



An Analysis of Selected Short Stories by Sudha Murty: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Sudha Murty's entire literary repertoire, encompassing her four collections of children's stories, all of which have received national-level recognition. The critical examination delves into various aspects of her works, including themes, characterization, narrative techniques, and settings. Her narratives often address the detrimental impacts of globalization and urbanization on domestic relations in India, featuring characters which originate from rural backgrounds and strive for upward social mobility. Her storytelling technique is characterized by a traditional and straightforward approach. She skillfully incorporates rural and urban settings into her narratives, which are both entertaining and educational for children. Rooted in the ethos of Indian traditions and ethics, her stories often convey the enduring message that goodness prevails over evil.

Key words: Themes, Values, characterization, setting, socio-cultural study, short stories

Sudha Murthy is a prominent contemporary female novelist known for her insightful portrayal of human emotions. A technocrat and wife of Narayan Murthy, she has worn many hats, serving as the chairperson of Infosys, a teacher, and a philanthropist. Her writing resonates with readers due to its basis in reality and its ability to evoke genuine emotions. Known for her simplicity in language and clarity of expression, Murthy is celebrated in both English and Kannada literature. Her works often depict rural life in Karnataka, and she frequently portrays strong female protagonists who challenge male dominance and forge their own paths to freedom.

Sudha Murthy authored numerous novels and short stories, including *Dollar Bahu*, *House of Cards*, *Mahashweta*, *The Bird with Golden Wings*, *Wise and Otherwise*, *The Old Man and His God*, *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, and others.

In the preface to *The Magic Drum and Other Favourite Stories*, Sudha Murthy articulates her perspective on the genre of short stories. She observes that across the globe, diverse folktales have been passed down through generations, captivating children in every corner of the world. In curating this collection, she deliberately includes a selection of such stories, aiming to offer readers a glimpse into this rich tapestry of global storytelling traditions. What struck her during this process was the distinct thematic patterns prevalent in various cultural narratives. She notes that Indian stories frequently revolve around deities, curses, and blessings, often culminating in matrimonial unions and happily-ever-after resolutions. This observation reflects the deeply rooted cultural and mythological elements inherent in Indian storytelling traditions. In contrast, she highlights the emphasis on logic and human intellect in Western stories, reflecting the cultural values and narrative preferences of those regions. Furthermore, she remarks on the prevalence of magic and supernatural elements in stories originating from the Middle East, underscoring the region's rich folklore and mystical traditions.

Through her insightful commentary, she offers readers a deeper understanding of the diverse narrative traditions that shape storytelling across different cultures. By including stories from various cultural backgrounds, she not only provides entertainment but also fosters cross-cultural appreciation and understanding among her audience. *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* chronicles the inspiring journey of Krishtakka, a sixty-two-year-old grandmother, who embarks on a quest to learn the Kannada language independently. Motivated by the belief that literacy enhances one's character, Krishtakka demonstrates unwavering determination to expand her horizons, eschewing external aid. With her granddaughter Sudha's guidance, Krishtakka diligently learns the Kannada alphabet, overcoming the challenges of her advanced age and lack of formal education. Through perseverance, she gradually becomes proficient in reading and writing, showcasing the indomitable human spirit's ability to conquer obstacles. Her transformation from novice to adept learner underscores the timeless adage that dedication knows no age bounds. Her inspirational journey serves as a testament to the enduring power of determination and resilience in overcoming adversity.

““For a good cause if you are determined, you can overcome any obstacle. I will work harder than anybody, but I will do it. For learning there is no age bar. ” (Murty 7)

Salaam Abdul Kalam highlights Abdul Kalam's keen ability to discern individuals' character regardless of social status. Kalam recognized Sudha Murty's writing talent from her newspaper articles, which left a lasting impression on her. She reveals Kalam's reading habit of starting from the end of an article, only proceeding to the beginning if interested. Inspired by Kalam, Murty adopted this technique in her own reading and writing. Their interaction illustrates Kalam's influence on Murty's literary approach and deepened her appreciation for his insightfulness. *Amma, What is Your Duty* epitomizes the saying "child is the father of man." Sudha Murty's daughter engaged in voluntary charity work, teaching blind children in school. Encountering a determined boy aspiring to attend St. Stephen's College, Delhi, but

lacking funds, she selflessly donated her birthday money to support his education. This act deeply moved Sudha Murty, prompting her to initiate regular donations for underprivileged children's education. The narrative underscores the transformative power of altruism, as one act catalyzed a broader commitment to philanthropy within their family. It reflects the reciprocal influence between parent and child, highlighting the profound impact of individual kindness in fostering social change and promoting educational opportunities for marginalized youth. The primary theme of *Dead Man's Riddle* revolves around the invaluable wisdom imparted by elders to the younger generation. Through the narrative, the significance of receiving and heeding the fruitful advice from older individuals is emphasized, highlighting its potential to guide and benefit the youth in their journey of life.

“Experience is the best teacher in life. Elders have seen many ups and downs in their lives and interacted with many people. During the process they have acquired knowledge which cannot be taught in school or college.”(Murty 113)

The fundamental theme of the short story *The Red Rice Granary* is that charity starts within one's own household. It emphasizes the importance of showing kindness to the less fortunate and those in need. In this narrative, the grandmother demonstrates this by generously giving away the finest quality of rice to the poor individuals who visit her home.

“Child whenever you want to give something to somebody give the best in you, never the second best.”(Murty 40)

The core narrative of *Bird With Golden Wings* highlights the importance of selfless service as a guiding principle in life. Through contrasting characters, the story explores the consequences of altruism versus self-interest. Varsha exemplifies selflessness by sharing her food with birds, receiving valuable gifts in return. In contrast, Kapila's self-serving behavior leads to negative outcomes. The narrative underscores the theme of karma, where altruistic actions yield positive results while selfish deeds bring

adversity. It serves as a moral allegory, stressing the significance of virtuous conduct and the rewards of selflessness. Symbolic imagery of golden and wooden objects conveys profound insights into human nature and moral principles.

“When she finally gathered up her courage and returned home many hours later, the box, ladder and plate had disappeared” (Murty 46)

The Kind Step Mother depicts the transformative power of good habits. Jaya, a widow, discovers a snake's tail turning to gold. She supports her stepson, Badri, with the wealth. Badri's greed leads to the snake's death, ending their prosperity. Badri repents and works hard to redeem himself, emphasizing the consequences of greed and the value of repentance and hard work. *What's in it for Me* illustrates the downfall of deceit as a mouse trades a twig for a pumpkin, leading to a chain of deceitful exchanges. However, a clever bride outsmarts the deceitful man by trapping him in a hole. *Doctor, Doctor* explores the contrast between selfless and selfish service, showcasing the positive outcomes of altruism and the negative consequences of greed. Ravi, the protagonist, selflessly provides water to those in need, leading to a magical pitcher that heals any ailment. However, his growing greed eventually strips the pitcher of its power, underscoring the importance of selflessness over selfishness.

“He remembered he had healed once out of kindness and compassion and how much they had blessed and loved him in return.....” (Murty 13)

The story *Kavery and the Thief* brings out the theme of presence of mind to face the impending danger. Kavery the protagonist of the story coaxed the thief to dig her field having gold coins there. Through this way she very easily handles the situation and protects the valuables items of the temple as well as her field adjacent to each other.

“All night he dug and dug, looking for treasure, but of course there was no sign of as there never had been any treasure to begin with! By the time dawn broke he realized kavary had made a fool of him and all he could do now was get away from the field fast.” (Murty 19)

The seed of truth is about positive outcomes of being honest. Ping succeeded in becoming the crown prince. “Here is the crown prince! I had given everyone roasted seeds, which would never grow, just to see which child was the most honest one and would admit he or she had not been able to grow anything. Only this boy told the truth. I am sure he will rule this kingdom one day with truth and honesty” (Murty 45)

Sudha Murty's narratives not only entertain but also impart valuable lessons to Indian readers. With a firm belief in the triumph of good over evil, she consistently portrays virtuous characters prevailing against adversity. Her stories serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the consequences of greed, deceit, and cruelty, which are universal vices plaguing societies worldwide. Murty's narratives often feature individuals driven by selfish motives, ultimately facing retribution for their misdeeds.

“Your majesty, I hope you now realize that people’s contentment does not end with having enough food or money. They also need to be truly happy inside. Only then will they not be swayed when they gain or lose wealth. That is a lesson that everyone-whether a king or a commoner-need to remember.” (Murty 28)

Characterization is the skillful portrayal of various aspects of characters within a literary work. The introduction, development, and final impression of characters reflect the writer's proficiency in characterization. The writer's ability to depict both the internal and external traits of characters determines the success or failure of the writing. Sudha Murty's writing often features characters from emerging fields like Information Technology and Medicine in India. She selects youthful individuals from lower-middle-

class rural backgrounds, illustrating their journey from struggle to economic stability. Mythical elements can be inferred from the character's name. Vishnu, a character in the story *Roopa's Great Escape*, shares a name with the Hindu deity Vishnu, known as the Preserver in mythology. Similarly, Vishnu Kaka in the narrative cares for everyone in the village, fostering religious beliefs by referencing the village's gods and goddesses.

Plot development and characterization are closely intertwined; major characters in her works tend to be well-defined, while minor ones are more rudimentary, akin to wooden blocks. As the complexity of character development increases, so does the intricacy of the plot. Her male characters typically hail from ordinary social and financial backgrounds. Her approach to characterization follows a consistent pattern, particularly in her adept portrayal of the psychological turmoil experienced by her female characters. It appears that she possesses a deep understanding of the female psyche, surpassing her grasp of male psychology.

Traditional Indian stories often carried moral lessons alongside their entertainment value, with characters typically depicted as either good or bad, engaged in conflict resolved by the triumph of good. Sudha Murty adheres to this narrative tradition, emphasizing the impact of money on close domestic relationships in India. Her short stories follow a structured format, with engaging beginnings, developed middles, and satisfying conclusions. Despite predictable beginnings and endings, she maintains momentum by propelling the action forward. While her narration lacks figurative language, she employs literary devices such as symbols, metaphors, anecdotes, and allusions to enhance her storytelling. These elements enrich the narrative, adding depth and complexity to her characters and themes. Through her adherence to traditional storytelling techniques and incorporation of literary devices, she effectively delivers messages about moral values and societal issues, engaging readers while imparting meaningful lessons.

Sudha Murty's works are often set in real locations, such as Karnataka, rather than relying on imaginary settings. Additionally, she incorporates metropolitan cities like Bangalore and Bombay as settings for her novels. By grounding her narratives in actual places, she adds authenticity and familiarity to her stories, allowing readers to easily connect with the settings and characters. This approach enhances the realism of her works and provides readers with a vivid portrayal of the environments in which her stories unfold. Sudha Murty underscores the detrimental impact of globalization on Indian culture, juxtaposed with traditional values centered on mutual cooperation and community life. The agrarian economy cultivated strong bonds among individuals, fostering harmony with nature and animals. Despite their reticence, a deep sense of belonging prevailed, particularly towards women, whose dignity was closely linked to familial honor. Her depiction highlights the enduring significance of traditional values and close familial ties within Indian society, amidst the pressures and changes brought about by modernization and globalization. Furthermore, her storytelling prowess lies in her ability to craft engaging narratives from seemingly mundane incidents. For instance, a simple encounter with a boy advising her to carry cash alongside a chequebook prompts Murty to reflect on her own perspective. This encounter serves as a catalyst for Murty to reassess her approach to societal service, emphasizing the importance of humility and practicality in her endeavors.

Overall, her stories resonate with readers by addressing universal themes and moral dilemmas. Through her narratives, she encourages introspection and fosters empathy, urging individuals to consider the broader implications of their actions. Her storytelling not only entertains but also serves as a vehicle for societal critique and personal reflection, making her narratives an invaluable contribution to Indian literature. Sudha Murty adopts the persona of a wise elder, akin to a grandmother figure, to facilitate storytelling in her narratives. In doing so, she consciously avoids flaunting her wealth, knowledge, or social status, opting instead for a humble approach that resonates with her audience. Her adept storytelling

abilities are evident in her production of four anthologies containing a hundred stories each, showcasing her remarkable narrative prowess.

“Nooni was twelve year old tomboy who loved all form of physical activity...”(Murty 1)

She seeks to maintain a sense of realism and relatability in her storytelling, allowing readers to connect more deeply with the characters and themes presented. Overall, her deliberate narrative choices and storytelling approach contribute to the accessibility and universality of her works, making them both engaging and meaningful to a wide range of readers.

Sudha Murty's stories are born from her genuine interactions with everyday people, lending them a sense of authenticity and simplicity. Her choice of language is both straightforward and engaging, capturing the essence of her characters and narratives. Through careful selection of words and phrases, she ensures that her stories maintain focus and coherence, steering clear of unnecessary distractions. The concentration with which she constructs her stories allows her message to be conveyed without ambiguity, ensuring clarity for her readers. While literary works often derive strength from offering multiple interpretations, the true power of a short story lies in its ability to deliver a singular, straightforward narrative.

In essence, her storytelling prowess lies in her ability to capture the nuances of human experience with honesty and clarity. By drawing inspiration from real-life encounters, she infuses her narratives with a sense of relatability and depth. Through her simple yet evocative language, she navigates the complexities of human emotion and experience, delivering stories that resonate with readers on a profound level.

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