
Sudha Murty's Writings: Gender, Human Values, Cultural Memory, and the Everyday Indian Experience

Reshma N.A

Associate Professor of English Government First Grade College, Hsr Layout, Bangalore

Abstract: Sudha Murty occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian writing because her literary world is built largely from ordinary lives, familiar relationships, cultural memories, and moral choices. Her prose is deliberately accessible, but its simplicity should not be mistaken for a lack of social or literary complexity. This paper examines selected writings by Murty, particularly *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, *House of Cards*, *Wise and Otherwise*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, and selected mythological and children's narratives. It argues that Murty's central literary strength lies in bringing large social questions into everyday situations. Gender inequality appears through marriage, domestic expectations, bodily difference, education, economic dependence, and the unequal recognition of women's work. At the same time, her fiction does not present women only as victims. Her female characters frequently negotiate, endure, learn, resist, and rebuild their identities. The paper also examines Murty's treatment of materialism, tradition and modernity, rural life, education, compassion, mythology, and intergenerational relationships. Recent scholarship published between 2022 and 2025 has increasingly approached Murty through feminist criticism, cultural studies, rural studies, mythology, materialism, narrative technique, and pedagogy. Building on these discussions, the present study proposes that Murty's writing is best understood through the idea of "everyday humanism": a literary practice in which social criticism is embedded in ordinary experience and moral reflection. The paper concludes that Murty's contribution to Indian English literature lies not in radical stylistic experimentation but in making socially meaningful questions accessible to a wide readership and in creating narratives where dignity, education, empathy, and self-respect become forms of quiet resistance.

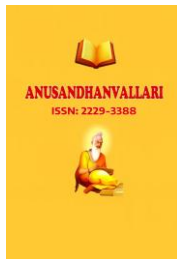
Keywords: Sudha Murty; Indian English literature; women's writing; feminism; gender; materialism; tradition and modernity; human values; rural life; mythology; education

1. Introduction

Sudha Murty's popularity is unusual in contemporary Indian literature. Her books are read by children, young adults and mature readers, and her stories frequently circulate beyond academic literary spaces. She writes about families, students, grandparents, working women, migrants, village communities, professionals, children and people whose lives rarely appear in grand historical narratives. This closeness to ordinary experience is one of the defining features of her writing. It also creates a critical challenge: because her prose is simple and her moral observations are direct, her work can be underestimated as merely "easy reading." A closer reading shows that many of her apparently simple stories are concerned with difficult questions about gender, dignity, social hierarchy, wealth, cultural change and human responsibility.

Murty's fiction is particularly valuable for the study of contemporary Indian society because her characters often inhabit the middle spaces between tradition and modernity. They may be educated but constrained by family expectations; economically comfortable but emotionally dissatisfied; geographically mobile but culturally attached; or socially respected while privately experiencing loneliness. The tension between these positions creates much of the narrative energy in her work.

Recent scholarship has begun to move beyond general appreciation of Murty's moral storytelling. Devi and Singh examine national identity and cultural memory in her writings, emphasizing the interaction between folklore, heritage and contemporary relevance. Agrawal and Dwivedi examine mythology and modernity and



identify discrimination, gender disparity, social stratification and the blending of mythology and contemporary life as important dimensions of Murty's work. Research published in 2025 has also examined feminism, materialism, family values and women's resilience in her fiction.

This paper therefore reads Murty not simply as a writer of values but as a writer who uses values to expose social contradictions. Compassion, education, honesty and dignity in her stories are not abstract virtues. They become ways of questioning social behaviour. A family that values money more than affection, a marriage that values appearance more than companionship, or a community that judges a woman by her body provides Murty with the material for social criticism.

The paper focuses on a representative selection of Murty's writings and asks how her literary simplicity accommodates complex social questions. The study pays particular attention to women's identity, family and marriage, materialism, education, cultural memory, rural life, mythology and narrative accessibility.

2. Research Problem and Research Gap

Murty has attracted a large readership, yet academic discussion of her writing remains uneven. Some studies concentrate on a single novel, particularly Mahashweta or Dollar Bahu, while others discuss her general contribution through social values or narrative simplicity. Recent scholarship has expanded the field, but there is still room for an integrated reading of her fiction and non-fiction as a connected literary project.

The research gap addressed here is the relationship among three dimensions that are often studied separately: gender and female agency, everyday social ethics, and cultural change. Murty's women are not located outside family and community; their struggles occur within these structures. Her treatment of materialism is similarly connected to gender because wealth affects the way women are valued, while education is connected to both female independence and social mobility.

The paper therefore asks not merely whether Murty is a feminist writer, but what kind of feminist consciousness her writing produces. It also asks how her apparently simple narrative style makes social criticism accessible without turning every story into an overt political argument.

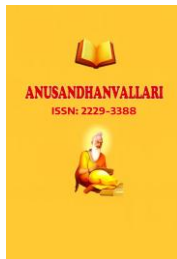
3. Research Questions and Objectives

The study addresses the following questions: How are women's identities constructed in selected writings by Sudha Murty? How do marriage, family, education, economic status and social expectations influence female agency? How does Murty represent the conflict between material success and human values? How do mythology, folklore and cultural memory shape her narratives? What is the significance of her simple and accessible narrative style? How do recent scholars interpret these concerns?

The objectives are to analyse Murty's representation of women and gender relations; examine materialism and family values; explore tradition and modernity; study education and social mobility; examine mythology and cultural memory; evaluate her narrative strategies; and place her work within recent scholarship published between 2022 and 2025.

4. Review of Literature: Recent Scholarship, 2022–2025

A 2022 study by Aarthi Devi and Ravichandran approaches Mahashweta through an ecofeminist perspective and identifies questions of women's identity and equality. Kale's study, published in a UGC-CARE Group 1 journal issue dated 2022, examines Mahashweta as a representation of inequality in Indian culture and argues that patriarchal attitudes continue to limit women despite social development. These studies are useful because they establish gender and social inequality as significant areas of Murty scholarship.



In 2024, Agrawal and Dwivedi examine mythology and modernity in Murty's writing, emphasizing her treatment of discrimination, gender disparity, social stratification and the relationship between mythology, folklore and contemporary Indian culture. Devi and Singh examine national identity and New Historicism, particularly Murty's use of folklore and cultural heritage in children's literature.

Aayushi and Kamboj's 2024 study of *Dollar Bahu* and *House of Cards* focuses on humanitarian values and materialism, arguing that Murty contrasts the attraction of wealth with the need to preserve compassion and moral relationships. Singh's 2024 study of *Dollar Bahu* approaches the novel through postcolonial ideas of East-West difference, cultural identity and hybridity.

Scholarship in 2025 becomes particularly attentive to feminism. Kalra and Vashist examine four novels—*Dollar Bahu*, *Mahashweta*, *House of Cards* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*—through a generational perspective and identify a movement from traditional expectations toward greater autonomy and equality. Menon and Singh Thakur examine *Mahashweta*, *Gently Falls the Bakula* and *House of Cards* through feminist concepts of female agency, self-definition and resistance to patriarchal structures. Their separate study of *Dollar Bahu* uses existentialism, gynocriticism and intersectional theory to examine materialism, patriarchy and women's changing identities

Other 2025 studies broaden the field. Research on *Dollar Bahu* examines family values, cultural conflict and the social prestige attached to earning dollars. Guruchal's 2025 study considers Murty's narrative techniques and social themes, particularly realism, character-centred storytelling, family, gender, economic disparity, education and cultural identity. These studies indicate that Murty scholarship is moving toward more systematic literary analysis while retaining interest in her accessibility and social relevance.

The present paper builds on these contributions but seeks a broader synthesis. Instead of limiting the discussion to feminism or materialism, it proposes that gender, cultural memory, education and human values interact throughout Murty's writing. This integrated perspective helps explain why her work remains accessible to general readers while also offering material for serious literary study.

5. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The paper uses feminist literary criticism, cultural studies and a humanistic approach to literary interpretation. Feminist criticism is employed to examine women's agency, patriarchal expectations, marriage, economic dependence, bodily difference and education. The analysis does not assume that feminist writing must always portray dramatic rebellion. Murty's fiction often presents quieter forms of resistance: continuing education, earning independently, refusing humiliation, rebuilding after abandonment, or simply asserting the right to dignity.

Cultural studies provides a framework for examining materialism, globalization, family values, rural and urban life, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The study also uses close reading to examine characterization, narrative voice, recurring motifs and the relationship between ordinary events and larger social questions.

The methodology is qualitative and comparative. Primary texts are read alongside scholarly publications from 2022 through 2025. The study does not claim to represent every dimension of Murty's extensive bibliography. Instead, selected texts are used to identify recurring patterns in her literary imagination.

6. Women, Marriage and the Search for Selfhood

Gender is one of the most visible concerns in Murty's fiction. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrikant and Shrimati begin their married life with different relationships to education and ambition. The novel becomes significant because Shrimati's intelligence and scholarly interests gradually come into conflict with a domestic arrangement



in which her husband's career receives greater recognition. The issue is not simply that one spouse succeeds and another sacrifices. The deeper problem is the cultural habit of assuming that a woman's intellectual life can be postponed without consequence.

Shrimati's journey can be read as a movement from accommodation to self-recognition. Her decision to return to her own intellectual interests is important precisely because it is quiet. She does not need to defeat another character in order to reclaim herself. Her resistance lies in recognizing that a meaningful life cannot be reduced to the role assigned to her within marriage.

Recent scholarship supports this reading. Kalra and Vashist identify generational changes in Murty's representations of women and emphasize the movement from duty-bound identities toward autonomy. Menon and Singh Thakur similarly describe Murty's protagonists as negotiating patriarchal structures through self-definition and agency.

Murty's treatment of marriage is often less confrontational than contemporary feminist theory might expect. This is precisely what makes it interesting. She frequently works through emotional consequences rather than ideological declarations. The reader is invited to notice what happens when a woman's aspirations are repeatedly treated as secondary. Her feminism, therefore, often begins with the simple recognition that a woman's inner life matters.

7. Mahashweta: Body, Stigma and Resilience

Mahashweta is one of Murty's most important texts for studying gender and social stigma. Anupama is an educated and talented young woman whose life changes dramatically after the appearance of leucoderma. The illness becomes socially significant not because it diminishes her human worth but because the people around her attach social meanings to her body. Her experience exposes the cruelty of a culture in which marriageability, beauty and social acceptance can become intertwined.

The novel's feminist force lies in its treatment of the body as a social site. Anupama's body is judged before her intellect, emotional capacity or personal history can be recognized. The rejection she experiences reveals the fragility of relationships built on appearance and social approval. Her eventual rebuilding of life becomes more than personal recovery: it questions the social belief that a woman's value depends upon physical conformity.

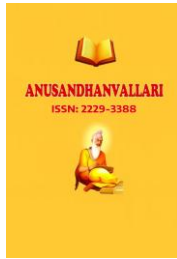
The 2022 studies of Mahashweta are especially relevant here. Devi and Ravichandran approach the novel through ecofeminism and questions of women's identity and equality, while Kale examines cultural inequality and the continued secondary status imposed upon women. The 2025 feminist study by Menon and Singh Thakur further interprets Anupama's experience as a critique of patriarchal structures and the commodification of women's bodies and abilities.

What makes Anupama compelling is that her resilience is not presented as superhuman strength. She suffers humiliation, loneliness and uncertainty. Her eventual independence becomes meaningful because it grows out of vulnerability. Murty thus humanizes feminist resistance: a woman can be hurt and still rebuild herself.

8. Dollar Bahu: Money, Family and the Value of Women

Dollar Bahu examines a familiar Indian social phenomenon: the tendency to measure status through money, especially foreign income. The novel contrasts women within a family and shows how financial prosperity affects the respect given to them. The phrase "Dollar Bahu" itself turns a daughter-in-law into a symbol of economic value. Her identity becomes connected to the currency she earns rather than to her character.

The novel's critique of materialism is closely connected with gender. Gouramma's admiration for the daughter-in-law who earns dollars reveals how women can become objects of comparison within family structures. Vinuta, who remains in India, experiences the consequences of this comparison. The injustice is not only



financial; it is emotional. Affection and respect become unevenly distributed according to perceived economic worth.

Aayushi and Kamboj identify materialism as a major concern in *Dollar Bahu* and *House of Cards* and contrast it with Murty's humanitarian values. Singh's 2024 study interprets *Dollar Bahu* through cultural identity, East-West relations and globalization. Kanwar's 2025 study similarly examines the conflict between tradition and modernity.

The novel should not, however, be reduced to a simple opposition between "good Indian values" and "bad Western materialism." Its more interesting point is that money can distort relationships anywhere. The desire for security is understandable, but when wealth becomes the primary measure of human worth, family relationships begin to lose their emotional balance. Murty's critique is therefore directed at materialism rather than at geography itself.

The women in *Dollar Bahu* also demonstrate how patriarchy can operate through women themselves. Gouramma's attitudes are shaped by the values of her social environment, but she also reproduces those values in judging other women. This complicates the idea that patriarchy is maintained only by men. Social expectations can become internalized and passed from one generation of women to another.

9. House of Cards: Education, Ambition and Emotional Cost

House of Cards explores the relationship between ambition, marriage, professional success and emotional life. Mridula and Sanjay represent different attitudes toward education and career. The novel raises a difficult question: what happens when economic success becomes the main measure of achievement? Murty does not reject ambition, but she asks readers to consider what may be sacrificed when success becomes detached from emotional responsibility.

For women, the issue is particularly complicated. A woman may be educated and capable, yet her social identity may still be tied to marriage and family. At the same time, professional success does not automatically produce emotional freedom. Murty's women often have to negotiate between their own aspirations and the expectations surrounding them.

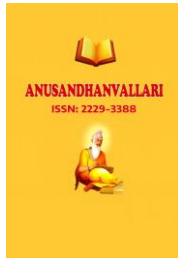
Recent scholarship groups *House of Cards* with Murty's other major feminist texts and identifies female self-definition and resistance to patriarchal structures as recurring concerns. The 2024 study by Aayushi and Kamboj also reads the novel through materialism and humanitarian values.

The metaphor of the house of cards is useful because it suggests apparent stability built on fragile foundations. A family may appear successful from the outside while emotional trust is collapsing within. Murty's narrative asks readers to look beyond visible achievement and to consider the human cost of success.

10. Education as Empowerment

Education is perhaps the most consistent form of empowerment in Murty's writing. Her stories repeatedly show that education changes not only employment opportunities but also the way individuals understand themselves. This is particularly important for women because education can create alternatives to dependence.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, education becomes part of Shrimati's selfhood. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's intelligence remains a source of identity even when society attempts to define her through appearance. In Murty's autobiographical and philanthropic writing, education frequently appears as a practical means of transforming lives rather than merely as a marker of prestige.



This emphasis connects Murty's fiction with her broader public concerns. Her stories rarely treat education as an abstract credential. It is associated with confidence, mobility, awareness and the ability to make decisions. The educational message is therefore closely linked with social equality.

Recent scholarship on Murty's writing also identifies education alongside resilience, female empowerment and resistance to restrictive social expectations. Her pedagogical significance has likewise attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to how her accessible narratives can cultivate values and reading habits.

11. Rural India, Social Inequality and the Ordinary Life

Murty's literary world is not restricted to metropolitan India. Rural communities, small towns and ordinary households frequently appear in her narratives. This attention to everyday life allows her to explore poverty, education, caste, gender, healthcare, migration and social mobility without turning the characters into statistics.

A 2024 study of rural life in Murty's literature identifies economic hardship, education, tradition and modernity, and social justice as recurring concerns. This observation is significant because Murty's rural characters are rarely presented only as helpless victims. They often possess practical intelligence, resilience and strong community relationships. Her writing invites readers to notice dignity within ordinary lives.

The rural dimension also complicates the idea of modernity. Modernization may bring education, technology and economic opportunity, but it does not automatically eliminate inequality. Murty's narratives often show that social change is uneven. A new school may open opportunities while old gender expectations continue inside the home. A family may become wealthier while emotional relationships weaken. A young person may move to a city while remaining psychologically connected to the village.

This tension between change and continuity is one of the reasons Murty's writing remains culturally recognizable to Indian readers. Her characters are often caught between what they have inherited and what they hope to become.

12. Mythology, Folklore and Cultural Memory

Murty's engagement with mythology and folklore is another important dimension of her literary contribution. She retells familiar stories for contemporary readers, particularly younger audiences, but her retellings are not simply decorative. They transmit cultural memory while making traditional narratives accessible to new generations.

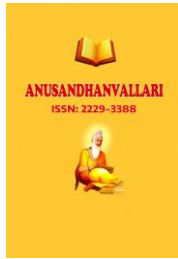
Agrawal and Dwivedi identify mythology and modernity as significant dimensions of Murty's contribution to contemporary literature. Devi and Singh similarly examine her use of folklore and cultural heritage in relation to national identity and New Historicism.

The value of these retellings lies in their ability to create continuity without demanding complete imitation of the past. Children can encounter familiar stories while also seeing them through contemporary language. Murty's approach suggests that tradition survives not by remaining unchanged but by being retold in forms that new readers can understand.

Her mythological writing also complements her social fiction. In both, she is interested in the relationship between inherited values and present behaviour. Myth becomes a way of asking contemporary readers what values they want to carry forward and which assumptions need to be questioned.

13. Narrative Style: Simplicity as Literary Strategy

Murty's language is among the most distinctive features of her writing. Her sentences are generally direct, her plots are easy to follow, and her characters are recognizable. Some academic readers may initially associate this



simplicity with literary limitation. Such a judgement, however, overlooks the communicative purpose of her style.

Murty writes for readers who may not identify themselves as literary specialists. Her accessible language allows social questions to reach a wide audience. A reader does not need advanced theoretical knowledge to understand the pain of rejection, the consequences of greed, the importance of education or the loneliness of a neglected person. Her simplicity becomes a form of literary hospitality.

Guruchal's 2025 study explicitly examines Murty's narrative techniques and identifies realism, character-driven plots, multiple narrative perspectives and the integration of social issues as important features of her fiction.

Her storytelling is also strongly episodic. A small incident can carry a moral or social implication, while a larger narrative accumulates meaning through ordinary encounters. This resembles oral storytelling traditions in which the value of a story lies partly in its ability to be remembered and retold. Murty's prose therefore occupies an interesting space between literary fiction, oral narrative and social storytelling.

14. Human Values and the Ethics of Everyday Life

Human values are central to Murty's writing, but they should not be mistaken for simple moral instruction. Her stories frequently place characters in situations where values compete. Wealth may provide security but damage relationships. Ambition may bring success but create loneliness. Tradition may provide belonging but also support discrimination. Compassion may appear impractical but ultimately preserve human dignity.

Wise and Otherwise and Three Thousand Stitches are especially important because Murty draws on encounters with people and communities to reflect on social responsibility. Her non-fiction frequently moves from a specific person or incident toward a larger ethical question. The reader is encouraged to reconsider assumptions about poverty, education, women, social class and success.

This "everyday humanism" is useful as a critical concept for reading Murty. She does not generally begin with an abstract theory and then construct characters to illustrate it. Instead, she begins with people and allows their situations to reveal the ethical problem. The result is a form of social criticism that is intimate rather than confrontational.

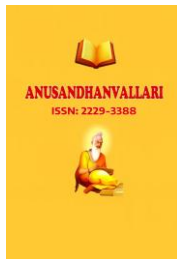
The strength of this approach is its accessibility. The limitation is that moral resolution can sometimes appear too neat when compared with the complexity of real social structures. A critical reading should therefore appreciate Murty's ethical vision while also asking where her narratives simplify problems that may be structurally difficult to resolve.

15. A Critical Evaluation of Murty's Feminism

Calling Murty a feminist writer requires some qualification. Her fiction clearly addresses women's education, autonomy, discrimination, economic dependence, marriage and dignity. Recent scholarship explicitly identifies feminist consciousness in Mahashweta, Dollar Bahu, House of Cards and Gently Falls the Bakula. Yet Murty's feminism is generally reformist and humanistic rather than revolutionary.

Her protagonists often seek dignity within or beyond existing social structures rather than rejecting all traditions. They value family, education and relationships while questioning unequal expectations. This may make her feminism less confrontational than some contemporary feminist writing, but it also makes it recognizable to readers who live within family-centred social environments.

The important point is that feminist resistance does not have to look identical in every cultural context. For one woman, resistance may mean leaving an oppressive marriage; for another, it may mean returning to education,



earning independently, refusing social shame, or deciding that physical difference does not determine her worth. Murty's fiction gives considerable space to these quieter forms of self-assertion.

At the same time, a critical reading should acknowledge that her moral framework can sometimes place strong emphasis on individual character and personal resilience. Structural inequalities such as caste, class and institutional power may receive less sustained theoretical attention than they would in more explicitly political feminist writing. This is not a reason to dismiss her feminism; rather, it helps define its particular character.

16. Conclusion

Sudha Murty's writing deserves serious academic attention because its apparent simplicity conceals a sustained engagement with contemporary Indian life. Her fiction and non-fiction repeatedly return to questions that remain socially urgent: What gives a person dignity? What happens when money becomes a measure of human worth? How does marriage affect women's aspirations? Can education change a life? What happens when tradition and modernity collide? How should individuals respond to inequality?

The selected works demonstrate that gender is one of the central routes through which Murty examines these questions. Shrimati's intellectual awakening, Anupama's struggle against bodily stigma, the women of Dollar Bahu negotiating economic comparison, and the female characters in House of Cards confronting the emotional costs of ambition all show women attempting to preserve a sense of self within demanding social environments.

Recent research from 2022 to 2025 confirms the growing academic interest in Murty's feminist, cultural, rural, mythological and humanitarian dimensions. The present study extends this scholarship by proposing "everyday humanism" as a useful way of understanding the relationship among gender, social values and ordinary experience in her writing.

Murty's literary contribution ultimately lies in making readers pause over lives that might otherwise seem ordinary. Her characters are not always heroic, and their victories are not always dramatic. Sometimes the achievement is simply the recovery of self-respect, the decision to continue learning, the refusal to judge another person by appearance or wealth, or the recognition that kindness is a form of social responsibility. In a literary culture increasingly interested in complexity and experimentation, Murty reminds us that accessibility can itself be meaningful when it opens difficult questions to a broad community of readers.

Further research may examine Murty through disability studies, Dalit studies, ecocriticism, children's literature, translation studies and reader-response criticism. Comparative studies with writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Sudha Menon, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and other contemporary Indian women writers could also clarify the distinctive place of Murty's reformist and humanistic feminism within Indian literature.

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