowledge. Not only this but he has also gifted a car to Lakshmi’s son Anil, a house and gold ornaments to Lakshmi. “At that moment, something inside her just shattered into pieces. When the foundation of trust cracks, how can a marriage remain the same? Mridula felt like she was drowning. Her thoughts haunted her” (Murthy, 183). When Sanjay returned back, Mridula did not talk with him and she silently shifted to the guest room. When Sanjay came to know that Mridula has learnt about all his secrets, there was no trace of any guilt in him. Rather he thought to himself that so what if he doesn’t share everything with Mridula and moreover Lakshmi is his sister and he can do anything for her and by helping Lakshmi Mridula’s share of money has not decrease; so why should she be bothered by all these. Mridula felt cheated by thinking that Sanjay “acted like an honest husband but he had stabbed her in the back. She felt trapped in her marriage” (Murthy, 191). On her 25<sup>th</sup> marriage anniversary, Sanjay had planned a great party to celebrate. But Mridula decided to walk out of the marriage that day. She had asked for a transfer to her village school. She said, “I’ve spent twenty twenty-five of my most important years with you, and yet, I never felt like I belonged to you or your family. I’m still an outsider. My father’s house now belongs to Vatsala and I don’t want to be a burden on my brother and her. Shishir is independent and you can take care of him better than I can. My duty towards both of you is over. I’ve fulfilled all my duties as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. 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” (Murthy, 218). Saying all this, Mridula took her bag and left. Sanjay stood there shocked. He had taken Mridula always for granted. But he had never thought that she can take such a big decision on her own. “He walked back into the house and sat down on the sofa. The phone was ringing. He ignored it. For the first time, he felt like he had lost something valuable. He believed that he could buy anything and anyone with money. But today, even with all his riches, he felt like a beggar” (Murthy, 219). Mridula had left a void in his life and he started missing her presence. He remembered the day they had first met and he remembered each and every moment spent with her. The ending chapter reflects the change that came in Sanjay’s mindset within two months after Mridula left. The chapter takes the reader to a beautiful description of Ugadi festival time in Mridula’s village. There were preparations going on for the festival. “But for Mridula, nothing mattered. She was swinging without any bondage and with a free mind. From the swing, she could see her house. She was happy. Mridula was not like everybody, she was different. She had enormous enthusiasm for life and unlimited energy. 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 minute to be enjoyed. Suddenly, Mridula felt that someone was trying to stop the swing. Surprised, she turned to look. Sanjay was holding the swing, with his one good arm” (Murthy, 232). The end of the novel clearly shows how Mridula’s fight for her self-respect helped in changing the mindset of her husband.

When Shishir went to England for higher studies, he met Neha who was also going to England for her studies. Shishir remembered the time he had first met Neha at an all-India youth competition and both were participating in it. Neha was from a small place called Chitradurga. As both were studying in Oxford, they were able to feel a bond growing between them. There were three more from Bangalore and hence they made a five people group. Once while the group went for punting in the river, the topic of their prospective life partner came and everyone gave their perspective of how their life partner should be. When Shishir’s turn came he said, “I want a girl who won’t argue with me and who will adjust to any situation. A woman defines the culture and environment at home. But she should be modern outside the house. She must be intelligent and understand how I think and act accordingly” (Murthy, 224). He felt that for a girl finding a good looking and rich husband is a kind of achievement and she should be willing to adjust according to Shishir’s wishes. But for Neha money or status did not matter. Rather she wished for a life partner who would give her the respect she deserved. Both should support each other in growing together and individually.

One day Shishir asked Neha to go on a date with him. But Neha declined the offer. Shishir got disturbed by this incident. He was not able to comprehend how a girl can say no to him as he is so handsome, rich, intelligent and successful. Next day, he went to Neha’s college to meet her. When he saw her, he asked her angrily that how she can reject his idea of going on a date. Neha said to him that their upbringing and attitude towards life is very different. She further pointed out that “despite modern education, your mindset has not changed. You expect a woman to remain a subordinate. She should adjust under every circumstance. Her compromising nature is considered a virtue. I don’t want to live like that. I don’t want to be a doormat. Marriage is not the final destination for me. There are other ways that a woman can live her life” (Murthy, 227). She also said, “There are three types of men in this world. The majority of them belong to the first category where a man leads and thinks he’s superior and makes his wife follow him. He’s happy to look after her as long as she remains subordinate to him. He assumes that she’s not as exposed to life as he is or as intelligent as he is. He makes decision on her behalf. Most women accept this as a way of life and people who don’t accept it or rebel against it have to suffer in society. The second category is of men who allow women to excel. They adjust their life according to the woman in their life and respect her as an individual rather than a wife. But there are very few people in this category. The third category is of men who treat their women as true and equal partners in life and walk side by side with them. I don’t want the first category of men at all” (Murthy, 227-28). When Shishir got angry and asked her that how she can think that he ill-treats women, Neha calmly advised Shishir to ask his conscience about the status he gives to women and does he really respect women and considers them his equal; these answers he can get only if he listens to his conscience honestly. Saying this Neha left. Shishir took some time to digest all these and later when he understood what Neha had said, he found out that the only woman he had most interactions with was his mother and how he had always disrespected his mother by following his father’s footsteps. His mother had no authority on other matters except kitchen matters. All other decisions were taken by his father. He realized how much pain and humiliation his mother has suffered by

staying with his father. But his father has never realized or appreciated her sufferings. For him, she is not very important, almost a non-entity.

Shishir realized that he would never get a girl like Neha who is so caring, simple, honest and bold. He was not ready to lose her but for that he needed to change himself for better. He wanted to be the partner Neha was looking for. He knew changing himself won't be easy but losing Neha would be more difficult so he was ready to change himself to be a better person. He remembered how once his mother had told him that "Shishir, things are different today. Girls are independent now. Their expectations from a partner are high. Traditionally, only the woman was expected to adjust and change. But the modern world demands that boys change too. You can't treat your wife the way you treat me. No modern girl will be happy only with money. Care, partnership and responsibility are the key ingredients if a modern marriage" (Murthy, 230). This entire episode made Shishir look at his mother from a new perspective. He felt bad for the way he had always treated her. He started respecting her for all that she had done for him and his father. When he called home and came to know that her mother had left his father and gone to her village, he said his father that without his mother's support his father wouldn't have been successful in building such a big empire and his father should make the first move to save his marriage and bring Mridula back in his life and home. Neha not only changed the way Shishir expected his life partner to be, but also his perspective of looking at women and his own life. Shishir tried to change himself to be a better person leaving behind his chauvinistic attitude towards women.

Mridula and Neha became successful in changing the chauvinistic perspective of Sanjay and Shishir. Though it is just a micro-level change but these micro-level changes can one day bring a revolution of a macro-level change in the attitude of society towards women. And for bringing this macro-level revolution, the women can play a pivotal role. The power is within them, all they need to do is recognise their power and fight for their upliftment but without disrupting the family surroundings. This changed perspective of new woman that Sudha Murthy has tried to portray in her book *House of Cards* might force the readers to change their perspective towards women as well and make the women aware of the important role they can play in changing the mindset of their family and society.

#### REFERENCES:

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