



Women's Interpersonal Dynamics within the Family of In-Laws: A Reading of Select Characters in Sudha Murty's Novels

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Abstract: Sudha Murty is a prolific writer whose stories reflect the social realities of middle-class Indian life with unusual clarity. Again and again, her work brings to light the everyday tensions inside families, especially those that strain a marriage and sometimes break it. Murty pays close attention to the bonds, and the missing bonds, between women in the same household. She shows how sincere, dutiful women are hurt day after day by their own families, and how other women are often the cause of that hurt. Husbands who are wrapped up in their own ambitions add to the problem, and their neglect is another major source of unhappiness for women in middle-class homes. This paper examines how women's relationships with their in-laws are portrayed in three of Murty's novels, Mahashweta, House of Cards, and Gently Falls the Bakula. It considers how female characters, knowingly or not, uphold patriarchal expectations and so deepen the emotional, social, and personal struggles of other women. It also traces how Murty's heroines face these struggles, step outside traditional limits, and work towards self-realization and equality. The central problem the study identifies is a family's unwillingness to accept a new member fully as one of its own. The study follows a qualitative literary method built on close textual reading, with scholarly articles and critical studies serving as secondary sources. It draws attention to the way women's wishes, and even their basic desire for respect, are repeatedly brushed aside in the name of status and convention. These women are left on their own, pressured to give up their identities to please others, and discriminated against all the same.

Keywords: identity, experience, discrimination, patriarchy, family, in-laws

Introduction

For generations, male dominance, propped up by cultural and traditional norms, has reduced the Indian woman's place in the household to that of someone who performs duties and is expected to work without asking for anything in return. Women enter marriage with their roles already decided for them, and however hard they try to fulfil those roles, their opportunities remain limited regardless of their abilities. In her study of women's status in Indian society, Mohapatra observes that customs placing the family's honour and convenience above a woman's own needs have kept women in a subordinate position. Kate Millett identifies the family as patriarchy's chief institution, the place where women first learn their subordination and then pass it on to the next generation. In India, this subordination is made worse by kinship structures in which marriage moves a bride out of her natal family and into her husband's patrilineal household (Uberoi). Sudha Murty's fiction looks closely at these dynamics as they play out inside the family. Drawing on her careful observation of ordinary households, and on a life that has itself been described as one of simplicity and dedication ("Inspirational Story"), Murty shows women being discriminated against, pushed to the margins, and forced to give up their identity for the family's sake, even as they keep hoping for a small measure of acceptance from the people around them.

Anupama in Mahashweta, Mridula in House of Cards, and Shrimati in Gently Falls the Bakula are all treated in much the same way by their families. Murty writes each of them as a daughter-in-law whom the mother-in-law did not choose, and this goes some way towards explaining the discrimination they face. Each, however, was chosen by her husband, and yet the man who chose her fails in his duties and gives her neither emotional security nor contentment (Murty, Mahashweta; Murty, House of Cards; Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). Without these



most basic foundations of a shared life, all three women are thrown into turmoil. The novels therefore explore the dynamics of marriage, the changes it brings into a woman's life, and the conduct of the in-laws who receive her.

The paths the three heroines take are remarkably alike. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati and Shrikant drift apart under the pressure of ambition, self-interest, and social expectation until their marriage comes to an end (Murty, *Gently Falls the Bakula*). In *Mahashweta*, Anupama refuses to go back with her husband, Dr. Anand, because she has found a far more peaceful life away from her in-laws (Murty, *Mahashweta*). In *House of Cards*, Mridula leaves her husband and his family in search of a happier life after discovering the dishonest means by which he has grown rich (Murty, *House of Cards*). None of these women fears being alone. Each, in fact, is better off away from the deceitful lives of the people around her. Ironically, they were most isolated while they were still inside their marriages, because relationships driven by selfish interests never met their needs. As Priyanka notes in her study of Murty's women characters, these heroines are ordinary women whose strength lies in quiet endurance and in their eventual refusal to be diminished.

This paper reads the three novels closely, paying particular attention to the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the women of her husband's family. It argues that Murty does not present the mother-in-law and sister-in-law simply as villains. Rather, they act on behalf of a patriarchal order in which they themselves have a stake. The paper further argues that it is the husband's emotional absence that finally leaves the heroine with no protection in the marital home.

Women, Patriarchy, and the Family of In-Laws

Feminist theory has long held that womanhood is shaped by social expectation rather than by nature. Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283) describes the process by which a woman learns, and is made to accept, the roles assigned to her. In the Indian joint family, this process becomes sharper at the moment of marriage, when a young woman leaves her natal home for a household in which she is a newcomer, an outsider, and the lowest in the order of authority. The psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has shown that an Indian mother's intense emotional investment in her son often leads her to see the young bride as a rival for his affection and loyalty. As a result, the early years of a marriage tend to be marked by suspicion and testing rather than by welcome.

Deniz Kandiyoti's idea of "bargaining with patriarchy" helps explain why the other women in that household so often become instruments of the bride's oppression. Under what Kandiyoti calls classic patriarchy, the hardship a young bride endures is eventually replaced by the authority she will hold over her own daughters-in-law, so older women have a real interest in keeping alive the very system that once kept them down (279). The mother-in-law's control over the household, the kitchen, and her son's loyalty is her hard-won reward, and the arrival of a daughter-in-law threatens it, particularly one whom the son, not the mother, has chosen. Sociological research shows that this conflict is more than a literary motif. Studying cases of domestic abuse in India, Gangoli and Rew find that violence by mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law is a widespread and recognized form of domestic violence, one rooted in the hierarchies of patrilocal households and not simply in individual malice. bell hooks makes a related point: sexist socialization teaches women to see one another as competitors and enemies rather than as allies, so that women often end up enforcing the very norms that harm them.

Murty's novels put this bargain on the page. Kauntagi and Kolekar observe that Murty approaches feminism from within the ordinary Indian family rather than through open political argument, exposing injustice through women's daily experiences (1). The mothers-in-law in her novels, Radhakka in *Mahashweta*, Ratnamma in *House of Cards*, and Gangakka in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, are not monsters. They are women guarding a small share of power. Their hostility, together with the indifference of sisters-in-law and the neglect of husbands, makes up the web of relationships that each heroine has to find her way through.



Anupama in Mahashweta: Illness, Rejection, and Survival

Mahashweta tells the story of an affliction that its protagonist, Anupama, does nothing to deserve, and of the cruelty it brings into her life. A beautiful but poor young woman, she marries Dr. Anand, the son of a wealthy family, and seems to have found happiness. Yet she was never her mother-in-law's choice before the wedding, and she does not become one after it. While Anand is abroad for higher studies, Anupama notices a white patch on her skin, the first sign of leukoderma, and from that moment her place in the household falls apart (Murty, Mahashweta). Even the family priest, Narayana, scolds her for bringing flowers for the puja: "Don't come in here and pollute everything..." (54). His rebuke shows how quickly the household turns a medical condition into a mark of impurity.

Radhakka, her mother-in-law, expected only one thing of her daughter-in-law: that she perform the Lakshmi puja at Deepawali. Beyond that ritual role, Radhakka felt no bond with her (Murty, Mahashweta). When she learns of Anupama's condition, she promptly sends for Anupama's father to take her home, as if she has finally found the excuse she had been looking for to be rid of her. Murty writes that "Radhakka looked triumphant," and Radhakka tells the father, "Take your daughter back with you. She need not come back until she is completely cured.... We have been deceived, and I will inform Anand about this" (Mahashweta 58). The word "triumphant" says a great deal. Radhakka feels neither grief nor concern; she feels victorious, because the illness proves her original disapproval right and restores her authority over her son's choices.

Girija, Anupama's sister-in-law, shares this hostility. The two have never got along, and Girija has always treated Anupama as an outsider. When the patch on Anupama's foot is discovered, Girija feels "a kind of vicious satisfaction" (Mahashweta 53). Murty is exposing an uncomfortable truth here: the bride's suffering can actually give pleasure to the women of her husband's family. Nothing Anupama has done provokes their hostility. It comes from rivalry, from a sense that their own status is under threat, and from the household's readiness to treat the newcomer as expendable. Girija's delight in Anupama's misfortune is a clear case of the lack of solidarity between women that hooks describes, in which one woman's loss is felt by another as a gain. Prema reads the novel as a portrayal of the relentless oppression of Anupama, with social prejudice against illness reinforced at every level of the family.

Her in-laws' cruelty is made worse by her husband's betrayal. Anand does not answer her letters, and Anupama starts hearing rumours that he plans to marry again (Murty, Mahashweta). Her father's house offers no refuge either. Her stepmother resents her return, so once again she is surrounded by a woman who sees her as a burden. The mental torment grows so severe that she decides to end her life: "She gazed at the ledge—it was only a few steps away. And death was waiting" (Mahashweta 77). In this scene, Murty brings out the trauma that women endure through no fault of their own.

At this moment of crisis, Anupama thinks about how unjust her situation is. She thinks of Girija, whose conduct was far from virtuous but who, with money and her mother's backing, had married into a rich family and was respected in society. Anupama herself, better than Girija in conduct, looks, and temperament, was being driven towards death by a small white patch on her skin (Mahashweta 77). The passage shows Murty's awareness that acceptance in such families depends less on morality than on wealth, appearance, and the support of powerful women. Anupama's question, whether any of this is fair, is the question the novel puts to its readers.

Anupama does not die. She moves to Bombay, supports herself by teaching, and slowly builds a life of dignity and purpose. When Anand finally comes back, full of regret, she refuses to return with him (Murty, Mahashweta). Parvathi and Pushpalatha see this refusal as the culmination of Anupama's growth into a "new woman," one who no longer looks for her identity in the approval of her husband's family (878). The novel's title, which recalls the figure of Mahashweta, "the great white one," turns the whiteness her in-laws treated as a stain into a sign of her inner purity and strength.



Mridula in House of Cards: Neglect and the Cost of Ambition

Mridula's situation in House of Cards is much the same. A simple, warm-hearted schoolteacher from a village, she marries Sanjay, a young doctor in Bangalore, and joins a family that is emotionally distant (Murty, House of Cards). Her mother-in-law, Ratnamma, cares above all about money. She takes little interest in Mridula as a person, but for her son's sake she tries to teach her daughter-in-law to save: "She had seen enough nonsense in her life. She wanted to warn her daughter-in-law for the sake of her son" (69). The sentence makes Ratnamma's loyalties plain. Her advice is offered "for the sake of her son," not for Mridula's, and Mridula matters only as the person who runs his household.

Mridula's relationship with her sister-in-law is just as distant. The sister-in-law behaves less like a sister than like an acquaintance who enjoys showing off, and she, too, shows no regard for Mridula's feelings. Later in the novel, it emerges that she has been borrowing large sums of money from Sanjay without Mridula's knowledge (Murty, House of Cards). These secret dealings confirm that Mridula is treated as an outsider even in matters that directly concern her own household. The women of Sanjay's family relate to her through money and appearances, never through affection.

Sanjay, once a caring and loving partner, changes beyond recognition. His ambition crowds out everything else. He begins to make money through unethical means and grows indifferent to his wife's values and opinions (Murty, House of Cards). Left alone, Mridula slowly falls ill from loneliness. Her condition recalls what Betty Friedan famously called "the problem that has no name," the silent despair of women whose lives have been swallowed whole by the demands of home and family. At her first appointment with Dr. Rao, she asks, "Doctor, I am suffering from depression. Will I be cured completely?" (House of Cards 207). The directness of her question is moving. Mridula has understood that her family's emotional neglect has made her ill, and her decision to seek help is itself a first step towards taking back her life.

The neglect is handed down to the next generation. Mridula's son, Shishir, who has grown up watching his father, starts treating his mother with the same dismissiveness. When she gives him advice, he says nothing to her but thinks, "If the girl herself isn't bothered and when her parent themselves sends her with me, then why does Amma care? Times have changed, but she has stayed behind..." (House of Cards 166). Shishir's contempt shows how the devaluing of a woman within the family is learned and passed on: the son picks up his father's attitude and repeats it. However hard Mridula works for her family's well-being, she is overlooked again and again, and her advice and requests are ignored precisely because she is always there, whatever the situation. Her eventual decision to leave Sanjay is therefore not rebellion for its own sake. It is a recognition that the home she has cared for is, as the title suggests, a house of cards, built on appearances and ready to collapse.

Shrimati in Gently Falls the Bakula: Sacrifice without Recognition

Shrimati, the heroine of Gently Falls the Bakula, is an exceptionally bright young woman who was her husband's classmate at school. They marry for love, against the wishes of their families, who have long been enemies (Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). Her in-laws' coldness is therefore no surprise. What is unexpected is the way Shrikant himself comes to treat her, and this is where Murty places the real tragedy of the novel. After the wedding, Shrimati sets aside her own academic ambitions to support Shrikant's rise in the corporate world. Her efforts and sacrifices are taken for granted and soon forgotten, as if they belonged to a past that no longer counts.

Her mother-in-law, Gangakka, never misses a chance to treat her unfairly. She speaks rudely to Shrimati and criticizes her openly. From the day of the wedding to five years later, she refuses to accept her daughter-in-law. Shrimati is not even allowed to help in the kitchen, which Gangakka claims as her own domain on the grounds that the new bride does not know the family's traditions (Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). In this scene the kitchen



becomes a symbol of the mother-in-law's authority; shutting the daughter-in-law out of it denies her a place in the family's daily life.

Gangakka extends her criticism to Shrimati's mother as well. When Shrimati calls her husband by his first name, a habit left over from their school days, Gangakka declares, "The quality of the saree depends on its thread and the nature of a daughter depends on her mother's" (Gently Falls the Bakula 23). The taunt is typical of in-law rhetoric: a small departure from custom becomes an attack on the daughter-in-law's upbringing and on the honour of her natal family. Gangoli and Rew note that verbal humiliation of this kind, including taunts aimed at the bride's family, is one of the most common forms that a mother-in-law's hostility takes in Indian households. Gangakka has no qualms about such character assassination because, as she sees it, her position gives her every right to correct her daughter-in-law, and even to wrong her.

Murty's plain, unsentimental handling of the mother-in-law's behaviour lays bare what these relationships really are. She shows a woman trying, again and again, to improve things with her family, even when those efforts come to nothing. Shrimati's patience is not weakness; it is the patience of someone who believes her goodwill will one day be returned. When it is not, and when Shrikant's ambition has left no room for her in his life, she chooses to leave and return to the intellectual life she had given up (Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). The bakula flower of the title, which keeps its fragrance even after it falls, becomes an image of Shrimati herself, whose worth lasts even when no one notices it.

The Absent Husband and the Pattern of Neglect

Taken together, the three novels show a consistent pattern. In each, the hostility of the mother-in-law and sister-in-law might be bearable if the husband gave his wife emotional support. Anand, Sanjay, and Shrikant all chose their wives, two of them in love marriages, yet each abandons his wife emotionally once his own desires come first. Anand ignores Anupama's letters and leaves her to face his mother alone; Sanjay is consumed by wealth and status; Shrikant is absorbed in his career (Murty, Mahashweta; Murty, House of Cards; Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). Their failure turns the in-laws' household from a difficult place into a hostile one, because no one is left inside it to speak up for the wife.

The same pattern appears elsewhere in Murty's fiction. In Dollar Bahu, the mother-in-law, Gouramma, openly favours the daughter-in-law whose husband earns dollars in America over the one who lives with her in India, judging each woman by the wealth her husband brings into the family (Murty, Dollar Bahu). Reddy reads the novel as an insight into womanhood, showing how the desire for money and status distorts relationships between women in the same household. Across these works, Murty suggests that how a family treats a woman depends less on her character than on the material and social value attached to her.

What sets Murty's portrayal apart is that she neither lets the husband off lightly nor simply blames the mother-in-law. The older women defending their power and the men retreating into their ambitions are part of the same structure. The daughter-in-law is caught between them, expected to give up her identity for the family's comfort and yet never fully admitted into it.

Resistance and Self-Realization

Murty's heroines do not stay victims. Each reaches a point where she refuses to keep sacrificing herself for people who do not value her. Anupama builds an independent life in Bombay and turns down her husband's belated return (Murty, Mahashweta). Mridula recognizes her depression, seeks help, and walks away from a marriage built on dishonesty (Murty, House of Cards). Shrimati leaves the comfortable life she made possible for her husband so that she can return to her own vocation (Murty, Gently Falls the Bakula). Their decisions are quiet rather than dramatic, but they are firm. It matters, too, that each act of resistance is made possible by work and some degree of financial independence. Virginia Woolf argued that a woman needs money and a room of her own



if she is to write on her own terms, and Murty's heroines bear this out: Anupama's teaching post, Mridula's profession, and Shrimati's return to scholarship give each of them the independence to leave.

These choices reflect what Parvathi and Pushpalatha describe as the emergence of a "new woman" in Murty's fiction, a woman who finds her identity in her own work and integrity rather than in the approval of her husband's family (878). Kauntagi and Kolekar likewise stress that Murty's feminism rests on self-respect and on economic and emotional independence rather than on confrontation (1). None of these heroines finds fulfilment in a second marriage or in revenge. They find it in solitude, in work, and in the dignity of making their own decisions. In this sense, Murty redefines loneliness: what the family sees as abandonment becomes, for these women, a kind of freedom.

Conclusion

This study has examined the experiences of women within the family of in-laws in three of Sudha Murty's novels. Murty exposes how in-laws really behave towards a daughter-in-law, showing how mothers-in-law such as Radhakka, Ratnamma, and Gangakka, and sisters-in-law such as Girija, protect their own place in a patriarchal household at the newcomer's expense. In each novel, she draws attention to the failure of the family, and of society more broadly, to recognize the daughter-in-law's efforts.

Murty also shows how even husbands who married for love fail to shield their wives from alienation and discrimination. Once their own aims have been met, these husbands feel no real emotional connection with their wives. They neglect their responsibilities, while their wives give up their identities for the sake of their husbands' ambitions. In the end, the women are forced into difficult decisions, including distancing themselves from their families and ending their marriages, in search of peace and a better life.

Murty's fiction, then, offers more than a portrait of domestic cruelty. By showing that women can be the instruments as well as the victims of patriarchy, and that a husband's emotional absence leaves his wife defenceless, she asks her readers to rethink relationships that are too often treated as natural and fixed within the Indian family. At the same time, through the resilience of Anupama, Mridula, and Shrimati, she affirms that a woman need not surrender her identity to a family that refuses to accept her, and that self-respect, even when it costs her loneliness, can be the beginning of a better life.

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