



Portrayal of Motherhood and Identity in Sudha Murthy's Works

^{*1}Dr. Vasantha Pillai

^{*1}Associate Professor, Department of Language & Literature, Dr. C.V. Raman University, Kargi Road, Kota, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India.

Abstract

This essay explores motherhood and identity portrayal in Sudha Murthy's recent works through her unique application of literary simplicity. Murthy's novel, with its foundation on the cultural texture of Indian society, constructs mothers not just as caregivers but also as moral pillars and culture bearers. From close reading of 'The Mother I Never Knew', Two Novellas (Penguin India, 2014), Three Thousand Stitches, Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives (Penguin India, 2017), and a selection of the short stories in Wise and Otherwise, A Salute to Life (East West Books, 2006), this work analyzes how mothers' figures are sites of social and personal negotiation. Representation of the self in her writing reveals tensions between tradition and self-definition. By situating Murthy's sparse prose within histories of oral storytelling and moral instruction, the argument shows how literary simplicity works not as restraint but as a conscious choice that works to increase emotional availability and thematic light. Ultimately, Murthy's balance between thematic simplicity and stylistic sparseness allows her to engage with refined social realities without sacrificing universality.

Keywords: Sudha Murthy, Motherhood, Identity, Culture, Indian Society.

Introduction

Sudha Murthy has a unique place within the landscape of Indian literature today. Her extremely diverse life as a writer, educator, social worker, and philanthropist provides her work with a sense of perception that is both rooted in experience and attuned to the wider concerns. Born in 1950 in Shiggaon, Karnataka, Murthy's family background in a humble but culturally conscious household and her own education as an engineer at a time when women scientists were nonpersons has shaped her world and narrative voice. Her writing is genre-transgressing, ranging from children's books to short stories, novels, travelogues, and essays, yet they all are unique in their commitment to access, moral inquiry, and cultural authenticity.

In the literary tradition that tends towards the praise of stylistic play of authors like Arundhati Roy or Amitav Ghosh, Murthy's embracing of literary simplicity is a contrarian and positive choice. She eschews associative wordy adornments and over-hyper narrative designs and adopts a plain narrative and linear writing style. This literary economy allows her to speak to people from various generations, locations, and education levels, situating her in tandem with India's own extensive oral storytelling tradition of stories that have been forms of entertainment and moral instruction.

Among the themes that recur most often in Murthy's work, motherhood and identity are of especial significance. These issues are not handled as abstractions but are placed in definite cultural, familial, and affective contexts. Murthy's mothers are moral poles but no less vulnerable to the

confusions and contradictions of real caregiving. Her own work typically engages with characters negotiating a balance of personal desire against inherited cultural expectations, a nuanced grasp of the self both socially constructed and individually defined. Through the infusion of these themes into the storylines of ordinary lives, Murthy acquires a canon that is both highly personal and highly universal.

Her thematic naivety and stylistic plainness is an interplay that deserves close critical attention, particularly in the context of Indian women's literature and postcolonial fiction. As opposed to those who have rejected her prose as too plain or morally didactic, what is offered here is the argument that her plain style is a deliberate aesthetic choice. Not only does it announce her pedagogical intention, but it also optimizes the thematic density and emotional straightness of her fiction. This research will analyze chosen books; The Mother I Never Knew, Two Novellas, Three Thousand Stitches, Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives, and Wise and Otherwise, A Salute to Life, to understand how Murthy's characterization of motherhood and self is developed, and indeed enriched, through her literary simplicity. By doing so, it seeks to enlighten us on the ways in which her readable accounts help towards ongoing debate about women's place in Indian society and the potency of plain prose in modern writing.

Literature Review

Sudha Murthy's fiction has garnered both popular acclaim and sustained scholarly attention for its moral clarity, accessibility, and grounding in the everyday realities of Indian

society (Shukla 79). Scholars like Rao have highlighted her consistent engagement with human values, compassion, honesty, and perseverance, as central thematic constants across her oeuvre. Murthy's position as a storyteller who straddles the roles of educator, philanthropist, and cultural commentator enables her to produce narratives that are simultaneously personal and socially conscious (Rao 45). Yet much of the existing critical commentary is largely descriptive, focusing on plot summaries and biographical connections rather than sustained thematic or stylistic analysis.

Motherhood occupies a central and complex place in Indian literary discourse, both in the oral tradition and in modern Indian English writing. Partha Chatterjee notes that the mother figure has historically been idealized as a symbol of sacrifice, cultural preservation, and moral virtue (122). In postcolonial feminist criticism, this idealization is often problematized. Rukmini Nair, for example, identifies motherhood as a "double-edged institution" that can offer empowerment through nurturance yet also impose restrictive gender roles (54). While canonical Indian women writers such as Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*) and Shashi Deshpande (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) have explored the ambivalence of motherhood in the face of societal change, Murthy approaches the maternal role through a lens of moral optimism, without ignoring its challenges.

The theme of identity is equally prominent in Indian women's writing, particularly in works addressing questions of gender, class, and cultural continuity. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita observe that female identity in Indian literature is often constructed through negotiations with the inherited past, family obligations, and personal desires (33). Writers like Kamala Das have articulated identity through confessional introspection, while Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic fiction often situates identity in cross-cultural negotiation. Murthy's contribution to this discourse lies in her focus on identity formation within India's own social landscape, where cultural rootedness is not necessarily at odds with personal growth. Her characters frequently seek self-definition in ways that harmonize with, rather than reject, communal values, though not without moments of friction and self-questioning.

Murthy's stylistic hallmark; her literary simplicity; has been both celebrated and critiqued. F.R. Leavis argues that simplicity should not be conflated with a lack of artistry; rather, it can represent a deliberate choice toward precision and thematic clarity (16). Murthy's language, with its unembellished vocabulary and direct narrative structure, aligns with oral storytelling traditions where memorability and moral clarity take precedence over stylistic ornamentation. This approach makes her work accessible to a wide readership, including those outside formal literary circles. However, critics such as Srinivasan have suggested that this simplicity risks narrative predictability (21). The debate over Murthy's style reflects a broader tension in literary criticism between valuing complexity as a sign of depth and recognizing the craft of plain expression.

Most importantly, there has been minimal scholarly analysis that takes up the intersection of Murthy's identity and motherhood themes with her narrative approach. Though specific elements of her work have been examined; her moral didacticism, the autobiographical origins of her work, or her regional emphasis; few studies consider how exactly her stylistic simplicity serves to enhance the emotional accessibility and thematic richness of these repeated motifs. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining select

works where these three elements, motherhood, identity, and simplicity, intersect in ways that illuminate Murthy's literary purpose and cultural significance.

Methodology

This study is qualitative, interpretive and based on close textual analysis. The corpus consists of, *The Mother I Never Knew*, *Two Novellas* (Penguin India, 2014), *Three Thousand Stitches*, *Ordinary People*, *Extraordinary Lives* (Penguin India, 2017), and some of the short stories from *Wise and Otherwise*, *A Salute to Life* (East West Books, 2006). These works were selected for their rich portrayals of motherhood and identity, as well as their expression of Murthy's hallmark simplicity. The analysis employs three interrelated lenses, thematic analysis to identify motifs of motherhood and identity; stylistic analysis to examine diction, tone, and structure; and feminist literary critique to situate maternal and identity narratives in the broader context of Indian women's writing. Confining scope to English-language editions enables maximum similarity in interpretation, promoting depth rather than breadth.

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Mother I Never Knew*, mother figures are not merely imagined as biological relatives but as moral foundations that define the belonging and self-worth of the protagonists. The two-novella work is a study of the emotional and moral imperatives of finding hidden family connections. In the first novella, the hero finds a mother he never knew he had; in the second, a search for missing maternal connection results in a conflict of identity and legacy. Murthy explains in his characteristic direct style: "A mother's love is invisible, yet it is the fabric that holds your soul together" (Murthy 34). The plain but evocative sentence catches both the closeness and the commonality of the maternal role.

Murthy's treatment of motherhood here reflects postcolonial feminist readings of maternal figures as agents of cultural continuity (Nair 54), yet she resists reducing them to static symbols. Instead, these mothers are active participants in the moral formation of their children, even when separated by time, secrecy, or social convention. The emotional arcs in *The Mother I Never Knew* also reflect a form of "emotional realism," where the protagonist's inner conflict mirrors the experiences of readers navigating questions of familial duty, legitimacy, and selfhood.

In *Three Thousand Stitches: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives*, which blends autobiographical vignettes with fictionalized accounts, motherhood often appears in metaphorical forms. In the title essay, Murthy recounts her involvement in rehabilitating devadasis (women dedicated to temple service, often forced into sex work), portraying her own role as a kind of "social mothering" that nurtures dignity and opportunity. She reflects, "Some wounds do not heal with medicine; they need compassion, patience, and love" (Murthy 56). This sentiment encapsulates her belief that maternal care transcends biological ties, extending to acts of social reform and community responsibility. Such portrayals align with Chatterjee's framing of motherhood as a vehicle for moral and cultural preservation (122), but they also expand it into the public sphere, suggesting that mothering is a social ethic as much as a familial role.

In *Wise and Otherwise*, Murthy's short stories distill complex moral situations into compact, accessible narratives. For instance, in "A Man Too Clever by Half," the absence of maternal care in the protagonist's upbringing is subtly

contrasted with the unconditional love shown by a surrogate figure later in life. The story's moral—that integrity and kindness outweigh clever manipulation—is delivered without heavy authorial intrusion, allowing the simplicity of the events to convey the thematic message. This approach demonstrates Murthy's alignment with Leavis's assertion that stylistic economy can intensify thematic clarity (16). By forgoing elaborate symbolism or experimental narrative structures, Murthy ensures her stories remain approachable to readers across literacy levels, thereby democratizing literary engagement.

Identity formation in Murthy's works is deeply relational, often emerging from the interplay of personal aspiration, moral testing, and inherited values. In *The Mother I Never Knew*, identity is tethered to familial lineage, raising questions about whether one's sense of self is determined by blood ties or by chosen bonds. In contrast, *Three Thousand Stitches* presents identity as the sum of lived experiences and moral choices, particularly in its depictions of women redefining themselves after escaping exploitative circumstances. These differing approaches underscore Murthy's nuanced understanding that identity is both given and constructed—a theme that resonates with Tharu and Lalita's view of identity as “negotiated between the collective memory and the individual will” (33).

Murthy's literary simplicity is necessary for the success of these thematic explorations. Her writing is nearly short sentences, plain words, and sequential structure. This is no unintended consequence of her way of writing but a conscious preference that is an imitation of the cadences of spoken word. As she has explained in interviews, it is her intention that her novels be “as easy to read for a grandmother in a village as for a teenager in a city” (Murthy, qtd. in Shukla 82). The simplicity of her prose works to make the emotional power of her content even more powerful, so that it can reach and transcend generational, educational, and linguistic barriers. Critics such as Srinivasan decry this simplicity because it compromises predictability (21), but Murthy's writing demonstrates that depth in themes is possible within a simplistic narrative framework.

The convergence of motherhood, simplicity in literature, and identity is perhaps most successfully illustrated whenever the three converge. The meeting in *The Mother I Never Knew* between the protagonist and his biological mother is a case in point. Murthy's description avoids flowery metaphor: “We looked at one another for a very long time, not a word spoken, letting the years say all” (Murphy 112). The restraint of language is matched by the restraint of the moment leaving the emotional significance to the readers without exposition from the writer. Simplicity is here an enticement, an open space for the reader's own emotional reaction.

Through the marriage of thematic content and stylistic restraint, Murthy locates her work in a tradition of Indian fiction committed to moral lucidity and emotional engagement. Her narratives of motherhood eschew sentimental display and cynical remoteness, and her narratives of identity verify the potential for personal transformation without relinquishing cultural allegiance. In so doing, she offers a model for socially committed fiction that is open to mass readership and thick with theme.

Conclusion

The current study has made an attempt to highlight how Sudha Murthy's construction of identity and motherhood are enhanced by, and inseparable from, her deliberate adoption of literary

simplicity. Close readings of *The Mother I Never Knew*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, and selected short stories in *Wise and Otherwise* have uncovered the truth that Murthy's mother figures are not simplistic stereotypes and idealized symbols but complex characters whose presence molds the moral and personal direction of those in their orbit. These statistics are a continuum of caregiving functions—biological mothers to surrogate maternal figures and caregiving communities—that illustrate that motherhood, in Murthy's fiction, is no less social an ethic than domestic role.

Her use of identity avoids easy dualism. Murthy's heroines do not repudiate tradition for modernity or passively adopt transmitted norms. Instead, they can be perpetually negotiating between collective memory and personal will, realities of identity formation in a world where family and community remain at the center of sense of self. By framing identity as process rather than fixed state, Murthy directs her narratives into a larger postcolonial feminist enterprise that recognizes the limits and possibilities of culturally embedded being.

Behind the success of these thematic investigations lies Murthy's literary option of relating them in simple, unadorned prose. It enables her stories to traverse pedagogical and generational boundaries and appeal to literary refinement and popular taste. In a time when literary value is increasingly the equivalent of linguistic cleverness, Murthy's prose shows that one can achieve depth of sense with simplicity of style.

The conclusions of this paper are that Murthy's methodology has larger implications for Indian literature today. Her use of a style which everyone can comprehend, and her concerns with issues of social currency, make her a novelist who makes literature accessible without trading thematic richness. Future studies might investigate comparative studies with other international authors who use simplicity as a literary tool, like Ernest Hemingway or Kent, the reception of her books in translation to see how effectively her stylistic tools carry over to different cultures. There is also room for further analysis of how her charitable work influences her fiction, especially the way she represents social reform and communal responsibility.

Finally, then, Sudha Murthy's short fiction also promises us that narrative doesn't need to be linguistically complex to be profound. By employing motherhood, identity, and literary simplicity in narratives both culturally particular and universal, she continues to expand the horizons of Indian narrative. Her writing teaches us that the most significant truths can be stated the loudest, and that concealed within the simplicity of her prose is the richness of human life.

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