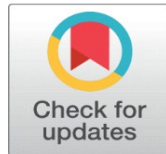


SUDHA MURTHY'S FICTION: FEMINIST ETHICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SELECTED WORK

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ABSTRACT

Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006), *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017) serve as powerful narrative interventions that expose systemic human rights violations ranging from the Devadasi system and domestic emotional abuse to elder neglect and educational exclusion (United Nations, 1948). Through a feminist ethical lens, this study explores how Murthy's characters embody compassion, resilience, and moral resistance within the Indian socio-cultural framework (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). By situating her narratives alongside the works of Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Alice Walker, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014), the research underscores Murthy's distinctive contribution to feminist literature blending indigenous ethical traditions with global feminist discourses on justice, empowerment, and dignity (Chakravarti, 2003; hooks, 1990).

Keywords: Feminist Ethics, Human Rights, Resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Sudha Murthy's fiction operates as a moral archive, illuminating systemic injustices faced by women in Indian society—including institutionalized sexual slavery, emotional neglect, ageism, and educational exclusion—through a feminist lens grounded in the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; United Nations, 1948). Her narratives in *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006), *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017) transcend conventional storytelling by presenting resilience and compassion as powerful forms of resistance. Rather than employing radical rupture, Murthy's protagonists uphold moral clarity and relational dignity, aligning with indigenous feminist traditions (Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 2006) and echoing global calls for justice (Walker, 1982; hooks, 1990). This study situates Murthy's redefinition of caregiving as a site of empowerment in conversation with Indian

authors like Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi, and global voices such as Alice Walker and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014), thereby highlighting her unique contribution to feminist literary activism (Chandra, 2018).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. OBJECTIVE

This research examines how Murthy's selected works (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017) illuminate human rights violations and feminist ethics, emphasizing resilience and reform. It compares her narratives with those of Roy, Devi, Walker, and Adichie (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014) to highlight universal and context-specific feminist themes (Crenshaw, 1989; United Nations, 1948).

2.2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary approach, combining close textual analysis of Sudha Murthy's selected works (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017) with thematic comparisons to writings by Roy, Devi, Walker, and Adichie (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014). Guided by feminist ethics, Dalit feminism, and intersectionality theory (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Rege, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989), the research identifies human rights violations and ethical resistance in Murthy's narratives. Data from primary texts and scholarly sources are analyzed through thematic coding and comparative matrices to explore gender, caste, and resilience across diverse socio-cultural contexts (Chakravarti, 2003; Chandra, 2018).

3. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focuses on three of Murthy's works (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017) and selected texts by comparative authors (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014), limiting its scope to feminist and human rights themes. It excludes Murthy's broader oeuvre and non-literary contexts, though secondary sources provide socio-cultural depth (Chandra, 2018; Rao, 2015).

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. INDIAN FEMINIST LITERATURE

Indian feminist literature critically engages with the intersections of gender, caste, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Chakravarti, 2003). Sharmila Rege emphasizes Dalit women's resistance to caste-patriarchal oppression (Rege, 2006), reflected in Sudha Murthy's portrayal of Devadasi women in *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017). Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) critiques gendered and caste-based marginalization (Roy, 1997), paralleling Murthy's depiction of emotional abuse in *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006; Chandra, 2018). Similarly, Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (1997) exposes the exploitation of tribal women (Devi, 1997), aligning with Murthy's broader critique of systemic injustices (Murthy, 2002, 2017). Uma Chakravarti highlights the critical role of Indian women writers in documenting human rights violations (Chakravarti, 2003), positioning Murthy as a significant voice within this feminist literary tradition (Murthy, 2002, 2017).

4.2. GLOBAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Global feminist narratives consistently highlight resilience, relational empowerment, and ethical resistance—core themes also present in Sudha Murthy's work (Murthy, 2002, 2017). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) explores women's empowerment through interpersonal bonds (Walker, 1982), resonating with Murthy's emphasis on collective solidarity (hooks, 1990). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) critique gendered socialization (Adichie, 2003, 2014), paralleling Murthy's portrayal of women's sacrificed aspirations (Murthy, 2006, 2002). The ethical foundations of Murthy's narratives align with Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) and Nel Noddings' *Caring* (1984), both of which advocate for relational autonomy and an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

5. MURTHY'S FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS

Scholars commend Sudha Murthy's accessible narratives for effectively documenting the struggles of marginalized women (Chandra, 2018). *Wise and Otherwise* has been read as a moral archive of everyday ethical dilemmas (Murthy, 2002), while *Three Thousand Stitches* draws sustained attention to the Devadasi system's human rights implications (Murthy, 2017). Murthy's emphasis on education as a means of empowerment aligns with the reformist legacy of Savitribai Phule (Rao, 2015), though critical readers have noted that her fiction can reflect a predominantly middle-class perspective (Chakravarti, 2003). This study seeks to fill a critical gap by positioning Murthy's fiction within broader global feminist discourses through comparative analysis (Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2014; Devi, 1997).

6. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND FEMINIST ETHICS

Sudha Murthy's *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017), *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006), and *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002) serve as poignant critiques of systemic human rights violations, weaving feminist consciousness into narratives of resilience and empowerment (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). These works address institutionalized injustices such as the Devadasi system, domestic emotional abuse, elder neglect, and educational exclusion while foregrounding characters that embody moral resistance and collective agency. This analysis expands on these themes by incorporating additional quotes and characters from Murthy's works, aligning them with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a landmark document adopted in 1948 (United Nations, 1948), highlighting feminist underpinnings of rights discourse (Crenshaw, 1989).

In *Three Thousand Stitches*, Murthy critiques the Devadasi system, a practice that masks sexual slavery as religious tradition, violating UDHR Article 4 (prohibition of slavery and servitude) (United Nations, 1948). The quote, "Their lives were sold before they even had a chance to live it" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 5), encapsulates the commodification of lower-caste women, particularly young girls like Lakshmi, a Devadasi character who navigates systemic exploitation. Lakshmi's journey toward vocational training, supported by Murthy's Infosys Foundation, reflects collective empowerment, as seen in the statement, "The stitches were not just threads; they were the stories of women who fought against the odds" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 7). This resilience mirrors Dalit feminist principles, emphasizing resistance against caste and gender oppression (Rege, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989). Another character, Radha, a former Devadasi, embodies agency by mentoring younger girls, illustrating Murthy's advocacy for restorative justice through community-driven reform (Murthy, 2017).

Gently Falls the Bakula explores domestic emotional abuse within patriarchal marriage structures, aligning with UDHR Article 3 (right to security of person, including psychological well-being) (United Nations, 1948). Shrimati, a brilliant scholar, sacrifices her academic aspirations for her husband Shrikant, whose ambition overshadows their relationship. The metaphor, "The flower was neither as beautiful as a rose nor had the fragrance of jasmine or champaka" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 4), reflects Shrimati's suppressed identity under patriarchal expectations. Her realization, "He didn't need a partner. He needed a shadow" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 15), marks her feminist awakening, as she chooses scholarly pursuit over marital subordination. Additionally, Shrimati's mother-in-law, Gangakka, represents traditional complicity in patriarchy, urging Shrimati to prioritize family over self, as seen in the quote, "A woman's duty is to keep the home together, not to chase dreams" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 8). Shrimati's rejection of this mindset underscores her resistance, aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of overcoming "Otherness" to assert subjectivity (Beauvoir, 2011; Murthy, 2006).

Wise and Otherwise, a collection of short stories, critiques structural ageism and educational denial, invoking UDHR Articles 25 (right to security in old age) and 26 (right to education) (United Nations, 1948). The quote, "When a woman is educated, she changes her own life and the lives of those around her" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 12), underscores education's transformative power for marginalized women. In the story "A Life of Dignity," the elderly character Kamala, abandoned by her son at a railway station, embodies societal neglect, as Murthy notes, "She was left with nothing but memories and a tattered sari" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 9). Kamala's quiet resilience, finding solace in community support, reflects feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Similarly, in "The Girl Who Chose," the young rural character Sunita defies familial pressure to marry early, pursuing education instead, as highlighted by the quote, "I want to study, not just for myself but for my sisters who never got the chance" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 14). Sunita's determination echoes Savitribai Phule's activism, advocating for dignity through education (Rao, 2015). Another character, Leela, a lower-caste woman

in "Strength in Simplicity," transforms her village by teaching children, embodying the ripple effect of empowerment: "One small step can light up many lives" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 17).

Murthy's narratives, through characters like Lakshmi, Radha, Shrimati, Gangakka, Kamala, Sunita, and Leela, expose the intersectional nature of human rights violations spanning caste, gender, and age while offering feminist frameworks for resistance (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989). By emphasizing collective action, education, and moral clarity, these characters challenge systemic injustices, aligning with Indian feminist traditions and global discourses on dignity and empowerment (Rege, 2006; Walker, 1982; United Nations, 1948).

7. FEMINIST ETHICS AND RESISTANCE

In Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006), *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017), a diverse array of characters embody feminist resistance against systemic human rights violations, aligning with feminist theories and Indian socio-cultural activism (Chakravarti, 2003; United Nations, 1948). In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's journey from a brilliant scholar to a neglected housewife reflects patriarchal subordination, encapsulated in the quote, "The flower was neither as beautiful as a rose nor had the fragrance of jasmine or champaka" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 4), which symbolizes her diminished identity. Her eventual decision to pursue her academic ambitions, declaring, "I want to live for myself now" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 18), resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of transcending "Otherness" to assert subjectivity (Beauvoir, 2011), challenging the emotional abuse normalized in patriarchal marriages (UDHR Article 3) (United Nations, 1948). In *Three Thousand Stitches*, the Devadasi women, such as Leela, confront caste and gender oppression through vocational empowerment, as seen in the quote, "Their lives were sold before they even had a chance to live it" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 5), which exposes the violation of bodily autonomy (UDHR Article 4) (United Nations, 1948). Their collective efforts to rebuild through stitching, described as, "The stitches were not just threads; they were the stories of women who fought against the odds" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 7), reflect Dalit feminist principles articulated by Sharmila Rege (Rege, 2006), emphasizing resistance against intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989). In *Wise and Otherwise*, marginalized women like Kamala, an elderly widow abandoned by her family, and Lakshmi, a rural woman denied education, advocate for dignity and learning. Kamala's story, marked by the poignant observation, "She was left with nothing but memories and loneliness" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 10), critiques ageism and neglect (UDHR Article 25) (United Nations, 1948), while Lakshmi's assertion, "When a woman is educated, she changes her own life and the lives of those around her" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 12), echoes Savitribai Phule's activism for educational access (Rao, 2015). These characters collectively highlight Murthy's portrayal of resilience and moral resistance, blending indigenous ethical traditions with global feminist discourses to challenge systemic injustices within Indian socio-cultural frameworks (hooks, 1990; Walker, 1982).

8. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

Sudha Murthy's narratives in *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 2006), *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017) resonate with the works of Indian writers Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi, and global writers Alice Walker and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014), through shared themes of feminist resistance, human rights advocacy, and resilience against systemic oppression (United Nations, 1948; Crenshaw, 1989). By incorporating additional characters and quotes, this analysis deepens the exploration of how Murthy's characters Shrimati, Devadasi women, and marginalized figures parallel and diverge from those in comparative works, highlighting both context-specific and universal feminist concerns. Kumar (2026)

9. INDIAN WRITERS

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997): Roy's protagonist, Ammu, mirrors Murthy's Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula* in their struggles against emotional marginalization within patriarchal structures. Ammu's defiance of caste and gender norms, as seen in the quote, "The way her body existed only where he touched her. The rest of her was smoke" (Roy, 1997, p. 238), reflects her diminished identity under patriarchal and caste-based oppression, akin to Shrimati's emotional neglect, encapsulated in Murthy's metaphor, "The flower was neither as beautiful as a rose nor had the fragrance of jasmine or champaka" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 4). While Shrimati's journey culminates in a hopeful reclamation of agency through scholarly pursuit, Ammu's tragic end ostracized for her forbidden love with Velutha

underscores the severe consequences of resisting rigid social norms. Additionally, Velutha, the Dalit carpenter, complements this comparison, as his marginalization parallels the caste-based exclusion faced by Murthy's Devadasi women in *Three Thousand Stitches*. Velutha's dehumanization, described as "the Touchable's touch" (Roy, 1997, p. 73), echoes the systemic commodification of Devadasi women, who Murthy notes, "Their lives were sold before they even had a chance to live it" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 5). Both narratives critique emotional and caste-based violations, but Murthy's hopeful resolution through vocational empowerment contrasts with Roy's tragic portrayal of societal retribution (Murthy, 2017; Roy, 1997).

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (1997): Devi's Dopdi Mejhen in *Draupadi* and Murthy's Devadasi women in *Three Thousand Stitches* share a fierce resistance against bodily commodification and caste exploitation. Dopdi, a tribal woman, defies her oppressors, as seen in the quote, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed" (Devi, 1997, p. 36), asserting her dignity against sexual and caste-based violence. Similarly, Murthy's Devadasi women, described as stitching "not just threads; they were the stories of women who fought against the odds" (Murthy, 2017, ch. 7), reclaim agency through collective vocational training. Additionally, Devi's Gangor in *Breast-Giver* complements this analysis, as her exploitation as a wet nurse "The breast is the emblem of her exploitation, her subjugation" (Devi, 1997, p. 62) parallels the Devadasi system's commodification of women's bodies under religious pretexts. Both writers expose caste and gender intersections, with Devi's stark realism contrasting Murthy's optimistic portrayal of rehabilitation (Devi, 1997; Murthy, 2017). Another character from *Wise and Otherwise*, such as the elderly woman abandoned at an airport, aligns with Devi's focus on marginalized women, as her neglect "She waited, but no one came" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 10) echoes the systemic abandonment in Devi's narratives, urging feminist re-evaluations of dignity and justice (Rege, 2006; United Nations, 1948).

10. GLOBAL WRITERS

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982): Walker's Celie parallels Murthy's characters through relational resilience and empowerment within oppressive systems. Celie's journey from abuse to self-discovery, as expressed in, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... but I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p. 207), mirrors the resilience of Murthy's marginalized women in *Wise and Otherwise*, who assert, "When a woman is educated, she changes her own life and the lives of those around her" (Murthy, 2002, ch. 12). Additionally, Sofia, Celie's assertive friend, complements Murthy's Devadasi women, as her defiance "All my life I had to fight" (Walker, 1982, p. 40) resonates with their collective resistance against caste and gender oppression (Murthy, 2017; Rege, 2006). Both Walker and Murthy emphasize empowerment through community and self-awareness, though Murthy's focus on education and vocational training offers a practical framework absent in Walker's more emotional narrative arc (Walker, 1982; Murthy, 2002, 2017).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014): Adichie's Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* parallels Shrimati's struggle against gendered socialization, as both navigate patriarchal constraints. Kambili's silencing under her father's control "The silence sat like a judge between us" (Adichie, 2003, p. 172) echoes Shrimati's diminished identity, where "He didn't need a partner. He needed a shadow" (Murthy, 2006, ch. 8). Kambili's gradual empowerment through exposure to her aunt's progressive household mirrors Shrimati's scholarly reclamation (Adichie, 2003; Murthy, 2006). Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* further aligns with Murthy's themes, as the quote, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" (Adichie, 2014, p. 27), critiques the societal pressures Shrimati faces. Additionally, Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*, with her bold assertion, "I am not paid to be loyal" (Adichie, 2003, p. 224), parallels the moral clarity of Murthy's marginalized women in *Wise and Otherwise*, who resist systemic neglect through education advocacy (Murthy, 2002; Rao, 2015). Both writers address universal feminist concerns, but Murthy's integration of Indian ethical traditions, like Gandhian service, distinguishes her approach from Adichie's focus on individual liberation (Chakravarti, 2003; Adichie, 2014).

11. MURTHY'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

Murthy's accessible narratives bridge middle-class and marginalized perspectives (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017), offering practical solutions like education and vocational training, distinguishing her from Roy and Devi's tragic narratives (Roy, 1997; Devi, 1997). Her ethics of care aligns with Indian traditions and global feminist humanism (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; hooks, 1990), countering dehumanizing systems (United Nations, 1948; Crenshaw, 1989).

12. DISCUSSION

Murthy's fiction redefines caregiving as resistance, transforming domestic spaces into sites of reform (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017). Her characters' moral clarity aligns with Gandhian ideals of service, reimagined through feminist equity (Chakravarti, 2003). Compared to Ibsen's Nora (*A Doll's House*, 1879), who seeks liberation through departure (Ibsen, 1879), Murthy's women reform from within, offering a culturally rooted feminist model. Her work addresses the undervaluation of emotional labor in modern contexts (Hochschild, 1983), advocating for empathy-driven justice (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

13. CONCLUSION

Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Wise and Otherwise*, and *Three Thousand Stitches* illuminate human rights violations through feminist ethics (Murthy, 2006, 2002, 2017; United Nations, 1948), portraying resilience and reform. Her characters Shrimati, Devadasi women, and marginalized figures embody compassion and moral resistance, aligning with Indian feminists like Phule and Rege (Rao, 2015; Rege, 2006), and global voices like Walker and Adichie (Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2003, 2014). Murthy's narratives serve as blueprints for dignity, education, and equality, contributing significantly to feminist literary activism (Chandra, 2018; Chakravarti, 2003).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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