

## **Patriarchal bargaining in the Indian household: A study of Sudha Murty's select novels**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of patriarchy is important not only to the understanding of gender relations but also for the relations within the same gender, particularly women. The gender hierarchy of men as dominant and women as subordinate, though man-made, has always existed, making it the core concern for the feminists, egalitarians and the like. Far away from resisting, some women legitimize the workings of patriarchy because they do not believe in the equal treatment of the genders. Patriarchal bargaining will help us to better understand the realities and relationships of women with women in the Indian patriarchal society. It has become a strategy for some women as they cope with the workings of the patriarchal system in their life and the vicious cycle of oppression is continued by such women in Indian patriarchal families. It is difficult to generalize but some of the Indian family structure and gender relations can be identified to explain the ways in which women employ a patriarchal bargain with specific manifestations in the Indian context within which the two novels of Sudha Murty are set.

**Keywords:** patriarchy, gender relations, patriarchal bargaining, Indian family

### **Introduction**

Patriarchy as a social system is where the power and authority lie vested in the hands of men. In such a structure, men dominate the society with leadership, better opportunities, privileges, autonomy etc. while women experience little or no access to most of these resources depending on how patriarchy manifests in that particular country or society. Patriarchy can be considered as the main hurdle to women's advancement. Hence, it is important to understand the system that keeps women helpless. Patriarchy is the institutionalization of male dominance over women in general, implying that the men hold the important key positions in power which the women are deprived of. The concept of patriarchy is defined by Walby as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). The gender hierarchy of men as dominant and women as subordinate, though man-made, has always existed, making it the core concern for the feminists, egalitarians and the like. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* asks "What is a woman?" A woman is considered as "the other", while a man is considered as "the one", as a woman is only identified by her relationship to a man (Beauvoir 13, 17). Women responses to the system of patriarchy may differ from one another.

While some consider it as an oppressive system, some do not feel the necessity in defying the already made structure. Beside sheer male domination, biases held and reinforced by women have hindered their own kind of gender in numerous ways. The social hierarchy and women's subordinate position continue to be reified in the society.

Sudha Murty is a prolific Indian educator, philanthropist and Indian woman fictionist writer and has written numerous books in English, Kannada and Marathi. Some of her notable works in English include *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, *House of Cards*, *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk* etc. She is known for her simple writing style but vivid themes which explores and exposes the social issues of the Indian society, within which the novels are set. As a social reformist through her works, subject matters are usually the marginalized categories of the society- gender, class, caste, physical afflictions etc. The setting of her novels is set against the backdrop of social realities, where rapid social change exists along with traditions.

### Theoretical Framework

A textual analysis of Sudha Murty's two novels, namely *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* will be done to study how patriarchy works in the society. The theoretical framework of patriarchal bargaining will be used along with feminist theory in studying the patterns of patriarchy in the Indian household. Patriarchal bargaining will be used in order to help us, to better understand the realities and relationships of women with women in the Indian patriarchal society. This social structure Patriarchal bargaining will help in examining how women strategize concrete restraints to negotiate a greater degree of advantage in patriarchal oppression.

### Patriarchal Bargaining

According to Denis Kandiyoti, the term patriarchal bargain "...is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined and renegotiated... However, women as a rule bargain from a weaker position" (Kandiyoti 286). Far away from resisting, some women legitimize the workings of patriarchy because they do not believe in the equal treatment of the genders. It has become a strategy for some women as they cope with the workings of the patriarchal system in their life and the vicious cycle of oppression is continued by such women in Indian patriarchal families. In the Indian family, the household is usually headed by the husband's father or the husband but as a wife is made to be subordinate to the husband, so is the daughter-in-law made to be subordinate to the father-in-law and mother-in-law as well. Patriarchal Bargaining as a dimension of patriarchy and its specific manifestations can be seen in the two novels of Sudha Murty: *Gently falls the Bakula* and *Mahashweta*. The use of Patriarchal Bargaining can help us in studying the women characters of Murty and how they navigate their stands in the family as a means of negotiating with survival.

### Patriarchal Bargaining in *Gently falls the Bakula*

*Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008) is a novel by Sudha Murty exploring the multifaceted complexities of marriage that a wife has to undergo. Shrimati, the protagonist in *Gently falls the Bakula*, is a bright and aspiring student of history who always stood first in her class. She falls in love with Shrikant, her neighbor and the two of them made plans to get married. The family feud between them questioned their

relationship and the biggest objection came from Gangakka, Shrikant's mother. The cunning and manipulative mother despised her neighbors as they were Vaishnavas. Her daughter, Rama was no better in her old-fashioned views even if she belonged to the younger generation. On hearing Shrikant's choice, Rama consoled her upset mother not to give the gold to his wife but rather to demand money from them every month. Thus, the ostracism towards Shrimati started even before her marriage because she was "hardly ten months younger to her son, ordinary looking, without money and, more than anything, her enemy's daughter" (Murty 67). Shrimati wasn't allowed in the kitchen. Gangakka would show her true nature if Shrimati is alone "if you address your husband by his name, you shorten his lifespan. Your mother should've taught you all these manners...the nature of a daughter depends on her mother's" (Murty 70). Sometimes the reason with which the patriarchal bargain operates is hatred. Women under limited authority, tries to continue the same vicious cycle that they had gone through under their husband and mother-in-law. Gangakka was insecure to see her daughter-in-law happy and she became envious. The mother and daughter duo decided to ask money from the newly married couple since Shrimati did not bring any dowry "Let us ask Shrikant for a huge sum. That will make Shrimati struggle" (Murty 77). Some women escape the control of the mother-in-law and head their own households. Shrimati, settling in Bombay has not made it difficult for Gangakka from governing her. She had thought of continuing her studies after her marriage but had to sacrifice that in order to get an administrative job for a year and save up money for the loan. Still, Gangakka regretted for not asking two lakhs instead of one. Even after five years of their marriage, Gangakka has taunted Shrimati for not having children and she was referred as the barren woman. Shrimati was usually unhappy due to the lack of affection from Gangakka and Rama. Despite her numerous efforts, it is always wrong in their eyes. It made her to feel upset, worthless, and unwanted.

### **Patriarchal Bargaining in *Mahashweta***

*Mahashweta* (2007) is another novel by Murthy which deals with a female protagonist having leukoderma disease in exploring the social stigma, people's perception surrounding appearances and the rigid norms of patriarchy. In *Mahashweta*, the protagonist Anupama is a very beautiful, talented and intelligent girl. The marriage proposals are usually for her and not for her two sisters Nanda and Vasudha which makes her furious step-mother to detest her even more "This apsara won't get married herself and insists on destroying my girls' lives!" (Murty26). She is from a poor background and believes herself to be in a fairy tale as she gets married with Anand, a doctor from an affluent background. As married men become simultaneously responsible for the economic well-being of wife, mother and even family, a conflict of interest emerges between them over allegiance of the same man. Anand's sister Girija envied her sister-in-law as "she would now be a competitor for Anand's affections. All along Anand had been theirs. Now he would belong to Anupama and there was nothing they could do to prevent this" (Murty 34). Girija was secretly choosing loose morals and relationships as she lies about her field trips to her domineering mother. She turned her mother against Anupama for correcting her. Anupama's carefree life seemed to be curbed by her mother-in-law who governs her married life as Radhakka would never allow her daughter-in-law to go out without her permission. Thus, the talented actress Anupama was only to be displayed as a beautiful art, to demonstrate the status of her in-laws in the society "Imagine girls from decent families going on stage... Radhakka will have a heart attack if her daughter-in-law carries on like that" (Murty42). However, when this submissive and beautiful girl gets leukoderma, she is thrown out of the house and Radhakka starts looking for a new bride. Anupama

has to face the verbal abuse of her step-mother back at home as she navigates through the social stigma, pushing her to the edge of contemplating suicide. The role women and their beauty, appearances and appropriation to suit and please in the society is seen in the life of Anupama. She can remember how her look changed and her life took a complete set of turns within some years. Once, considered as an epitome of beauty, she was praised, applauded, and envied for her goddess like looks. Her in-laws took great pride in accepting a suitor from a lower class since they are also proud of her beauty and wanted to adorn her as a trophy wife at home. Even her friend Sumithra's mother felt uneasy once about her presence in the house while they were finalizing the alliance for Sumithra. Now this very beauty of hers is gone and her appearance causes her a miserable life. All of these hardships are embedded in the social system of patriarchy and its appropriation of women's look to suit the gaze. Anupama's experiences represent any woman who fails to conform to conventional beauty standards. The patriarchal norms have dictated a woman's worth in relation to her physical appearance and social acceptability, the leukoderma patch becomes emblematic of the arbitrary markers of purity and beauty used to enforce exclusion.

The social stigma she faces because of leukoderma made her to hide and prevent others from considering as polluting them or treating the encounter as a bad omen. On her way to the temple, Anupama, in her hiding overheard two women talking about her situation as a source of woe to her mother-in-law. Anupama, a victim of patriarchal bargain realizes that it operates not only at her household but in the societal level. She feels too intimidated by her mother-in-law to feel at ease, while at her father's house, she is constantly blamed by her step-mother which makes her feel guilty and worthless.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to generalize but some of the Indian family structure and gender relations can be identified in order to explain the ways in which women employ a patriarchal bargain with specific manifestations in the Indian context within which the two novels of Sudha Murty are set. As analysed, patriarchal bargain can take different forms as the experiences of women vary due to the differences in class, race, religion and their issues vary from dowry to being childless. Patriarchal bargain is not always strategic but also a misunderstanding that patriarchy is natural and inevitable. Women find themselves in a sexist environment in which they would face consequences for altering what they were taught. They manipulate the system to their best advantage but leaves the system intact and it appears to be an individual gain but a collective loss.

## **Limitations and further study**

While viewing how some categories of women play their part in preserving patriarchy, it should be a paramount in order to study the larger, bigger systems of media, religion, education etc and how they play a pivotal role in shaping such perspectives. A more in-depth examination of the possibilities for harnessing such forces in influencing society, whether through indoctrination or by sensitizing and making people aware of their consequences, can be conducted in the future.

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