

A New Materialist Reading of Sudha Murthy's House of Cards

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Abstract:

The paper offers a New Materialist interpretation of Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards*, examining how the novel stages the complex interplay between matter, agency and desire in the context of middle-class Indian domestic life. Drawing upon theoretical insights from Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Bill Brown and Rosi Braidotti, the study explores how material objects, infrastructures and nonhuman forces shape human emotions, ambitions and social relations. The illusion of happiness, as pursued by the novel's protagonists, is revealed not as a self-contained psychological state but as an emergent product of entangled material-discursive forces. This analysis reframes Murthy's narrative as a site of ontological and ethical inquiry, highlighting how matter acts not as passive backdrop but as an active participant in shaping subjectivities. The paper challenges reductive readings of *House of Cards* as a straightforward domestic or moral tale and instead positions it within a broader philosophical framework that reconsiders the politics of things, spaces and bodies in the construction of happiness.

Keywords: New Materialism, Material Agency, Sudha Murthy, Domestic Space, Happiness and Subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards* appears at first glance to be a simple story of love, ambition, and disillusionment in the life of a small-town couple navigating India's rapidly transforming social and economic landscape. Centered on Mridula and Sanjay, the novel traces their ascent into urban respectability and subsequent unraveling as the entanglements of wealth, power and moral compromise take their toll. However, beneath this familiar narrative lies a complex web of material and affective relations that demand a more nuanced reading. Through the lens of New Materialist theory, this paper contends that *House of Cards* is not merely a moral tale about individual choices but a profound meditation on how happiness, agency and identity are co-produced by material infrastructures, nonhuman actors and social forces.

Murthy's narrative landscape is saturated with objects like furniture, houses, clothes and machines that do not simply furnish the background but actively participate in shaping character and consequence. This aligns closely with the theoretical provocations of New Materialist thinkers such as Jane Bennett, who in *Vibrant Matter* argues for the agency of things and Karen Barad whose notion of "intra-action" underscores the entangled becoming of human and nonhuman elements.

In this framework, the pursuit of happiness is not a linear journey of personal fulfillment but a complex, unstable negotiation with the material world. Mridula's growing sense of disillusionment is not only moral

or emotional but ontological, it emerges from a shifting assemblage of relations between her body, home, relationships and the things that surround her.

The paper explores *House of Cards* as a rich literary site where the New Materialist paradigm can be fruitfully applied to foreground how nonhuman entities shape human becoming. It proposes that the novel dramatizes the illusion of autonomy and the seductive but ultimately fragile promise of happiness grounded in material accumulation. Through this analysis, we aim to reposition Murthy's work within contemporary theoretical discourse, highlighting its relevance to ongoing debates about matter, meaning and the ethics of everyday life.

Theoretical Framework

The research paper employs the New Materialist approach to examine Sudha Murthy's *House of Cards*, drawing on the works of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Bill Brown and Rosi Braidotti. New Materialism challenges the traditional separation between human and nonhuman agencies, suggesting that matter is not passive but actively participates in shaping human experiences, identities and desires. The framework rethinks the human subject as fundamentally entangled with its material surroundings, highlighting the role of nonhuman forces such as objects, spaces and technologies in constituting meaning and agency.

Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" is crucial to understanding the entangled relationships between humans and nonhumans in *House of Cards*. Barad's framework proposes that entities do not preexist their interactions but emerge through them, emphasizing that all matter like human and nonhuman shares agency. In this context, the objects and spaces in the novel are not neutral backdrops but active participants in the narrative. The novel's material landscape is integral to shaping the characters' experiences and subjectivities, as Mridula's evolving emotional states are closely tied to the material world around her.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* further expands the notion of material agency, asserting that objects from everyday things to natural forces, have a "vibrancy" that influences human behavior and societal structures. Bennett's theory suggests that objects are not mere passive tools for human use; they possess their own vitality and agency, shaping the world in often unpredictable ways. In the case of *House of Cards*, the material objects that fill the characters' homes like furniture, clothes and technological devices, become active agents in shaping their emotional and social lives. These objects are not simply functional; they carry emotional, cultural and social weight, contributing to the characters' struggles and desires.

Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* offers another important insight by suggesting that objects are not just "things" in the conventional sense but are loaded with cultural, social and affective meaning. In this analysis, objects are imbued with stories and histories that shape their significance within a given cultural context. In *House of Cards*, the material world, particularly the household items that Mridula and Sanjay accumulate, becomes symbolic of their desires and aspirations but also of their disillusionment and entrapment. These objects, far from being passive symbols of wealth and success, actively participate in the construction of the characters' subjectivities and social relations.

Rosi Braidotti's work on the posthuman in *The Posthuman* provides a critical perspective on how subjectivity is always already entangled with nonhuman agencies. Braidotti challenges human exceptionalism and underscores the interconnectedness of human bodies and nonhuman forces. This perspective aligns with the New Materialist view that happiness, desire and identity are not purely human constructs but are co-produced through material relations. In *House of Cards*, the protagonists' sense of self and their pursuit of happiness are not isolated phenomena but are shaped by their interactions with the material world and the objects they encounter.

By applying these New Materialist theories, this paper explores how the characters in House of Cards are shaped by and shape the material forces around them. The novel does not merely depict individual moral or emotional struggles but reveals how subjectivity, identity and even happiness are co-constructed through a dynamic, entangled interaction with matter. The material world, far from being passive, actively participates in the unfolding of the narrative and the shaping of the characters' desires and disillusionments.

Rethinking the Domestic: Space, Structure, and Sensibility

In House of Cards, the domestic sphere is central to Mridula and Sanjay's pursuit of wealth and happiness. Initially, their new home represents success, but it soon becomes a site of disillusionment. As material wealth accumulates, the house transforms from a symbol of comfort to one of entrapment. Mridula's dissatisfaction reflects how the material world she inhabits shapes her emotions. The house and its objects such as furniture, decorations and clothes are not passive backdrops but active agents in the narrative. Through the lens of New Materialism, these material entities shape the characters' emotional states and desires. Rather than fulfilling their longing for happiness, the objects intensify the tension between material success and existential emptiness, demonstrating the fragility of happiness when tied to accumulation.

Materiality and the Illusion of Happiness:

In House of Cards, happiness is linked to material acquisition yet it proves to be an illusion. Mridula and Sanjay believe that wealth and status will bring fulfillment but their increasing material success only exposes their growing dissatisfaction. Objects like homes and possessions instead of providing happiness, underscore the emptiness of their pursuit.

Through New Materialism, happiness is seen not as an internal state but as co-constructed through interactions with material surroundings. The house, initially a symbol of success, becomes a source of anxiety, reflecting how materiality shapes emotional states. The novel critiques the idea that happiness can be attained through material wealth, revealing its limitations in providing true fulfillment.

Entangled Agencies and the Construction of Identity:

In House of Cards, identity is shaped by the entangled relationships between humans and nonhuman forces. Mridula's sense of self is co-constructed through interactions with material objects like the house and clothing. These nonhuman entities actively influence her emotional and psychological states, reflecting the New Materialist idea that subjectivity emerges through intra-action. The novel challenges the notion of autonomous identity, emphasizing that selfhood is shaped by external material forces.

Reconceptualizing the Ethics of Happiness:

House of Cards critiques the belief that happiness comes from wealth, showing how material success leads to moral compromises and emotional emptiness. Through a New Materialist lens, happiness is seen as a relational process shaped by both human and nonhuman forces. The novel challenges traditional views suggesting that true fulfillment comes from interconnectedness not material accumulation.

Conclusion:

Sudha Murthy's House of Cards, when read through the lens of New Materialism, emerges as a deeply

philosophical exploration of matter, desire, and affect. The novel challenges traditional binaries like human/non-human, self/other, subject/object and instead posits a world in which happiness is not an individual possession but a phenomenon produced through material entanglements. By foregrounding the agency of things, spaces and infrastructures, the narrative aligns with the New Materialist insistence on relational ontologies. Rather than moral allegory, the novel becomes an ontological inquiry into the fabric of modern life where one in which the illusion of happiness is constantly negotiated within assemblages of vibrant matter.

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