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MAJOR THEMES IN THE SELECT WORKS OF SUDHA MURTY: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract

Sudha Murty's writings demonstrate a noticeable change from the other feminine writings. She is one of the pioneer Indian women writers. Her works written in simple words can express views, ideas or thoughts efficiently. Moreover, they reach to a greater extent. The author stands as a role model and inspires young women in the society. As this is a literature study, descriptive and analytical method has been employed to understand the works of the author. This paper elucidates the themes and characters with special reference to women. This paper also aims at how the ethical and moral values are inculcated through some of her works. The budding women try to create their own identity in this male dominated society. Being the Chairperson of an Organization, she manifests women are strong and can make the impossible possible. Her passion to empower girls and women can be witnessed through female characters in her writings. The author elicits the skills and leadership qualities of women even though most of them are illiterate and homemakers in the rural areas, managing their home. Besides fulfilling the needs of the family members, they propose solutions for the unembellished problems in existing circumstances. 'Today's children are tomorrow's citizens.' Children learn many things by observing others and also through stories. They enact elders and unknowingly get along with others and enjoy the life. So, if they are guided in a proper manner, they may develop good habits and moral values like loyalty, humanity, generosity and empathy. The paper enables one to differentiate the difference between human being and being human. One can learn life skills which are essential and also to be practiced a lot in order to build our personality.

Keywords: Sudha Murty, Themes, Women, Education, Identity, Morals

Introduction

Sudha Murty, being the chairperson of Infosys Foundation, is a social worker, an engineering teacher and also a prolific writer. She was born into a Brahmin family on 19th August, 1950 in Shiggaon, Karnataka. Besides her parents Dr. R.H. Kulkarni (surgeon) and Vimala Kulkarni, she was also brought up by her maternal grandparents. She received gold medals for topping the class in B.E (EEE) and M.E (Computer Science). Standing as a topper shows her hard work and commitment in achieving goals. Srinivas Kulkarni, a renowned astronomer and the recipient of Dan David Prize in 2017, is Sudha Murty's brother. Her first notable work "How I Taught My Grandmother to Read", is from her childhood experiences and an affinity for her grandmother. She was the first female engineer at Tata Engineering & Locomotive Company (TELCO), India's largest auto manufacturer. As an engineer, she changed the employment policy of TELCO. She wrote a postcard to the company's chairman complaining of gender bias in recruitment at TELCO. She was then called to an interview, after which she was hired immediately. She started her career in Pune and then moved to Mumbai and Jamshedpur. Later on, she joined Walchand Industries in Pune as a Senior System Analyst. She is a visiting professor at PG Centre, Bangalore University. While as an employee at TELCO, she married N.R. Narayana Murty. She left her job to start Infosys Foundation, a non-profit organization, in 1996 with her husband. She gave Rs.10000/- to start the organization. She is currently the Chairperson and Trustee of the Foundation. Through this foundation, Sudha Murty has built 2,300 houses in the flood-affected areas and 16,000 public toilets in the rural areas, besides several hundred in Bangalore city. Her social work covers healthcare, public hygiene, education, women empowerment, art and culture, poverty alleviation. Her vision for 'a library for each school' has made her build 70,000 libraries so far. The words of J.R.D. Tata still echo in my ears, she says. "You are only trustee of money and it always changes hands. Give it back to the society that gave you good will."



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Sudha Murty is a prolific bilingual writer. Her books espouse philosophical views on hospitality, normal life, and self-realization through narratives. Most of her works have been translated into other Indian languages. She has written nearly 30 books, out of which two are technical books, three educative books, and two travelogues. Most of her books are collections of short stories for children, while few of them are an amalgamation of real-life experiences.

Objectives

- This paper elucidates the themes and characters with special reference to women.
- To elicit the skills and leadership qualities of women (mostly illiterate and homemakers in the rural areas, managing their home).
- This paper also aims at how the ethical and moral values like loyalty, humanity, generosity and empathy are inculcated through some of her works.
- To enable one to differentiate the difference between human being and being humane.

Methodology

As this paper is a literature study, descriptive and analytical study has been employed for furnishing. This paper discusses the characterization of women and themes of a few works by the author. The theme is the purpose on which the story is built upon. The predominant themes in Indian English Fiction are castes, classes, unemployment, social inequality, and discrimination. When it comes to Indian women writers, the works are woven around the themes of feminism, oppression, traditionalism etc. The theme of the urban & rural gap is commonly found in most of the works of Sudha Murty. In most of the feminine writings, men are blamed mostly for women’s suffering; often men and women are portrayed as born rivals. Sudha Murty is the first Indian writer in English to rationalize the problem by blaming one woman and the man in the family for the misfortunes of another woman. In her novels, the author clearly depicts the complicated relationship between two women in one family. Another theme which is found in her novels is the degeneration of close relationships due to the rise in capitalism, especially with respect to young boys and girls accessing modern facilities. One of the prevalent themes in her works is the urban and rural gap. She clearly depicts the differences between urban and rural societies in many of her works.

One of the striking features in the author’s novels is that all her characters are from a middle-class background and they are bound in conventional Indian society along with ultra-modern society. The young men and women are engaged in their personal as well as professional growth, whereas women characters have a positive approach towards life, and they plan their fate unlike other feminist writers. For say, Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Ashima’ simply accepts what all comes to her and adjusts in all circumstances. But Sudha Murty’s ‘Mahasweta’ does not go down with the situations; rather works hard to bring about a change in her life. The young boys and girls are modern and have high academic credentials. The characters are portrayed realistically and lack imagination. Also, the author dwells deep into the psychological crisis.

Characterization of Women

The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk is a collection of real-life stories. This collection is really great because of the varied characters, situations, and events which had a prominent effect on Sudha Murty. These stories once again prove that good people do exist in the world. In the story ‘Ganga’s Ghat’, the protagonist is a poor woman who works as a coolie in a drought- stricken area. She goes to work all through the day and returns in the evening; does all her work alone and cooks food. Besides gathering water from a well which is nearly half a kilometer away, she does nothing. When an old man comes to her, she mistakes him for being a beggar and politely answers that she could not give him anything to eat as she herself has not enough food. But the old man asks her to give him some lukewarm water so that he can have a bath to get rid of the itching he has been suffering from. At first, Ganga refused as fetching water from 1/2km is a difficult



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task. The old man addressed her as ‘akka’ and stated that he was a poor beggar having nothing for him, while Ganga had a home, vessels, food, and water. By listening to his words, Ganga realized that she is rich, at least when compared to the old man. It was an unusual feeling for her and she gave him a bucket of lukewarm water daily. Day by day, the number of beggars for baths increased. Ganga’s broad mindedness made her find a mission in her life i.e., to serve people in need. The news spread, and people knew if anyone wanted to have a bath, they should go to Ganga’s Ghat. Her resolution to help others who are miserable made her to lead a contended life. When the author met her to extend help by handing over some soaps and towels, Ganga refused softly. She explained that she wanted to help within her own limitations. Moreover, she believes with money comes expectations by which the equilibrium of social work is spoiled. The humanistic approach of the lady who tries to understand and stretch her hand for others is beautifully pictured.

Rahman’s avva enlightens how few women, though uneducated, are well advanced in human values. In this story we come across a poor woman, Kashibai, an illiterate, bringing up Rahman – an infant who has lost his parents. Kashibai & Fatima Bi are not in good relations as neighbors. Regardless, the former goes to hospital without any hesitation to see Fatima, who has been admitted. Kashibai forgets her enmity and even cries. Moved by hearing the boy’s cry continuously after Fatima’s death, she picks him and brings him to her house. After Rahman’s father died, she raised him according to his religion. Although Rahman prays to Allah, he touches the feet of Kashibai and calls her ‘ammi’. He thinks Mecca is in her ammi only. This story moves the heart of every reader and the human values of an individual are well depicted. Furthermore, it also presents how a child should treat his parents.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the flower Bakula symbolizes female protagonist Shrimati. It is the first novel by Sudha Murty. The plot of the story seems simple but, in reality, questions the very purpose of the existence of an individual in this world without ambition. It clearly depicts the need to focus on the rightful priorities which upgrade an individual to the fullest. At the beginning of the story, Shrimati is introduced as an ambitious girl who whirls around history which she is interested in. But after marriage, her priorities changed. Her ambition and self-interest take their toll only when she realizes towards the end of the story, leaving the path of marriage on its way.

Shrimati and Shrikant get married to each other against their parents’ consent. As a result, she had to face the typical stereotypical mother-in-law and sister-in-law’s hatred. Shrimati is a little bit more intelligent than Shrikant, but it is Shrikant who became successful and reached the pinnacle in his career, whereas Shrimati lagged behind. Though Shrimati is a graduate, she focused on her familial life as a dutiful wife and tried by all means to win her mother-in-law. She supported her husband as a sincere and dedicated wife. When Shrikant’s mother asked to repay the loan amount taken for his educational purposes, Shrimati postponed her decision to join PhD program and took up a job to contribute to clearing the loan within time. Regardless of Shrikant’s reminders to pursue her doctoral degree, she prioritized her responsibilities towards her husband and home as more important and postponed her higher studies. It was only after Shrikant became extremely busy with his work and travelled twenty to twenty-five days a month, that Shrimati started to feel lonely. She was shattered and burst out when she came to know about their ‘sub-fertile’ condition. She learnt basic computer skills and became an obedient personal secretary to Shrikant and believed that it was her responsibility to understand and help him. It was because of Shrimati’s encouragement, support and her sacrifice that Shrikant could become General Manager in a short time of 10 years. Her appetite for history can be witnessed when she accompanied Prof Collins who was on a visit to the monuments and historical places like Delhi, Goa, Ujjain, and Bombay. Prof Collins’ words - people who are intelligent do not use it properly constantly prickled her and she starts thinking about what her ambition really is, where she stands now. She realized that she had lost her identity in the process of being an obedient and affectionate wife. In spite of all this, Shrikant could not recognize her sacrifice nor spend time with her. She felt exhausted and upset.

As the fragrance of Bakula spread even after the flower dried, so also Shrimati. She remained the same without any change. She was perfect in every sphere of life – a perfect wife, a perfect daughter-in-law, a perfect sister-in-law. It was only due to the single-mindedness of Shrikant towards his own career, negligence towards his wife and inability to recognize her interests that made Shrimati take a decision to get away from him, leaving all the material things behind. The reason she moved away was to find her own identity and fulfill her dreams.



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Major Themes

1. Monetary Influence

In *Dollar Bahu*, Gouramma (mother-in-law) and Surabhi (sister-in-law) give more priority to ornamental things like money, jewelry etc. As Vinuta is from a middle-class family and did not bring any dowry with her, she is humiliated by both of them. On the other hand, her younger daughter-in-law, Jamuna, is honored and respected since she is from a well-to-do family. Vinuta manages all the daily chores in the family, regardless she is ill-treated. However, Jamuna is excused even from visiting her in-law's house. Gouramma comes to know about the selfishness of Jamuna when she happens to visit America to attend and take care of her new born. She then realizes how foolishly she behaved towards innocent Vinuta. She repents for her mistake.

Shrikant in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a hard-working young man and desirous to achieve his goal. Shrimati too, is an intelligent girl who aspired for a Ph.D. But after their marriage, Shrimati felt being responsible towards her family is more important than her personal interests. Shrikant worked hard day and night to make his dream come true. He could climb the ladder of success in a short period of time, which earned him fame and status. In the process of climbing the ladder, he ignored everything, including his wife. He became so enthusiastic to such an extent that he could not even identify the growing gap between both of them. He could only realize that he was running back of money in the name of success when Shrimati left him.

2. Self-Realization

Shrimati, a young, intelligent housewife in *GFB*, is a dutiful and dedicated wife. She even postpones her PhD admission so as to support her husband Shrikant, achieving his goal. But Shrikant ignores her sacrifices. After realizing that she is being ignored, she deserts him. Anupama of *Mahasweta* is found to be a submissive, enduring wife who has unconditional love for her husband, Dr. Anand in the beginning. Though her husband is a doctor, she is dishonored by him when she is affected by Leukoderma and dissociates from her. When she realizes she is not honored by her family members as well as her husband, she emerges as a confident, self-sufficient woman; she moves to Mumbai and starts making her own living. She creates her own identity. It is observed that in *Three Thousand Stitches* the women stuck in the Devadasi system are emancipated and educated by the author herself. These women gave up hope and trust in human beings as everyone tried to get their own benefits in the name of uplifting them. Sudha Murty took on as her first project to educate, emancipate and empower these women. So firstly, she enrolled hundreds of their children in the institutions, thus gaining trust from them. Then she educated them and made them realize how their lives would be if they came out of the age-old Devadasi system. They could establish a bank with the help of Sudha Murty, which provided financial support. The most important thing was that 3,000 women were outside of the Devadasi system. It is proved that through education, the lives of these devadasis and sex workers are transformed.

3. Humanism

As we all know, ethics and morals have been transmitted through ages by means of storytelling (orally). Through stories, a child can be made to learn the culture and tradition. While narrating a story, the child tries to imagine and picturize illusions related to the characters. This aids in developing imaginary skills and creativity. As the characters are drawn mostly from the common lives of Indian society, they connect with the reader to a great extent. They assist children in building up their personality. There is a large scope for children to learn showing gratitude, being humane and generous to fellow human beings. The child learns to be self-reliant and to live with compassion. They deal with challenges and how the solutions are drawn. Even the humorous instances can be witnessed in the stories. The child can observe how the real-life obstacles can be overcome with simple solutions.

The Old Man and His God comprises 25 real-life stories which deal with all types of experiences. The author's experiences have also been incorporated into the stories. This book brings out the life of both the urban and rural people.



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The title story ‘The Old Man and His God’ teaches an excellent moral to the readers. When the old blind couple living in a Shiva temple gives shelter to the author during a stormy night, she understands the plight of the old couple and thinks of helping them financially. But they politely refuse her help. Their refusal teaches the reader how to live a contented life with what they have. In another story, ‘A Tale of Two Brothers’, the author tells how people relate themselves to others. Here the two biological brothers turn up to be strangers and it happened to be the sons of master and servant become so intimate as real brothers.

One can find how to meet the career related obstacles specially with the egoistic co-employees through one of her works. The people working in a private sector have no liberty, moreover cannot choose their boss. But with his good nature, a good team can be made around him. The author mentions how people are getting separated and moving away from each other on the name of technology in the modern world. In the olden days, the villagers and elderly people gathered under a Banyan tree to take rest. They discuss their whereabouts, share the difficulties, chats and sometimes even forgot their burdens discussing with each other. It is presumed to be the world’s best place because everyone listened to each other, shared and enjoyed the talk and came up with some possible solutions. It is compared to that of an urban counsellor’s office. But in the present day, people have no time to listen to others and live a lonely life amongst the crowded population. They detach themselves from others in the name of modernity and modern means of communication.

The real meaning of marriage is conveyed in one of the stories by the author to the civilized people through the poor couple Yellamma and Medha who have proved that marriage is nothing but sharing everything. Though they were beggars, they did not have any problem in their life. The reason was, they shared everything together – food, work and more importantly they exchanged each other’s views. If anyone could not go out, the other would fetch alms for both of them. This couple stand as an example to others who consider marriage as a status or prestige. Marriage is a journey wherein the married couple should understand each other in all situations. In the present day, people spend huge amounts of money on marriage to showcase it, which is a mere waste if the couple lack understanding. They gave a message to the modern couple who think marriage is only a status.

‘Freedom of Speech’ is on the financial problems and crisis between husband and wife. Tulsi, who lives in a slum, is juxtaposed to Alka, the author’s friend from the city. Alka is called as ‘Queen of debate’ in the University. Though not same, but both of them have common financial problems – husbands exploit them by taking their wife’ earnings. Tulsi, an illiterate, could make herself calm to a little extent by speaking to others. Whereas Alka, though a debater in the university, suffers more as she could not share her problem with anyone. It is because she thinks women from the civilized society have no right to speak a single word against the husband. That means nothing should be spoken of the victim or the exploitation. If done as such, they are considered as cultureless women. The differentiation in the ideologies of these two women can be understood as the difference in the areas in which they live – the urban and the rural. The same theme can be seen in the story ‘The way you look at it’. In this, the author tries to give the true meaning of punya. The author says punya doesn’t come if we worship or go to religious places. Instead, it comes by doing good and something useful to others. The urban women do not understand the importance of public toilets constructed for the ladies in the village. Whereas the rural women recognize and applaud as they could understand the problem in reality.

The author is not just bounded to relationships between family members, marriage, villages; but she even discusses about the sensitive problems of a country along with international relationship of two countries. The difference in the attitude of people towards orphaned children is depicted in one of her works. On one side, a poor lady working as a maid, adopts a girl and does anything for her education. On the other side of the coin, one of the office representatives behaves in a different way. Instead of saving the child, he uses the money for construction of house. The author throws light on the sensitive issue of India-Pakistan separation, the emotional attachment to the native land. Even though the family relationship, domestic problems, educational problems, social problems, financial problems are universal, they are examined at a deeper level and structured into stories by the author.



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It is possible to acquire a variety of values, including charity, kindness, and humanity; additionally, to live a happy life without being depressed about one's shortcomings. Each of her stories teaches few essentialities of life.

Conclusion

Till few decades back we have seen joint families where grandparents were available to the grandchildren to narrate stories as well guide them in a proper way. But today, the same situation is not prevailing. There are no joint families where grandparents could impart such things. There is a wide gap in the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. Therefore, storytelling has almost become invisible. In present day the child's education is not catering to the gap of storytelling. This gap can be clearly seen by the intrusion of the electronic world in the lives of children which made them passive. So, there is a need to make the children read stories and learn them. They can be done as a part of curriculum in the educational institutions. Reading a story not only provides a platform of entertainment but also injects morals in the children. The author introspected the financial problems, struggle, suffering with special reference to women. So, in many of her stories, women have a prominent role and are found struggling; but she deals in a different manner. They overcome the troubles with their self-striving nature.

Sudha Murty has proved that the simple use of words can also express ideas and views efficiently. Her characters prove that success comes from those who have a strong determination. The themes discussed depict the present scenarios of men and women in society. The novels have enlightened the situations being faced by women and how they are able to manage their lives as well as the others whom they are engaged in with. She picks up the connection between the reader and the story generates easily. This works as a plus factor for any narrator. These abilities of Sudha Murty are profoundly amazing and show her devotion and effectiveness in narrating and communicating her thoughts.

Further Research

As much research has not been done on the works of Sudha Murty, her non-fictional works can be taken up to add on to the genre of children's literature. As her characters represent the common man, they can be studied in detail. The female characters can be analyzed to add up to feministic perspectives. Furthermore, familial relationships can be critically examined.

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