

Gender, Identity, and Agency in the Fiction of Sudha Murty

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Abstract

Sudha Murty's fiction offers a compelling exploration of gender, identity, and agency within the framework of everyday life. Her narratives, though simple in style, engage deeply with the lived realities of women negotiating patriarchal structures. This paper examines how Murty represents women's struggles, their subtle forms of resistance, and their journeys toward self-realization. Drawing on feminist literary theories alongside close textual reading, the study argues that Murty constructs womanhood not through overt rebellion but through resilience, moral clarity, and gradual self-awareness. Her work foregrounds voices that are often overlooked, thereby contributing meaningfully to the representation of women in contemporary Indian literature.

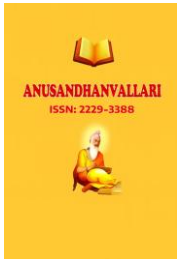
Keywords: Feminism, Resistance, Womanhood, Agency, Identity, Women's Voices

Introduction

Indian English literature has increasingly evolved into a space where questions of gender, identity, and resistance are actively explored. Within this landscape, Sudha Murty occupies a distinctive position. Her writing does not rely on stylistic complexity or ideological intensity, instead it draws its strength from clarity, relatability, and emotional depth. Murty's fiction focuses on ordinary women, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law who are situated within familiar social structures. Yet, these seemingly ordinary lives reveal profound struggles for dignity and selfhood. Unlike overtly radical feminist narratives, Murty's approach is subtle. She does not always depict confrontation; rather, she explores negotiation, endurance, and gradual transformation. This paper examines how her fiction engages with gender roles, identity formation, and agency, while also drawing on feminist theoretical perspectives to understand her contribution to the literary articulation of womanhood.

Feminism in Sudha Murty's Fiction

Feminism in Murty's writing emerges not as an abstract ideology but as a lived experience. Her narratives reflect the everyday realities of women who face discrimination, emotional labour, and limited autonomy. At the same time, these women are not portrayed as powerless; instead, they possess an inner strength that enables them to adapt, resist, and evolve. In *Mahashweta*, for instance, the protagonist's journey through social rejection becomes a process of self-discovery. Her eventual independence is not simply a resolution of conflict but a reassertion of dignity. Similarly, in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's emotional struggle reveals the silent sacrifices embedded within marriage. Her later decision to reclaim her intellectual identity reflects a shift from self-effacement to self-recognition. Murty's feminism, therefore, lies in her ability to portray transformation as an inward process—one that begins with awareness and leads to self-assertion.



A recurring concern in Murty's fiction is the restrictive nature of traditional gender roles. Women are often expected to prioritize family over personal ambition, to remain silent in the face of injustice, and to conform to socially defined ideals of femininity. These expectations create tensions that shape the emotional and psychological lives of her characters. In *House of Cards*, the imbalance within marriage becomes evident as trust and equality give way to control and moral compromise. Likewise, *Dollar Bahu* exposes how economic status influences familial relationships, revealing how patriarchy often intersects with materialism. Murty does not merely depict these inequalities; she invites readers to question them. Her narratives encourage a re-evaluation of gender norms, suggesting that such structures are neither natural nor inevitable, but socially constructed and therefore open to change.

The question of identity is central to Murty's portrayal of women. Her characters often begin their journeys defined by relational roles—daughter, wife, or daughter-in-law. Over time, however, they begin to recognize the limitations of these identities and seek a more autonomous sense of self. In *Mahashweta*, the protagonist's transformation reflects a movement away from imposed identity toward self-definition. Her sense of worth becomes independent of societal validation. Similarly, Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula* comes to understand that intellectual and emotional fulfilment are essential to her sense of self. Murty suggests that identity is not fixed but continually shaped by experience, reflection, and choice. This evolving sense of self becomes a crucial step toward empowerment.

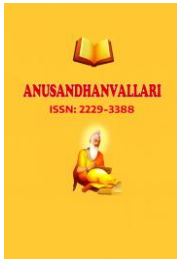
Agency in Murty's fiction is not immediate or absolute; rather, it develops gradually. Her characters often begin with limited control over their lives, constrained by social expectations and emotional dependencies. However, through experience and self-awareness, they begin to make choices that reflect their own values. In *House of Cards*, the protagonist's decision to distance herself from an ethically compromised marriage marks a turning point. It is an act of self-respect that challenges societal expectations. In *Dollar Bahu*, agency is expressed more quietly, through emotional resilience and the refusal to internalize injustice. Murty portrays empowerment as an internal process one that arises from self-recognition rather than external validation. In the novel *Dollar bahu*, even though Vinuta cheerfully took all the responsibilities, she was not valued by her in laws. But Jamuna, who is from a well to do family was glorified by her mother-in-law, because she is married to a wealthy man who earns dollars.

“Ever since he had started earning in dollars, people respected him, envied him and showed him that extra bit of warmth. In the process, however, he had also lost real love and mutual trust. It was an unalterable fact that no amount of dollars could buy the warmth of genuine affection”. (Murty, *Dollar bahu*,70).

Resistance in Murty's narratives rarely takes the form of open rebellion. Instead, it is expressed through small yet meaningful acts choosing independence, asserting dignity, or withdrawing from unjust situations. In *Mahashweta*, rebuilding one's life after rejection becomes a powerful act of resistance. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the decision to reclaim one's intellectual identity challenges the expectations placed upon women within marriage. Murty's portrayal of resistance reflects the realities of many women's lives, where overt defiance may not always be possible. Her work suggests that even quiet acts of self-assertion can have transformative power.

Womanhood and Emotional Strength

Murty redefines womanhood by moving away from stereotypes of idealized sacrifice or passive suffering. Her women are emotionally complex, capable of both vulnerability and strength. They nurture relationships, but they also seek self-respect and fulfilment. This balanced portrayal highlights the dynamic nature of womanhood. It suggests that strength does not lie in denying emotion, but in navigating it with awareness and



resilience. Murty's characters demonstrate that compassion and independence are not contradictory, but complementary aspects of identity.

One of Murty's significant contributions lies in her ability to bring ordinary women's experiences into literary focus. By writing about middle-class and rural lives, she expands the scope of representation in Indian English literature. Her narratives give voice to experiences that are often overlooked domestic struggles, emotional labour, and silent endurance. In doing so, she creates a space where women's stories are not only told but also valued. This inclusivity strengthens the presence of women's voices within the literary world.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Perspectives

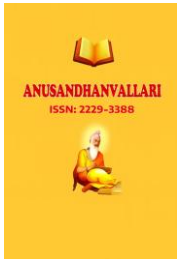
A deeper understanding of Murty's fiction can be achieved through feminist theoretical perspectives. Thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Betty Friedan emphasize equality and access to opportunities and ideas that resonate with Murty's portrayal of women seeking education and independence. At the same time, Kate Millet's critique of patriarchy helps illuminate the power structures underlying family and marriage in Murty's narratives. Psychological dimensions of identity can be understood through Sigmund Freud and Nancy Chodorow, whose work explores how gender roles are internalized.

The cultural specificity of Murty's writing aligns with the ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who emphasizes the importance of context in feminist analysis. Similarly, Elaine Showalter's concept of gyno criticism highlights the value of women's writing as a distinct literary tradition. Finally, Simone de Beauvoir's notion of womanhood as a social construct and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of subaltern voices provide deeper insight into Murty's representation of marginalized women. Together, these perspectives reveal the complexity underlying her seemingly simple narratives.

A nuanced reading of Sudha Murty's fiction requires an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that engages with feminist thought, psychological frameworks, and postcolonial perspectives. Although Murty's narratives are often characterized by their simplicity and accessibility, they are deeply embedded in complex questions of gender construction, identity formation, and the exercise of agency within socio-cultural constraints. By drawing upon multiple feminist theories, this study seeks to uncover the layered meanings underlying her portrayal of women's lives. One of the most relevant frameworks for understanding Murty's representation of women is liberal feminism, which advocates equality through access to education, economic independence, and legal rights.

"If I don't study well, I will lose everything. My scholarship is my only support. My future depends on it." (Murty, Mahasweta, 41).

Thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Betty Friedan argue that women's subordination is largely the result of limited opportunities rather than inherent incapacity. This perspective resonates strongly in Murty's fiction, where education often becomes a turning point in a woman's life. Characters like Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula* illustrate how intellectual fulfilment is essential to selfhood. Her eventual return to academic pursuits reflects the liberal feminist belief that empowerment begins with awareness and access. Similarly, Murty repeatedly emphasizes that financial independence provides women with the ability to make autonomous choices, thereby reinforcing the liberal feminist notion of equality through reform within existing structures. In the novel *House of cards*, When Sanjay was in a dilemma to choose between the government job with no development and frequent transfers and the private practice which promises a better life, Mridula supports him both mentally, physically and financially. She says,



“Your satisfaction and joy in work is more important to me than my difficulties. If you are not happy with what you are doing then you should consider it. I am different. I don't take life so seriously but you don't share your feelings with others and you take everything earnestly” (Murty, *House of cards*, 110).

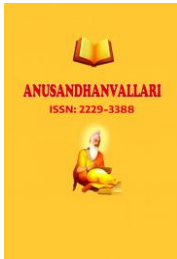
What a girl expects from her man is pure love. She was not looking for the looks and wealth of the man she wanted to marry. She wanted a man with a pure heart and a clear head as her better half. The author shares his wisdom on marriages and what men and women expect from marriage. However, Murty's critique of social structures also aligns with radical feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Kate Millett. In *Sexual Politics*, Millett examines how patriarchy operates as a pervasive system of power that shapes personal relationships, especially within marriage and family. Murty's narratives subtly expose these dynamics. In *House of Cards*, for instance, the erosion of trust within marriage reflects deeper inequalities embedded in patriarchal authority. Similarly, in *Dollar Bahu*, the valuation of women based on economic contribution highlights how patriarchy intersects with materialism. While Murty does not adopt an overtly confrontational tone, her depiction of these structures reveals their inherent injustice. Her work suggests that patriarchy is not always visible in explicit oppression but often operates through normalized expectations and emotional conditioning.

To further understand the internal struggles of Murty's characters, psychoanalytic feminism provides valuable insight. Rooted in the ideas of Sigmund Freud and later developed by Nancy Chodorow, this framework examines how gender identities are shaped through early socialization and internalized norms. Murty's protagonists often experience conflict not only with external structures but also within themselves. Their hesitation, guilt, and gradual self-realization reflect the psychological impact of patriarchal conditioning. For instance, Shrimati's initial acceptance of self-sacrifice in *Gently Falls the Bakula* can be read as an internalization of traditional gender roles. Her later awakening signifies a process of unlearning these internalized expectations and reclaiming her sense of self. This psychological dimension adds depth to Murty's portrayal of agency, suggesting that empowerment involves both external action and internal transformation.

While these frameworks provide important insights, Murty's work must also be understood within the context of postcolonial feminism, particularly as articulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Mohanty critiques the tendency of Western feminism to generalize women's experiences, emphasizing instead the importance of cultural specificity. Murty's fiction is deeply rooted in Indian social realities, where tradition, family, and community play a central role in shaping women's lives. Her characters do not always reject these structures; instead, they negotiate within them. This negotiation reflects the complexity of postcolonial identities, where resistance must often coexist with cultural continuity. Murty's portrayal of women who seek independence while maintaining relational bonds aligns with Mohanty's call for context-sensitive feminist analysis.

Another significant theoretical perspective is gyno criticism, introduced by Elaine Showalter. This approach focuses on women's writing as a distinct literary tradition that reflects female experiences and perspectives. Murty's contribution to this tradition lies in her focus on everyday life. She does not centre her narratives on extraordinary events; rather, she highlights the significance of ordinary experiences marriage, family, work, and social expectations. By doing so, she validates these experiences as worthy of literary attention. Her work expands the scope of women's writing by including voices that are often marginalized within mainstream discourse. Through relatable characters and accessible language, Murty ensures that women's stories are not confined to elite or urban contexts but resonate across diverse social backgrounds.

The philosophical insights of Simone de Beauvoir further deepen the analysis of identity in Murty's fiction. Beauvoir's assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” highlights the constructed nature of gender. This idea is vividly reflected in Murty's narratives, where characters gradually move beyond socially imposed identities. Anupama in *Mahashweta*, for example, is initially defined by her physical condition and societal rejection. However, her journey toward independence illustrates the process of becoming a conscious



redefinition of self that challenges external labels. Murty's fiction thus embodies an existential understanding of identity as fluid and evolving, shaped by choices and experiences rather than predetermined roles.

"To me, the greatest jewel is Anand. All the others only weigh me down. Nothing else matters as much" (Murty, Mahasweta, 62).

It reflects emotional dependence defining female identity. It Highlights identity through education and independence. In addition, the concept of the subaltern, as discussed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, provides a crucial lens for examining Murty's focus on marginalized voices. Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" draws attention to the silencing of certain groups within dominant discourses. Murty's fiction can be seen as an attempt to address this silence by giving voice to ordinary women whose experiences are often overlooked. While her characters may not always articulate resistance in overt terms, their stories themselves become acts of representation. By centring these voices, Murty contributes to a more inclusive literary landscape.

Another dimension that enriches this analysis is the concept of resilience theory, which examines how individuals adapt to adversity. In Murty's fiction, resilience is not portrayed as heroic endurance but as a quiet, ongoing process. Her characters do not simply survive challenges; they find ways to rebuild their lives with dignity. This perspective shifts the focus from victimhood to agency, highlighting the strength inherent in persistence and self-belief. Resilience, in this context, becomes a form of resistance one that is deeply personal yet socially significant.

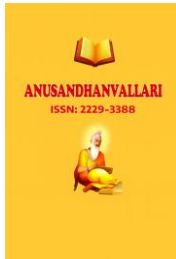
When these theoretical perspectives are considered together, a more comprehensive understanding of Murty's fiction emerges. Her portrayal of women cannot be confined to a single framework; rather, it reflects an interplay of social structures, psychological processes, and cultural contexts. Gender, in her narratives, is both imposed and negotiated. Identity is not static but continually evolving. Agency is not immediate but gradually realized through experience and self-awareness. What makes Murty's work particularly compelling is her ability to present these complex ideas through simple, relatable narratives. Her fiction reminds us that strength does not always manifest in dramatic acts of rebellion. Instead, it often resides in everyday choices—in the decision to pursue education, to uphold ethical values, or to walk away from injustice. By foregrounding such moments, Murty redefines empowerment as a process that is both subtle and transformative. Her work not only reflects the realities of women's lives but also challenges readers to rethink notions of gender, identity, and agency. Through her portrayal of ordinary women, she reveals extraordinary forms of strength, making her fiction a significant site for feminist inquiry.

Conclusion

Sudha Murty's fiction offers a nuanced and deeply human exploration of gender, identity, and agency. Her narratives show that empowerment does not always emerge through dramatic confrontation; it often unfolds through quiet resistance, self-awareness, and ethical conviction. By portraying ordinary women with extraordinary resilience, Murty challenges traditional notions of strength and redefines womanhood in meaningful ways. Her work not only contributes to feminist literary discourse but also amplifies voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

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