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Tapestry of Human Values: An Exploration of Sudha Murthy's Literary World through Select Short Stories

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**TAPESTRY OF HUMAN VALUES:  
An Exploration of Sudha Murthy's Literary World through Select Short  
Stories**

*Soham Agrawal<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract**

*Sudha Murthy's literary works offer a profound examination of human values, which are intricately interwoven with the themes of compassion, morality, and social awareness. This paper seeks to explore her literary world by analyzing select short stories that reflect her unique perspective on life, ethics, and the complexities of human relationships. Known for her simplicity and narrative clarity, Murthy addresses universal themes such as kindness, integrity, resilience, and social justice, often through characters who embody these values in their everyday lives. By focusing on specific stories, this paper examines how Murthy uses her storytelling to shed light on the importance of empathy, the power of giving, and the challenges of navigating moral dilemmas in modern society. Additionally, it explores how her personal experiences and her commitment to social causes inform her writing, making her characters relatable and her stories impactful. Ultimately, this paper highlights Sudha Murthy's ability to create a literary space where human values are not only explored but celebrated, offering readers both a moral compass and a deeper understanding of the human condition. Through this exploration, the paper emphasizes how Murthy's stories continue to resonate with readers, fostering reflection on the core principles that define our shared humanity.*

**Keywords:** *Human Values, Determination, Humility, Social Justice and Moral Dilemmas*

**Introduction:**

Values are very significant for individual and societal growth. It fosters personal development and preserves our diverse culture by building a sense of community. The moral principles that people uphold put values to the test. They not only guide our behavior but also shape our responses to various situations and challenges. These values are often tested by our actions and decisions, based on our moral and ethical beliefs about what is right and wrong. Stories have long served as a medium for imparting these values, facilitating self-knowledge, healing, and fostering a

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spiritual connection with others<sup>2</sup>. In this context, literature serves as a powerful tool for molding lives, helping individuals internalize important lessons through the art of storytelling. Sudha Murthy, a renowned author and philanthropist, has effectively used her literary works to communicate essential human values that transcend cultural boundaries.

Sudha Murthy's literary contributions are not only remarkable for their simplicity but also for their deep reflections on human values, ethics, and social responsibility. The author was born on August 19, 1950, in Shiggaon, Karnataka, and pursued Electrical Engineering which was followed by a Postgraduate Degree in computer science. She became the chairperson of the Infosys. Her education and her work experience shaped her life and her work.

Sudha Murthy had a penchant for writing and hence made remarkable literary contributions, which became popular due to its lucidity and also for their deep reflections on human values, ethics, and social responsibility. Sudha Murthy's works also gained popularity and caught huge readership due to the reestablishment of human values, socio-cultural norms, conflicts and hardships. She also wrote about her country, its well-known citizens, its culture, etc. which have influenced people's views towards society and themselves<sup>3</sup>. Her stories are infused with Indian culture and are based on real-life incidents occurrences, and experiences<sup>4</sup>. Critics appreciate her works because they consider that this simplicity is her strength, as it makes her stories accessible to a wide range of readers.

She combines her philanthropic endeavors with her literary pursuits, addressing issues such as social justice, empathy, and equality through her stories<sup>5</sup>. Through her

<sup>2</sup>Pillai, B.G.&SinghP, *Indian Values in The Work of Sudha Murthy*. 12International Journal PS., (2012).

<sup>3</sup>Hashmi, S. (n.d.). *Human values in Sudha Murthy's stories*, 22(1) Literary Studies Quarterly, 23-29 (2012).

<sup>4</sup>Alyahya, M.,*Exploring Sudha Murthy's literary world: A study of her short stories*. 14(2), Journal of Indian Lit., 45-52 (2019).

<sup>5</sup>Vaswani N.,*Sudha Murthy: An Eminent Contributor to Literature*, 6(1). International Journal of English Lit.and S.S, (2021).

storytelling, Murthy addresses complex moral questions with clarity, compassion, and an innate respect for her readers' intelligence. While her stories often engage with universal human concerns—compassion, resilience, justice, and integrity—they are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of India, creating a unique blend of traditional Indian values with modern-day challenges. This paper seeks to compare and contrast the themes of selected short stories from Murthy's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* to highlight the distinctive features of her narrative style. In doing so, it examines how Murthy's writing technique is shaped by cultural influences and her ability to weave humanistic values into her stories. Murthy's works are deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions and explore the intricate human experiences that define everyday life.

### **How I taught my Grandmother to read**

Her book *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* (2004) is a collection of short stories that illustrate these values. This paper examines select stories from the collection, focusing on how Murthy conveys essential humanistic values that can guide individuals in both their personal and social lives. Through these stories, Murthy shows that values like compassion, resilience, humility, and hard work form the foundation of society. The central theme of the story is the transformative power of education and the joy of learning, regardless of age or gender. The story highlights the values of the joy of giving, and respect towards our teachers irrespective of gender, and age. It also focuses on the values of achieving our commitments and resilience. This is a story from the author's childhood when she used to live with her grandparents. Her grandmother had never attended school so she was unable to read. A weekly magazine named *Karmaveera* used to come, and the author would narrate it to her grandmother. Once, the author was out for a week but when she came back, she saw her grandmother in tears following that night the grandmother told her that she was upset as she didn't know how to read, to which the author responded by promising her to teach her how to read. Then the tuitions were started and went on till the festival of Dussehra. Her hard work and dedication thus enabled her to read and

write. Also, at the end when the Grandmother learns how to read and write she expresses her gratitude by touching her granddaughter's feet, despite being elder to her in terms of their relationship. She was indebted to her young teacher. The story, thus, highlights themes of determination, devotion, and the life-changing impact of education. The grandmother's decision to learn to read at the age of sixty two underscores values of self-improvement, respect for others, and challenging societal limitations<sup>6</sup>.

This story shares thematic similarities with several traditional Indian folktales and narratives where the pursuit of knowledge is viewed as essential for social mobility and personal growth. However, Murthy's narrative distinguishes itself by highlighting a woman's journey to overcome the personal challenge of illiteracy, reflecting the broader societal struggle against the denial of women's education in Indian history. In this context, the story can be compared with the *Ramayana's* portrayal of women like Sita, who defy the societal constraints to uphold their dignity and wisdom.

The moment when the grandmother respectfully touches her granddaughter's feet after she learns to read underlines the cultural importance of respecting one's teachers, which is a key element in Indian culture. This gesture, which symbolises respect and gratitude, mirrors the reverence that students hold for their gurus, a value deeply rooted in Indian ethos.

In her book *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, Murthy employs simple language and clear narrative structures to convey profound human values without overwhelming readers. However, some critics contend that this simplicity can render her stories somewhat predictable. For example, in *How I Taught My Grandmother*, the themes of personal growth, compassion, and selflessness are presented in a direct, almost formulaic manner, which may come across as overly

<sup>6</sup>Murthy Sudha, *HOW I TAUGHT MY GRANDMOTHER TO READ AND OTHER STORIES*, (2004),

idealistic or lacking in narrative depth for certain readers. Critics like Nandini Rajagopalan have pointed out that while Murthy's stories are enjoyable, they can occasionally feel too morally straightforward and simplistic in terms of character development and plot structure.<sup>7</sup>

### **Salaam Abdul Kalam**

This story revolves around our hon'ble late president Abdul Kalam, but not for his stint as president of the country, but around a simple, humble yet one of the most intelligent people of the country. This story unfolds when Kalam reads a column written by the author, and calls her to appreciate her work. An incident is also mentioned about his cool-minded and humble approach where in a man entered his room without a prior appointment and asked him for a photo with him, so Kalam allowed him for a photo, so the man quickly took out a pink shawl and posed in a way that he was honoring Kalam with that shawl, but after the photo was clicked he quickly took the shawl with him which he had given to Kalam, seeing this the author became furious on the act done by the man, to which Kalam simply replies, 'it didn't matter, he didn't need any of them and probably the man needs it'<sup>8</sup>. This example clearly states that one should be serene and benevolent irrespective of how big he/she becomes. This tale emphasizes the moral value of humility, illustrating that true greatness is reflected in how one treats others, particularly those who are less privileged.

The narrative reflects the value systems found in Indian epics, where esteemed figures such as Lord Rama and King Yudhishtira demonstrate humility in their leadership. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam embodies the virtues celebrated in these texts, such as wisdom, humility, and empathy. Despite his high status, he opts for a simple lifestyle, acting as a modern representation of the ideals highlighted in Indian literature. The contrast between Kalam's calm nature and the opportunistic attitude

<sup>7</sup>Rajagopalan, N., *The narrative simplicity of Sudha Murthy: A literary critique*, 17(2) *Studies in South Asian Lit.*, 45-53 (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Murthy S., *HOW I TAUGHT MY GRANDMOTHER TO READ AND OTHER STORIES*, (2004).

of others emphasizes a broader moral lesson: true integrity lies in maintaining humility and compassion, regardless of one's position. This theme resonates throughout both contemporary and classical Indian literature, where individuals prioritize the common good over personal gain. Additionally, a frequent critique of Murthy's work is the prominent moralizing tone present in many of her stories. While her characters are charming and relatable, they often serve more as channel for moral lessons than fully developed individuals. For instance, in "I Will Do It," Narayana Murthy exemplifies hard work and perseverance, whereas "Salaam Abdul Kalam" presents Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam as an ideal figure of humility and simplicity. Critics like *K. S. P. Ranjani*<sup>9</sup> and *Madhavi Menon*<sup>10</sup> argue that Murthy's approach often borders on the didactic, where her characters' actions are overly aligned with the moral lessons she wishes to convey. This can occasionally lead to a lack of narrative tension, as the resolution of the story may feel too neat and predictable. The characters' moral growth is often transparent, making it difficult for the reader to experience the organic development of the characters' personal journeys.

### **Appro J.R.D.**

This story captures the author's stint at TELCO (Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company) after completing her postgraduate in Engineering from IISc, Bangalore. Although she wanted to pursue higher studies abroad, after seeing a poster from TELCO requiring young hard-working engineers, with the advertisement stating 'lady candidates need not apply', she wanted to challenge this discrimination and wrote a postcard to Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata (J.R.D. Tata) complaining about the discrimination. Within a few days, she received a letter inviting her for the interview for the job. After a lengthy interview, she was able to secure a job there. This teaches us a lesson that we should always voice our opinion against injustice, but in a polite way, as the

<sup>9</sup>Ranjani, K, *Idealism in Indian literature: Sudha Murthy's portrayal of human virtues*, 21(1) Indian Journal of Literature and Cul., 67-72. (2022).

<sup>10</sup>Menon, M, 3(4) *Understanding the moral and cultural dimensions of Sudha Murthy's works*. Journal of Contemporary Lit., 11-18 (2020).



author felt sorry because of her writing a postcard and not giving the letter in a closed envelope to such an elderly person (J.R.D. Tata). Her bold stance, which eventually leads to her hiring, highlights the value of standing up against injustice, no matter how entrenched the biases might be.<sup>11</sup>

The story can be compared with the principles of Gandhi, a proponent of non-violence, who consistently opposed injustice and inequality. Murthy's act embodies the value of truth and integrity in the fight against oppressive systems. Her resistance not only confronts the discriminatory practices prevalent in society but also champions the cause of equality and justice.

J.R.D. Tata's advice, encouraging Murthy to give back to society once successful, reflects with the Gandhian value of social responsibility. The story highlights the importance of societal contribution, a value that is central to the ethos of Indian philanthropy and social service. This teaches us the lesson that one should always try to give back to society in one or the other way.<sup>12</sup>

### **Heart of Gold**

The short story captures the essence of giving to others unconditionally. It is set in the city of New York, USA, where a mother takes to begging in order to treat her daughter who was diagnosed with cancer. That day the mother who was holding a bowl to collect money from people catches the attention of a policeman. He approaches the unfortunate mother and gets to know her situation. He decides to help her. He had recently got bonus money for his work. He tells himself that a man needs a home to live, a caring wife, and a loving son, and God had really been kind to him so he decides to give all the money received as a bonus to the mother for her to treat her child. After reaching home he narrated this whole incident to his family, to which the son became a bit angry and asked his father whether he was sure that he was not being cheated. After few days a news article came "mother and child duo caught cheating", which instantly caught the attention of the policeman's child. The child quickly told his father about the

<sup>11</sup>*Supra* 7

<sup>12</sup>*Id.*

same and afterwards became upset about what had happened, but the father wasn't disappointed rather when asked by his son he replied 'I am rather happy that the child (begging mother's) is happy. This event teaches certain things such as we should help the people who are clearly in need, secondly, instead of sulking for a situation one should try to find something good in it. Thirdly, one should always hope for others' well-being regardless of how they acted with them. Lastly, don't expect anything in return for the help provided, help and be grateful that by god's grace, you were competent enough to help somebody unconditionally.<sup>13</sup>

This story reflects upon the values depicted in the *Mahabharata*, where Lord Krishna exemplifies the act of selflessness by helping others. It ends on a didactic note that one should give unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. This feeling is timeless and deeply rooted in both Indian and global ethical traditions.

### **I Will Do It**

In this work, Sudha Murthy narrates the story of her husband, Narayana Murthy, and his determination to succeed despite financial constraints. This story upholds the values of perseverance, resilience, and hard work, even in the face of adversity. Narayana Murthy's journey to success, despite not having the opportunity to study at IIT, underscores the importance of self-discipline and personal responsibility in shaping one's destiny.

This narrative echoes the moral teachings found in classical Indian literature, where perseverance and dedication are key virtues. The stories of great Indian rulers like Chandragupta Maurya or even contemporary figures like Mahatma Gandhi emphasize that it is not external circumstances but one's inner strength and values that determine success.

Mr. Nagavara Ramarao Narayana Murthy is the great co-founder of Infosys who is also the husband of the author. He came from a poor, educated family but was

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

the brightest student in his class. He took the exam to pursue his studies at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and received a high rank. Excited, he went to his father to share the news and express his ambition to join IIT, to which his father sadly replied, ‘My son, you are a bright boy. You know our financial position. I have five daughters to be married off and three sons to educate. I am a salaried person. I cannot afford your expenses at IIT. You can stay in Mysore and study as much as you want’<sup>14</sup>.

Though shattered from within, he controlled his anger and remained composed. A few days later, he went to the station to wave off his friends, who were going to their colleges, he stood on the platform without anger or jealousy. All students from the IITs study well and do big things in life. But it is not the institution; ultimately it is you and you alone who can change your life by hard work<sup>15</sup>.

He toiled and it paid him. He became one of the greatest businessmen in the world by founding one of the largest tech companies “Infosys”. He always lived by the motto ‘Powered by intellect and driven by values’. This story teaches that perseverance pays off in the future. One should manage every situation in a calm and composed way and also one should in any case not hurt anyone or become angry.

While Sudha Murthy’s stories often explore common themes of compassion, respect, and perseverance, they also differ in how these values are articulated and the moral lessons they convey. For instance, *Heart of Gold* focuses on the purity of unconditional giving, emphasizing selflessness, while *I Will Do It* offers a more practical lesson on perseverance, focusing on hard work instrumental in achieving one’s goals. The focus in *Heart of Gold* is more on selflessness for the sake of others, while in *I Will Do It*, the emphasis is on self-determination and overcoming personal barriers. Furthermore, Murthy’s storytelling style varies in her treatment of societal structures. *Appro J.R.D.* directly challenges societal and institutional

<sup>15</sup>*Id.*

discrimination through action, while *Salaam Abdul Kalam* addresses societal expectations more implicitly, focusing on the moral integrity of the individual rather than direct resistance to societal norms.

## Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's writing style manifests a unique blend of simplicity and depth, where complex moral themes are conveyed through relatable, real-life experiences. Her stories consistently highlight core human values such as dignity, equality, humility, perseverance, and compassion, both in personal and societal contexts. What sets Murthy's writing apart is her ability to integrate these values into the fabric of her characters' lives, making her stories not accessible but also thought-provoking. By comparing and contrasting the themes across her works, it is evident that Murthy's storytelling remains rooted in traditional Indian values while simultaneously engaging with the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary life. This synthesis creates a literary world that not only reflects but also actively promotes humanistic ideals.

Sudha Murthy's literary works, particularly her short stories, have garnered a range of critical responses over the years. Critics often praise her distinctive writing style, which blends simplicity with profound moral insights. However, some also critique her narrative approach for being didactic, the idealized portrayal of Indian society, the lack of complex character development, and the traditional representation of women. Despite these critiques, Murthy's stories remain a significant part of contemporary Indian literature, offering readers valuable life lessons while providing insight into Indian cultural and moral traditions. As her work continues to be read and discussed, these critiques further enrich our understanding of her narrative style and thematic concerns.

Sudha Murthy's stories are praised for their simplicity, moral clarity, and cultural relevance. Critics recognize her talent for incorporating essential human values into her narratives, making them both accessible and relatable. However, some critiques focus on the didactic nature of her writing, the idealized depiction of Indian society,

the lack of complex character development, and the traditional portrayal of women. Despite these criticisms, Murthy's stories remain a significant part of contemporary Indian literature, offering valuable life lessons and insights into Indian cultural and moral traditions. As her works continue to be read and discussed, these critiques enrich our understanding of her narrative style and thematic concerns.