

The Power of Knowledge: Education as a Catalyst in Sudha Murty's Narratives

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Sudha Murty foregrounds education as a powerful instrument for social change in her short stories *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* and *Books for "At Least one Library"* from the short story collection *How I taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories*. The narrative presents education not merely as a formal process but as a lifelong pursuit essential for personal dignity and independence. This article also highlights how these stories focus on lifelong learning, and the emotional bond between generations. Through the transformation of an elderly woman from illiteracy to literacy, the story challenges age-related stereotypes and emphasizes determination, self-respect, and empowerment through learning. Moreover, this paper analyzes how the author uses character development, cultural context, and narrative simplicity to focus on the importance of education and its transformative power through the select short stories of Sudha Murty.

Keywords: Education, Self-respect, Values, Independence, Transformation

About the Author:

Born in Shiggaon, Karnataka, India, in 1950, Sudha Murty is a well-known Indian author, philanthropist, and chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. She is well known for her contributions to literary and social progress. Her books frequently address social issues, cultural values, women's empowerment, and the real-life realities of middle-class families. She is greatly known for her straightforward and approachable writing style. Her notable literary contributions include *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, which reflect her deep engagement with themes of resilience and moral integrity.

Sudha Murty's short stories are highly regarded for their straightforwardness, emotional richness, and strong ethical messages. Utilizing clear and easy-to-understand language, her tales often stem from real-life events, mirroring the daily challenges encountered by ordinary individuals, especially in the Indian middle-class context. Instead of focusing on intricate plots, she emphasizes human connections, moral challenges, and the repercussions of decisions, making her stories both relatable and thought-provoking. A key aspect of her short stories is their focus on values such as integrity, kindness, humility, and perseverance. A significant feature of her short stories is their emphasis on values such as honesty, compassion, humility, and resilience. Collections like *Wise and Otherwise*, *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* present a series of real incidents that highlight both the kindness and flaws of human nature, often ending with subtle moral reflections rather than preaching. Overall, her short stories serve not only as literary works but also as tools for social awareness, encouraging readers to reflect on moral values and human behavior in contemporary society.

Beyond literature, she has played a significant role in philanthropic and humanitarian initiatives through the Infosys Foundation. In recognition of her contributions, she has been awarded the Padma Shri in 2006 and the Padma Bhushan in 2023 and has also served as a nominated member of India's Rajya Sabha. Notably, she was the first female engineer hired at TELCO (Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company), marking a milestone in breaking gender barriers in the engineering profession.

Writing Style of Sudha Murty and the Themes Explored in her works:

Sudha Murty stands out as a respected voice in modern Indian literature. Her writing thoughtfully examines the multifaceted roles of women in both family and society, challenging conventional gender norms while highlighting their strengths as well as struggles across diverse social contexts. A central theme in her work is the tension between tradition and modernity in India, portrayed through characters who navigate the delicate balance between established cultural values and changing contemporary perspectives. With her empathetic and perceptive storytelling, she provides readers with a meaningful understanding of Indian culture and human relationships, making her work especially resonant for those interested in social realities and everyday life. Sudha Murty addresses important social concerns and cultural subtleties through her writing. Known for her perceptive and thoughtful style, she places strong emphasis on values, ethics, and the empowerment of women—elements that are evident in most of her works. While she brings attention to issues such as familial and societal discrimination against women, she also highlights their resilience, dignity, and determination in her narratives.

Through her literary contributions, she inspires readers to reflect on themselves and recognize the significance of moral values and education. Her storytelling weaves together elements of culture, tradition, modernity, and mythology, creating a rich narrative fabric. The compassionate portrayal of her characters underscores the importance of kindness and humanity in society. As a celebrated author, philanthropist, and social worker, her works explore contemporary social issues while emphasizing the need for change. *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* exemplifies her approach to storytelling. Many of her short stories are motivational, carrying strong moral and social messages, and are often semi-autobiographical. This particular story is drawn from her own life, narrated in the first person, which enhances its authenticity and emotional appeal. Her use of simple language makes the narrative accessible and relatable, reflecting the idea that education, though basic, has the power to transform lives. The grandmother's journey from illiteracy to literacy is portrayed gradually, symbolizing the learning process and reinforcing the story's central theme.

Education as Catalyst:

Education is widely regarded as a basic human right and a powerful force for both individual growth and societal progress. In *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, Sudha Murty presents a thought-provoking narrative that challenges the idea that learning belongs only to the young. Set within a traditional Indian household, the story reflects the social and cultural conditions that once restricted access to education, particularly for women. The narrative highlights education as a tool for empowerment, independence, and emotional satisfaction. First published in 2004 as part of the collection *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories*, it draws from a real incident in the author's childhood. Its clear language and meaningful morals have made it a common inclusion in school curricula. The story centers on a young girl who teaches her sixty-two-year-old grandmother to read, ultimately challenging the belief that age limits one's ability to learn.

The short story *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* offers a touching portrayal of the bond between a young girl and her grandmother, while emphasizing the value of literacy and lifelong learning. Set in a rural backdrop, the narrative centers on a twelve-year-old narrator who reads aloud to her grandmother, who cannot read, from the Kannada magazine *Karmaveera*, including the well-known serial *Kashi Yatre*. The young narrator regularly reads the story aloud to her grandmother, who grows deeply attached to it. However, when the narrator leaves to attend a wedding, the grandmother feels both helpless and embarrassed because she is unable to read the next installment on her own. This moment becomes a turning point, as her temporary absence highlights the grandmother's dependence. Determined to overcome this limitation, she sets herself the goal of becoming literate by the time of Saraswati Puja. Driven by a strong desire for independence, she decides to learn reading and writing with the help of her granddaughter. "I have decided I want to learn the Kannada alphabets from tomorrow onwards. I will work very hard. I will keep Saraswati Pooja day during Dassara as the deadline. That day I should be able to read a novel on my own. I want to be independent" (12).

Through steady effort and strong determination, she manages to gain basic literacy in a short time. Her success reaches its peak during Saraswati Puja, when she is able to read a passage on her own marking both a personal victory and the transformative impact of education. The story concludes with her heartfelt gratitude toward her granddaughter, highlighting themes of respect for knowledge, perseverance, and the lasting importance of learning.

With her granddaughter's guidance, she studies sincerely and ultimately achieves her goal. A significant moment occurs when the grandmother touches her granddaughter's feet in respect, recognizing her as a teacher, which underscores the cultural value placed on education and the deep reverence for those who impart knowledge. "She said, 'I am touching the feet of a teacher, not my granddaughter; a teacher who taught me so well, with so much of affection that I can read any novel confidently in such a short period. Now I am independent'" (12). This gesture reflects the grandmother's understanding that education deserves respect, regardless of the teacher's age. It also signifies her transformation from dependence to self-confidence, as she gains self-respect through learning. In this way, education is depicted as a source of dignity and personal empowerment.

The next short story selected for this research article is "Books for 'At Least One Library'" by Sudha Murty. It reflects the author's childhood experiences in a middle-class family of teachers, where books and learning were valued more than material possessions. The narrative underscores the deep respect accorded to teachers, illustrated through the wisdom of the narrator's grandfather, who asserts that knowledge is the only enduring wealth. He reinforces this idea by referring to Arjuna and his reverence for Dronacharya.

The story follows the narrator's early introduction to reading through regular visits to a small village library with her grandfather. Surrounded by books from a young age, she gradually cultivates a deep love for reading and ultimately goes through the library's limited collection. "I started reading children's books there and used to be absorbed in them until my grandfather would call me to go home. Years passed and I became a girl of twelve years. By that time, I had finished reading almost all the books in that little village library" (14). A key moment arises when her grandfather perceives her deep love for reading through her imaginative interpretation of a poem. This insight prompts him to recount the example of Andrew Carnegie, who supported the establishment of libraries.

Inspired by this conversation, the young girl promises to contribute to libraries in the future. The story concludes with the fulfillment of this promise in her later life through philanthropic efforts, emphasizing

the transformative power of books, the enduring value of knowledge, and the importance of making education accessible to others. “Later in my life, I became well off. I remembered my promise of buying books for a library. Today, through Infosys Foundation, we have given books to ten thousand such libraries” (15). When it comes to the importance of education and knowledge every individual feels to be empowered and in one of the article the researcher stated about the importance of education as “The right education makes you a confident person” (Sarawat 37).

Conclusion:

The grandmother’s inability to read represents both dependence and constraint, reflecting the broader realities of illiteracy among earlier generations. Her reliance on her granddaughter to access stories highlights this limitation. However, the moment she is left without assistance and experiences helplessness leads to a profound realization about the importance of education in achieving independence. Significantly, her decision to learn to read is not influenced by external pressure but arises from personal motivation, positioning education as a means of self-empowerment rather than an imposed duty. This transformation underscores the essential role of education in strengthening individual agency, confidence, and dignity. How I Taught My Grandmother to Read is more than just a story—it is an inspiring account of human determination and the transformative power of education. Through a simple yet profound narrative, Sudha Murty conveys that learning is a lifelong journey and that knowledge empowers individuals to lead independent and dignified lives. How I Taught My Grandmother to Read is a profound exploration of education as a lifelong, empowering force. Through the grandmother’s journey, Sudha Murty demonstrates that education transcends age, social barriers, and traditional roles.

The short story Books for “At Least one Library” from How I Taught My Grandmother to Read presents a compelling argument for the importance of books and libraries in education. Through a simple yet impactful narrative, Sudha Murty illustrates that access to books is essential for intellectual growth, social equality, and lifelong learning. The idea of having “at least one library” in every community serves as a powerful reminder that education must be accessible to all. Books, as gateways to knowledge, remain indispensable in shaping informed, thoughtful, and empowered individuals.

The selected short stories in this research collectively highlight that learning extends beyond the mere acquisition of skills, encompassing the development of independence, confidence, and self-respect. By placing education at the core of their narratives, they offer a lasting reminder that the pursuit of knowledge is both an inherent individual right and a profoundly transformative experience.

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