

Tradition vs. Modernity: Depiction of Women and Gender Roles in Sudha Murthy's Fiction

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Abstract: *Sudha Murthy, one of India's most prolific contemporary writers, intricately portrays the evolving roles of women in a socio-cultural context that oscillates between tradition and modernity. Her stories are rooted in real-life experiences, reflecting women from various walks of life — from obedient homemakers confined by patriarchy to bold professionals carving out identities in modern society. This paper explores how her narratives reflect the tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations of Indian women. It analyses key female characters from her short stories and novels, examining their challenges, choices, and transformations. By doing so, the paper reveals the layers of empowerment, resistance, and conformity embedded in Murthy's fiction and the broader message it sends about gender roles in contemporary India.*

Keywords: *Sudha Murthy, Indian Women Writers, Gender Roles, Tradition vs. Modernity, Feminism in Indian Fiction, Women's Identity, Patriarchy, Empowerment*

1. Introduction

The status and perception of women in Indian society have long been shaped by a confluence of religious beliefs, cultural practices, colonial history, and socio-economic factors. Literature has served as both a mirror and a mould for these dynamics, offering insights into the lived experiences of women across eras. Sudha Murthy, a writer known for her simple yet profound storytelling, provides a significant literary lens through which one can examine the nuanced depiction of women navigating the intersections of tradition and modernity.

Murthy's work stands out not for overt feminism but for its realism. Her characters are rooted in everyday Indian life, often reflecting her experiences as a teacher, social worker, and observer of grassroots India. Through narratives that span rural and urban settings, Murthy portrays a range of female characters — from submissive daughters-in-law and silent sufferers to bold entrepreneurs and social change agents. These women negotiate their identities within traditional structures while embracing modern aspirations.

This paper seeks to explore how gender roles are depicted in Sudha Murthy's fiction, and how her characters embody or resist traditional gender expectations. Using close textual analysis of select stories and novels, supported by feminist theory and socio-cultural analysis, the study examines how Murthy captures the changing face of womanhood in Indian society.

2. The Tension Between Traditional Expectations and Modern Aspirations

I. Contextualizing Sudha Murthy's Works

- (i) Sudha Murthy's writings are deeply personal yet universally relatable. Drawing inspiration from her upbringing in rural Karnataka, her educational and professional journey in male-dominated fields like engineering, and her philanthropic work across India, Murthy captures a wide spectrum of the Indian experience. Her dual life — one rooted in traditional Indian values and the other shaped by global exposure and modernity — enables her to bridge the gaps between generations, genders, and geographies.
- (ii) As an author, Murthy merges simplicity in narrative with profound insight, making her stories accessible yet deeply meaningful. She does not limit her storytelling to urban middle-class experiences but offers glimpses into rural life, economic struggles, and gender expectations across all social strata. Having herself experienced the expectations of being a dutiful wife, an accomplished professional, and a compassionate humanitarian, Murthy's characters are imbued with layers of authenticity, shaped by a life lived across traditional and modern contexts.
- (iii) Her female characters are particularly reflective of this duality. They are at once products of their upbringing and agents of their transformation. The dilemmas they face — between duty and desire, tradition and selfhood, silence and speech — mirror those that many Indian women grapple with daily. Murthy uses fiction not just to reflect society but to question and gently challenge its inequities. Through her storytelling, she reimagines the possibilities of womanhood within Indian culture, moving beyond idealized archetypes to complex, emotionally rich portrayals of real women.

II. Women as Custodians of Tradition

- (i) Shrimati, the protagonist, symbolizes the conflict between a woman's aspirations and her responsibilities. Initially introduced as a brilliant, academically inclined young woman, she chooses to marry Shrikant, a man equally ambitious but less emotionally attuned. As Shrikant's career ascends, Shrimati's world becomes confined to the domestic sphere, her intellectual dreams shelved in favor of supporting her husband's ambitions. Murthy poignantly captures how societal and marital expectations slowly erode Shrimati's sense of self. Her transformation from a confident student to a lonely, neglected housewife underscores the emotional sacrifices women often make for marital harmony.
- (ii) What is profound in Shrimati's journey is not just her eventual departure from the marriage, but the quiet strength it represents. It is not a dramatic rebellion but a deeply personal reclaiming of identity. Her decision to leave is a culmination of years of suppressed selfhood, a recognition that her existence deserves purpose beyond servitude. In portraying Shrimati's awakening, Murthy challenges the notion that traditional roles equate to fulfillment, offering instead a narrative of self-realization and the courage to seek personal meaning.

III. Women as Agents of Modernity

Conversely, Murthy presents strong, independent women who challenge norms and redefine gender roles. Characters like those in *Wise and Otherwise*, *House of Cards*, or *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, exhibit courage, ambition, and resilience. These women are not defined by rebellion alone but by introspection, self-worth, and the pursuit of integrity in a world that often devalues their choices.

3. Case Study: House of Cards

- (i) Mridula, the protagonist, begins her journey as a devoted wife and partner, deeply invested in her husband Sanjay's career and aspirations. She represents the archetypal supportive spouse, content to build her life around her husband's success. However, as Sanjay climbs the professional ladder, Mridula becomes increasingly disillusioned by the compromises he makes—corruption, moral lapses, and emotional neglect.
- (ii) Murthy delicately portrays Mridula's awakening as a moral reckoning. Her decision to walk away from a life of material comfort and social prestige is not fueled by bitterness but by a profound realization of her own values. Choosing dignity over luxury, Mridula embodies the idea of moral modernity—an evolution of character where ethics and self-respect take precedence over societal validation. Her journey is a powerful testament to how women can redefine success and strength on their own terms.

4. Navigating Dual Realities

- (i) While Sudha Murthy's fiction features both traditionally bound and radically independent female characters, many of her most compelling women occupy a space in between — navigating the complex terrain of tradition and modernity with pragmatism and introspection. These characters reflect a more realistic portrait of Indian womanhood, one not caught in the extremes of submission or rebellion but grounded in negotiation, compromise, and self-awareness.
- (ii) Murthy resists simplistic binaries such as "oppressed vs. liberated" or "traditional vs. modern." Instead, she acknowledges that real women often carry the weight of inherited cultural values while also striving for autonomy. Her characters are often not idealized feminists nor unquestioning conformists. Rather, they are individuals who forge their identities in the midst of competing demands: family expectations, societal judgment, personal ambition, and moral conscience.
- (iii) These middle-path characters often choose gradual transformation over outright revolt. For example, they may continue to care for their families while also pursuing part-time education or entrepreneurship. They may accept arranged marriages but still assert boundaries within those relationships. They may not abandon tradition entirely, but reinterpret it in ways that allow for self-expression and growth.
- (iv) Such portrayals are important because they reflect the lived experiences of millions of Indian women who are redefining gender roles within their own cultural frameworks. Murthy's writing demonstrates that empowerment can be quiet, subtle, and deeply rooted in one's values. Her characters' strength lies not just in fighting societal norms but in adapting, negotiating, and reshaping those norms from within.
- (v) These stories also emphasize that change is often incremental. A character's journey may begin with small acts of resistance — questioning a family decision, taking up a job, demanding respect — which slowly accumulate into a larger narrative of self-definition. Murthy portrays this slow, steady empowerment with sensitivity, highlighting that transformation need not always be dramatic to be meaningful.
- (vi) In doing so, Murthy adds a critical dimension to feminist discourse: that the path to gender equity in India is not always through confrontation but often through courageous coexistence with cultural structures. Her characters illustrate that choosing to remain within the fold of tradition can still be a feminist act, provided it is a choice made with awareness and agency.

5. Thematic Patterns

- (i) **Education as Liberation:** Murthy strongly advocates education as the most powerful tool for women's empowerment. In her stories, education is not just a means to employment but a route to self-awareness and confidence. It allows women to question societal expectations and to make informed choices about their lives. Educated women in her narratives often become role models for their families and communities, as seen in *Mahashweta*, where Anupama overcomes social ostracization by pursuing her medical studies and establishing a career. Education becomes the catalyst for dignity and independence.
- (ii) **Marriage as a Site of Conflict:** Murthy does not present marriage as inherently oppressive but critiques its unequal power dynamics. Marriage often becomes the setting where women's dreams are deferred or sacrificed. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati gives up her academic ambitions to support her husband's career, only to realize years later that she has lost her sense of self. The narrative emphasizes how love and companionship can be stifled by patriarchal expectations that undervalue a woman's aspirations.
- (iii) **Economic Independence:** Financial autonomy emerges as a vital turning point in the lives of Murthy's women. Women who earn and manage their finances gain not only material freedom but also the ability to make life choices on their terms. Mridula in *House of Cards* demonstrates this by leaving her unethical husband and starting afresh. Economic independence enables women to resist exploitation, raise their voices, and live with dignity.
- (iv) **Motherhood and Sacrifice:** Murthy challenges the glorified image of motherhood as the ultimate female destiny. While she respects the emotional strength of mothers, her stories often reveal the psychological and emotional burden it carries, especially when idealized by society. She shows that motherhood should not be a woman's only identity and that personal growth and fulfillment are equally important. In various narratives, women are shown struggling with expectations that prioritize children and family over their personal needs and mental health.

6. Reimagining Motherhood and Marriage

- Murthy also reinterprets motherhood and marriage. While these roles are often idealized in Indian culture, her stories reveal the burdens they impose. In *House of Cards*, Mridula ultimately chooses to leave a comfortable but morally corrupt marriage. Her decision underscores the importance of self-respect over social approval.
- Motherhood, similarly, is presented not merely as a biological function but as a space of emotional labour and sacrifice. Her stories often question the romanticized image of the mother by exposing the emotional toll and societal expectations attached to it.

7. Narrative Style and Gender Perspective

Murthy's writing is characterized by a straightforward, non-polemical tone. Her quiet feminism lies in the stories themselves rather than explicit messaging. She foregrounds everyday acts of resistance — a woman refusing dowry, a girl pursuing higher studies, a mother prioritizing her daughter's dreams.

7(a) Language and Accessibility

Murthy writes in English and Kannada, targeting a broad audience. Her accessible style makes the stories powerful in their reach, especially for young readers and women from non-metropolitan backgrounds.

8. Representations Across Social Classes

- Murthy's characters span different economic and social backgrounds. From rural women facing caste and class discrimination to urban professionals grappling with glass ceilings, her

fiction encompasses a wide spectrum. This inclusivity lends a democratic voice to her narrative.

- For instance, in *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, Murthy narrates stories of women from marginalized communities who exhibit extraordinary resilience. These stories highlight how gender roles intersect with other axes of identity such as class, caste, and region.

9. Feminist Undertones in Murthy's Fiction

While Murthy may not be seen as a radical feminist writer, her work embodies feminist ideals of self-definition, choice, and agency. Her brand of feminism is rooted in Indian socio-cultural realities. She celebrates the small victories of women and portrays empowerment as a personal journey rather than a political agenda.

Murthy's emphasis on self-worth, dignity, and inner strength rather than societal approval subtly critiques patriarchal structures while offering alternative models of womanhood.

10. Case Studies of Selected Works

- *Gently Falls the Bakula*: A tale of a woman's unfulfilled intellectual potential in a patriarchal marriage.
- *Mahashweta*: A powerful story about stigma, resilience, and redefining self-worth.
- *House of Cards*: Explores the corruption of power and the assertion of moral independence.
- *Three Thousand Stitches*: Focuses on the empowerment of marginalized women and the role of empathy in social change.
- *The Mother I Never Knew*: Delves into themes of identity, abandonment, and emotional reconciliation, with women at the core of familial resolution.
- *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*: Features real-life stories that bring out the strength and compassion of ordinary women who face extraordinary challenges.
- *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven*: Offers glimpses into the lives of women who transform grief, trauma, or loss into opportunities for growth and strength.
- *Dollar Bahu*: Highlights the allure of material wealth abroad versus traditional family values at home, centering on women's agency in negotiating expectations.
- *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories*: Reveals the power of literacy, generational bonding, and the transformative potential of female education.

Each of these works reveals how women negotiate space within or outside traditional structures, often redefining them in the process.

11. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals several notable patterns in Murthy's portrayal of gender roles:

- (i) Continuum of Change:** One of the defining features of Murthy's feminist perspective is her recognition that change is not sudden or radical but rather gradual and deeply personal. Her female characters do not overthrow patriarchy in grand gestures but chip away at it through everyday acts of courage and resilience. Murthy's stories track the subtle shifts in mindset and circumstance that allow women to grow. This continuum portrays real progress, which is more sustainable than dramatic, symbolic revolutions.
- (ii) Diverse Representation:** Murthy does not restrict her narratives to any single class or region. Her characters range from village women with little access to education to urban professionals confronting corporate sexism. This variety not only enriches her stories but also ensures that the struggles and aspirations of different women are given voice. It emphasizes that while challenges vary by context, the core issues of autonomy, respect, and identity remain central across the board.

(iii) Subtle Feminism: Rather than adopting an aggressive or polemical feminist stance, Murthy embeds her critique of patriarchy in relatable, everyday experiences. Her feminism is empathetic, rooted in ethical values, and focused on real change. She presents empowered women who remain connected to their cultural roots, thus redefining feminism in the Indian context. This approach allows her messages to reach a broader audience, including conservative readers who may otherwise reject feminist ideologies.

(iv) Agency Through Choice: A recurrent theme in Murthy's work is the empowerment that comes through personal choice. Whether a character chooses to conform to traditional roles or to break away from them, what matters most is that the choice is hers. This agency is at the heart of Murthy's portrayal of modern Indian womanhood. Her characters are not empowered merely by rebellion, but by their ability to assert control over their lives in a society that often denies them that freedom.

These patterns together highlight a feminist sensibility that is grounded in the realities of Indian society and committed to sustainable, inclusive transformation.

12. Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's fiction serves as a rich archive of women's experiences in India's transitional society. By presenting female characters who both uphold and challenge traditional gender roles, she portrays the layered nature of womanhood in a culturally complex country. Her stories encourage introspection and empathy, subtly pushing for a society where women can define their roles on their own terms. In balancing the traditional and the modern, Murthy's work becomes a site of quiet revolution — one that recognizes the power of stories in shaping social consciousness.

In doing so, Murthy adds a critical dimension to feminist discourse: that the path to gender equity in India is not always through confrontation but often through courageous coexistence with cultural structures. Her characters illustrate that choosing to remain within the fold of tradition can still be a feminist act, provided it is a choice made with awareness and agency.

This nuanced approach encourages a more inclusive understanding of empowerment — one that validates diverse expressions of womanhood across rural and urban, educated and uneducated, privileged and marginalized contexts. By presenting characters who grow from within their constraints, Murthy elevates the everyday acts of resilience that often go unnoticed. Through her empathetic lens, she champions the quiet revolution that unfolds not in public defiance, but in the private affirmations of self-worth, independence, and dignity.

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