

The Conflict Between Ethics And Power In Sudha Murty's House Of Cards

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Sudha Murty, a renowned Indian author and philanthropist, is known for her insightful exploration of social and ethical dilemmas. *House of Cards* critically examines the interplay between ambition, integrity, and corruption in a rapidly evolving society. The novel highlights how the pursuit of power can lead to moral compromises, challenging personal values and relationships. This paper analyzes the broader socio-moral themes in *House of Cards*, focusing on the ethical consequences of ambition, the tension between personal integrity and societal pressures, and the impact of corruption on human relationships. It explores how power dynamics shape individual choices and the extent to which success influences moral flexibility. The novel also delves into the psychological burden of ethical dilemmas, portraying the emotional struggles of characters torn between righteousness and ambition. Additionally, it critiques the illusion of success, questioning whether material wealth truly brings fulfillment or simply creates a moral void. By addressing these themes, Murty presents a thought-provoking commentary on the cost of material success and the fragile nature of ethical boundaries.

Keywords: Ethics, power, ambition, corruption, integrity, societal pressure, moral dilemmas.

Introduction

Sudha Murty's *House of Cards* is a compelling exploration of the moral dilemmas individuals face when ambition and power begin to overshadow integrity. The novel follows Mridula and Sanjay, a couple whose values and priorities evolve as they respond to societal expectations and personal aspirations. Through their journey, Murty examines how success and material wealth often come at the cost of ethical compromises, raising the question: Can one truly achieve power without sacrificing morality? As Sanjay justifies his actions, he states, "Nothing is black or white in this world. The cow gives milk for its calf. But we drink that milk. Isn't that wrong? Mosquitoes and bugs are also creatures. Don't we kill them because they trouble us? Big fish always eats the small fish. Is that wrong?" (210). This rationalization of moral ambiguity highlights how ethical boundaries blur when power and ambition take precedence.

Murty presents a nuanced portrayal of human nature, illustrating how individuals justify their actions in the face of ambition. The novel delves into the complexities of ethical decision-making, highlighting the consequences of corruption not just on individuals, but also on relationships and society as a whole. As Mridula confronts Sanjay's changing ideals, she embodies the internal conflict between staying true to one's principles and adapting to a world that often rewards moral flexibility. Her realization that "Every woman wants to change her life but no man understands how. He showers his wife with gifts that he likes but not with what she wants,"(120) reflects the larger struggles of women in a society where their aspirations are often overlooked.

Sanjay's journey also illustrates how power can become an intoxicating force, changing one's perspective on leadership and morality. This shift in his worldview reflects the internal battle between personal values and the demands of society. Sudha Murty has often spoken about the importance of ethics and values in her works. In an interview, she once remarked: "Ethics is a very personal choice. What is right for one may not be right for another. But at the end of the day, one must be able to look in the mirror without regret" (Murty). This sentiment is deeply reflected in *House of Cards*, where characters must decide whether success built on moral compromises is truly worth it. Murty's storytelling not only critiques corruption but also encourages readers to reflect on their own ethical boundaries in a world driven by ambition.

House of Cards follows the life of Mridula, a compassionate and selfless woman, and her husband, Dr. Sanjay, an ambitious and talented doctor. Initially, their marriage is built on love and mutual respect, with Mridula supporting Sanjay's career while finding joy in her simple yet fulfilling life. However, as Sanjay gains wealth and status, he becomes increasingly entangled in a corrupt system that values power over principles. His transformation from an idealistic doctor to someone willing to bend ethical rules for financial gain creates a rift in their relationship.

As Mridula witnesses this moral decline, she begins to question her place in his life. Despite her deep love for Sanjay, she cannot reconcile with his changing values. Eventually, she makes the painful decision to leave, choosing integrity over a comfortable but ethically compromised existence. Her departure forces Sanjay to confront the consequences of his actions. Reflecting on leadership and morality, he acknowledges, "A true leader leads with affection and not power."(150), realizing the emptiness of his success. *House of Cards* is not just a story of a marriage; it is a reflection on the cost of material success and the enduring power of personal values.

Sudha Murty's *House of Cards* critically examines the tension between personal integrity and the allure of power, illustrating how ambition can lead to moral compromises. Through the lives of Mridula and Dr. Sanjay, the novel explores how individuals, when faced with success and societal pressures, often struggle to uphold their ethical values. Sanjay's rise

in status comes at the cost of his moral ideals, forcing Mridula to confront the reality of a world where power often overrides principles.

Sanjay's pursuit of material success creates a growing rift in his marriage, as Mridula struggles to recognize the man she once loved. Initially, she believes in their shared values, but as she witnesses his changing priorities, she realizes that their bond is deteriorating. Mridula's departure is a powerful act of reclaiming her integrity, as she refuses to compromise her values for the sake of comfort. She acknowledges, "In a male-dominated society like ours, all the important decisions are made by a man, including choices about what his wife wants. Every woman values her freedom to choose—much more than her husband's money or position." (190). Her decision underscores the novel's critique of a system that forces individuals to choose between ethics and societal expectations

However, as Sanjay reaches the peak of his influence, he begins to feel the weight of his compromises. The relationships he once cherished start to crumble under the strain of his ambitions. His wife, who initially supported his dreams, grows distant, unable to recognize the man he has become. Friendships that were once built on trust have turned into mere strategic alliances, with each person looking out for their own advantage.

Murty highlights this alienation to show that corruption does not just tarnish one's public image it erodes personal identity. Sanjay's inner turmoil becomes more pronounced as he witnesses the consequences of his unchecked ambition. The system he once manipulated turns against him, leaving him vulnerable to betrayal from those he once trusted. In the end, Sanjay is forced to confront the emptiness of his achievements. The wealth and status he accumulated feel meaningless when he realizes he has lost his moral compass. His downfall serves as a cautionary tale, reinforcing Murty's central message: power without integrity is self-destructive.

Despite his fall from grace, there is a moment of redemption. As Sanjay reflects on his journey, he begins to understand the cost of his choices, not just in terms of his career but also in the loss of self-respect. In a bid to make amends, he attempts to undo some of the harm he has caused, though he knows it may be too late to reclaim all that he has lost.

Murty's *House of Cards* presents a nuanced view of ambition and morality. While success and power are often seen as markers of achievement, the novel questions their true worth when they come at the expense of one's ethics. Through Sanjay's rise and fall, Murty reminds readers that true success lies not in wealth or influence but in the ability to lead with integrity and compassion. Murty presents Sanjay's transformation as a gradual process rather than an outright abandonment of morals. At first, he believes that his small compromises are harmless, but as he gains more wealth and status, his perspective shifts entirely. He comes to believe that bending the rules is simply the way the world works, stating, "In this world, honesty is nothing but a hurdle. If you want to get ahead, you must learn to play the

game.”(175). This marks a turning point in his character, where ambition fully overrides the principles he once valued.

However, Murty does not portray Sanjay as a villain but rather as a man caught in the complexities of power and societal expectations. His journey mirrors that of many professionals who start with idealistic intentions but are slowly consumed by the pressures of success. This realistic portrayal makes *House of Cards* a thought-provoking study on the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in positions of influence. While Sanjay’s journey explores the temptations of power, Mridula’s narrative focuses on the personal cost of maintaining one’s ethical beliefs in a morally compromised environment. As Sanjay becomes more immersed in corruption, she feels increasingly alienated from him. Her disappointment grows as she realizes that the man she fell in love with has changed beyond recognition. She reflects, “This is not the life I imagined. Love should not come at the cost of losing oneself.”(197).

Mridula’s internal conflict highlights the novel’s emphasis on individual agency. Unlike Sanjay, she refuses to accept a life dictated by societal expectations and material wealth. She believes in a simple, honest existence, and when that foundation is shaken, she begins to question her place in the marriage. As she comes to terms with her unhappiness, she acknowledges, “A woman’s strength is in her ability to walk away when she knows she deserves better.”(230). Her decision to leave Sanjay is not just an act of defiance but also a statement on the importance of self-respect. Murty uses Mridula’s character to challenge traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of their families. Mridula’s departure signifies her refusal to conform to these norms, reinforcing the novel’s critique of power dynamics within personal relationships. As Sanjay reaches the peak of his career, he realizes that his success has come at a great personal cost. The wealth and status he once craved now feel empty in the absence of Mridula. His loneliness becomes evident as he reflects on what he has lost, admitting, “What is the point of success if there is no one to share it with?”(250). This moment of self-awareness is crucial in the novel, as it reveals the hollow nature of power when it is pursued without ethical grounding.

Murty presents power as an illusion, something that seems desirable but fails to bring true happiness. Sanjay’s journey illustrates how ambition, when unchecked, can lead to isolation rather than fulfillment. His realization comes too late, but it serves as a powerful commentary on the sacrifices individuals make in their pursuit of success. Moreover, the novel highlights how society often rewards those who abandon their morals in favor of power. Sanjay is praised and respected in his professional circles, despite the compromises he has made. This contradiction reinforces Murty’s critique of a system where ethical individuals struggle while those who manipulate the system thrive.

Another significant aspect of *House of Cards* is how it examines power dynamics within marriage and society. Mridula’s experiences focus on the limited autonomy women often have in male-dominated environments. Even though she is intelligent and capable, her

opinions are frequently dismissed by those around her. She observes, “A woman’s voice is the softest in the house, yet she carries the heaviest burden.”(180), emphasizing the societal expectations placed on women to endure and adapt rather than challenge. While Sanjay’s power grows in the public sphere, Mridula’s strength lies in her quiet resistance. She refuses to accept a life dictated by corruption and chooses to reclaim her agency by walking away. Murty presents this contrast to highlight the different ways in which power is exercised, Sanjay’s power is external, built on wealth and influence, while Mridula’s power is internal, rooted in her unwavering moral compass. Even after leaving, Mridula does not seek revenge or bitterness. Instead, she focuses on rebuilding her life, proving that true power comes from self-assurance rather than societal validation. Her story challenges the traditional notion that success is measured by financial gain, offering an alternative perspective where integrity holds greater value than material wealth.

Towards the end of the novel, Sanjay is forced to confront the consequences of his actions. His professional reputation remains intact, but his personal life is in shambles. He begins to question whether his choices were truly worth it, acknowledging, “A man can conquer the world, but if he loses himself in the process, what has he really won?”(270). This moment of introspection signals the beginning of his redemption arc, where he starts to understand the weight of his decisions.

Murty does not provide an easy resolution, leaving the reader to reflect on whether redemption is truly possible after years of ethical compromise. While Sanjay’s regret is evident, the novel suggests that some losses especially those tied to personal relationships can never be undone. His journey serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of prioritizing power over values, reinforcing the novel’s central message about the fragile nature of ethical boundaries.

Beyond the personal stories of Mridula and Sanjay, *House of Cards* offers a broader critique of contemporary society. Murty questions the systems that enable corruption and the cultural norms that place power above principles. The novel encourages readers to reflect on their own ethical boundaries and consider whether true success can ever be achieved without compromising one’s integrity.

Through its exploration of power, corruption, and personal morality, *House of Cards* presents a nuanced and study of human nature. Murty’s storytelling does not offer simple answers but instead invites readers to engage with the complex realities of ethical decision-making in a world that often rewards compromise.

As Sanjay rises in status, his growing wealth and influence begin to reshape his identity. Initially, he is a humble and hardworking doctor who values honesty and compassion. However, as he becomes increasingly entangled in the world of power and corruption, his perception of self-worth shifts. He begins to measure his success not by his service to others but by the recognition he receives from influential people. This change is evident in his

dismissive attitude toward Mridula's concerns, as he argues, "The world respects power, not goodness. People may admire honesty, but they don't reward it."(215).

This transformation is significant because it highlights how power can distort one's sense of morality. Sanjay convinces himself that he is merely adapting to reality rather than losing his integrity. He starts associating with corrupt politicians, businessmen, and other influential figures, believing that these connections are essential for his career growth. However, in doing so, he distances himself from the principles that once defined him. His friendships are no longer based on mutual respect or shared values but on convenience and transactional benefits.

One of the key moments in the novel occurs when Sanjay accepts a bribe in exchange for approving an unethical medical practice. At first, he hesitates, but the pressure of maintaining his status pushes him to justify his actions. He reasons, "Everyone does it. If I don't, someone else will. What difference does it make?"(235). This moment serves as a turning point, illustrating how power can erode ethical convictions when self-interest takes precedence.

Apart from Sanjay and Mridula, several supporting characters play a crucial role in reinforcing the novel's central theme. Each of them represents different perspectives on power and morality, offering a broader understanding of the ethical dilemmas at play. Dr. Venkatesh, Sanjay's mentor, serves as a moral compass throughout the novel. Unlike Sanjay, he remains steadfast in his principles despite the temptations of power. He warns Sanjay about the dangers of compromising his ethics, stating, "Medicine is about healing, not profit. The moment you let money dictate your choices, you cease to be a true doctor." (145). His integrity contrasts sharply with Sanjay's descent into corruption, making him a symbolic figure of resistance against moral decay.

Dr. Venkatesh's disillusionment with Sanjay grows as he witnesses his protégé making increasingly unethical decisions. At one point, he confronts Sanjay, saying, "You had the potential to change lives for the better. Instead, you chose to change yourself for power."(260). His disappointment underscores the novel's critique of how ambition can lead individuals away from their original purpose.

Shankarappa, a corrupt politician, embodies the deep-seated corruption within the system. He manipulates people like Sanjay, luring them with promises of power and wealth in exchange for unethical favors. His influence over Sanjay demonstrates how power structures often prey on individuals with ambition but weak moral foundations. Shankarappa's interactions with Sanjay reveal how corruption operates in layers, gradually pulling individuals deeper into a cycle of moral compromise. He tells Sanjay, "If you want to survive in this world, you must learn to bend the rules. Rules are for the weak, not for those who wish to lead."(225). His words highlight the ruthless mindset that drives corruption, where morality is seen as an obstacle rather than a virtue.

While Sanjay's journey is one of moral decline, Mridula's character arc represents resilience and self-discovery. Initially, she is deeply invested in her marriage and believes in the ideals they once shared. However, as Sanjay changes, she realizes that she cannot compromise her values to fit into his world. Mridula's decision to leave Sanjay is not impulsive but a result of prolonged emotional suffering. She endures moments of self-doubt, wondering if she is being unreasonable. However, she recognizes that staying in a marriage built on deception would mean sacrificing her self-respect. She reflects, "Love cannot survive without trust, and trust cannot exist without honesty"(240).

After leaving, Mridula embarks on a journey of self-reliance. She moves to a small town, starts teaching, and rediscovers her independence. Murty portrays her as a strong, self-sufficient woman who does not need power or wealth to find happiness. Her transformation challenges the traditional notion that a woman's identity is tied to her husband's success. One of the most empowering moments in the novel is when Mridula refuses to return to Sanjay despite his regrets. When he tries to persuade her by saying he has changed, she responds, "Regret is not redemption. You cannot undo years of betrayal with a few words of apology." (280). This line solidifies her stance as a character who values integrity over reconciliation for convenience.

As the novel progresses, Sanjay begins to face the consequences of his unethical choices. His political connections turn against him when he is no longer useful to them, and he finds himself entangled in a corruption scandal. The very people who once admired and respected him now distance themselves, reinforcing the transient nature of power. In a climactic moment, Sanjay is left alone in his lavish home, realizing that everything he worked for was built on shaky foundations. He laments, "I built a house of cards, and now it has collapsed. I thought power would make me invincible, but it has only left me empty." (290). This encapsulates the novel's core message—that power gained through unethical means is ultimately unstable and self-destructive.

House of Cards does not present a simplistic resolution but rather leaves readers with questions about the nature of power and ethics. Sanjay's downfall serves as a cautionary tale, while Mridula's journey represents hope and the strength of moral conviction. Through these contrasting arcs, Murty emphasizes that true power does not come from wealth or influence but from the ability to remain true to one's values. While Sanjay loses everything, Mridula gains a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Her journey challenges the notion that success is defined by societal status, instead presenting an alternative path where inner peace holds more value than external validation.

Thus, Sudha Murty's House of Cards explores the tension between ambition and ethical values, illustrating how power can test an individual's moral compass. Through the contrasting journeys of Mridula and Sanjay, the novel highlights the personal struggles that arise when success demands moral compromises. While Sanjay initially embodies honesty and dedication, his gradual transformation into a man who bends the rules for personal gain reveals

the seductive nature of power. On the other hand, Mridula remains steadfast in her values, choosing to walk away from a life that no longer aligns with her principles. This conflict between ethics and ambition forms the crux of the novel, making it a deeply engaging and relevant story.

The title *House of Cards* serves as a powerful metaphor for the fragility of a life built on compromised morals. Just like a structure made of cards, a life that prioritizes power over ethics is inherently unstable and bound to collapse under its own weight. Sanjay's pursuit of wealth and influence comes at the cost of his integrity, leading to cracks in his relationships and personal fulfillment. Murty suggests that while ambition can bring material success, it often creates an unstable foundation, leaving individuals vulnerable to disillusionment and emotional turmoil. This metaphor underscores the central message of the novel—when success is achieved through moral compromise, it remains precarious and unsustainable.

Mridula's decision to leave her comfortable life signifies the strength required to uphold one's ethical beliefs in a world driven by ambition. Unlike Sanjay, who gradually becomes absorbed in the corrupt system, she refuses to lose herself in the pursuit of material gains. Her choice highlights an important theme in the novel: true fulfillment does not come from external success but from inner peace and self-respect. Murty presents Mridula's journey as a counterpoint to Sanjay's, emphasizing that walking away from moral corruption, though difficult, is sometimes necessary to preserve one's values and dignity.

The novel also critiques a society that often equates success with financial prosperity, regardless of the ethical costs. Murty portrays how systemic corruption and social pressures push individuals to compromise their values, suggesting that the struggle between ethics and power is not just a personal conflict but a larger societal issue. Sanjay's story is not unique—it reflects the reality of many who start with noble intentions but gradually succumb to the allure of influence and status. Through this, the novel encourages readers to question their own definitions of success and whether achieving power is worth the sacrifices it demands.

In the end, *House of Cards* compels readers to reflect on their own choices and values. It poses an essential question: should one prioritize ambition at any cost, or is it more important to uphold one's ethical principles? Murty's storytelling reminds us that while power may bring temporary rewards, true success lies in staying true to oneself. The novel leaves a lasting impact by illustrating that the choices we make define who we are, and a life built on moral compromises is always at risk of crumbling just like a house of cards.

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