



BRIDGING TWO WORLDS: EXPLORING TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN SUDHA MURTY'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: This research paper analyses how Sudha Murty, a renowned story teller, has tried to create a balance between age old tradition and modernity through her short stories. She is highly acclaimed short story writer who has portrayed characters reflecting intricacies of cultural heritage among the rapidly changing life of the people of the modern society. Through the qualitative analysis of some of the short stories, the present paper explores how Murty's narratives have reflected the contemporary Indian society dealing with gender roles, socio-economic disparities, gender roles and familial dynamics etc. The paper also throws light on how her narratives reflect contemporary Indian society where traditional norms are taken care of and valued to the greater extent possible. Finally, this research paper contributes a deeper comprehension of the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity in the short stories of Sudha Murty. This research paper would mainly deal with the following books:

- (i) *How I Taught My Grandmother To Read and Other Stories*(2004)
- (ii) *The Magic Drum and other Stories* (2006)
- (iii) *The Bird with Golden Wings*(2009)
- (iv) *Grandma's Bag of Stories*(2012)
- (v) *The Magic of the Lost Temple*(2015)

Introduction

Tradition and modernity are two important concepts shaping the lives of both individual and society. They are often interlinked with each other creating a dynamic and complex relationship. Tradition refers to beliefs, cultural practices and values which pass down through



generations. It provides platform for comprehending the world. It includes social customs and rituals defining how people interact with one another, celebrating important events etc. These include family traditions, greetings and religious ceremonies. Folklore and Mythology are full of songs and legends which passed down through oral tradition having cultural values and entertainment.

On the other hand modernity refers to continuing process of societal, cultural and technological progression which constantly reshaping the society. Modernity includes rapid advancement in technology influencing transportation, communication and various aspects of life the people are to undergo. Globalization is one of the specific features of modern world where the people of the world are interdependent and interconnected culturally and economically. In modern world emphasis is given on individual choices, rights and autonomy.

Tradition and modernity affect each other to a greater extent. Traditions seem to be practiced along with modern advancements intermingling old and the new. Sometimes we find traditions clash with modernity which lead to disagreements and challenges regarding values and behaviours. In some specific cases traditions and modernity complement each other nurturing innovation, positive and constructive changes. Thus we find that tradition and modernity are not merely opposite forces but are complicated and complex elements which constantly influence and interact with human beings. Literature plays a vital role in exploring the intricacies and paradoxical relationship between tradition and modernity. The writer uses a variety of literary device to depict the conflict, coexistence and potential synergy between these two forces taking into account the lives of their characters. Literature depicts characters that hold fast established social values and cultural practices, maintaining a sense of identity and belongingness highlighting the significance of traditions. Authors explore the ways through which traditions passed down through generations.



Enduring Tradition

Story telling: Means for transmitting culture

Sudha Murty is a great story teller. For transmitting moral and socio-cultural values, she adapts the traditional art of storytelling. In the story *The Golden Fish and the Demon Suraj*, the prominent character, is presented as kind hearted fisherman who catches a magical golden fish which has a power to grant wishes of anybody. His wife, Laxmi is a greedy woman who incites her husband to fulfil her wishes of having power and wealth. After fulfillment of each wish, both of them become unhappy and isolated. Finally Laxmi's desire for becoming God turned her monstrous. After realizing his mistake, Suraj wishes to have their old lives. Touched by his repentance, the gold fish grants his old wish. Undergoing such type of happenings, Suraj learns a lesson that satisfaction is the true wealth in one's life. One is supposed to be contented with the present lot. The story warns against excessive greed which leads to stress and anxiety ultimately. It emphasizes on giving importance to what we have at present.

In the story *The Clever and the Beautiful* a king was in search of a wife who is both intelligent and beautiful. An ordinary prince arrived at his state and cleverly proves that intelligence and ingenuity surpasses beauty. The king is impressed with his proving and chooses the princess having good wit and intelligence not on the basis of beauty. This story serves as the testimony to the everlasting power of storytelling for shaping the ethics prevailing in the age-old Indian society. *Doctor, Doctor* has the theme of positive outcome of selfless service and undesirable result of service with selfish motive. The story deals with Ravi, the hero who quenched the thirst of the persons in need by providing them water during summer season without charging any money. One day he served water to an old man, who was extremely thirsty, free of charge resulting into turning of his pitcher to a magic pitcher which could cure any type of diseases. When Ravi's greed increases the pitcher lost its magical power. Through this story the writer highlights the importance of selfless service without having any selfish intension.



“He remembered the people he had healed once out of kindness and compassion and how much they had blessed and loved him in return. He remembered their acts of generosity, sparing him a few coins, a bundle of vegetables from their garden in return for the water. When did he become so selfish greedy that he would neglect the people who had needed him the most? The old man had taken back his powers when he sensed Ravi had misused the gift” (Murty 15)

Story telling serves as the foundation stone to preserve the tradition prevalent in the society. Grandparents perform as custodians of cultural heritage, sharing legends with the people of present generation, as we find in the story *The Lost Temple* legends are shared with Nooni. This story revolves round a small village of Karnataka narrating the simple yet wealthy lifestyle of the people of the village. The people of the village spend their time in prayer, Agriculture work and social gatherings. Mystical elements, story related to hidden treasure, tales of lost temple etc. are included in Nani’s stories. These narratives not only entertain but also inculcate a sense of cultural identity and also enhance the historical knowledge of the young minds together with the people of the society in totality. Some stories like *Roopa’s great Escape* and “Doctor, Doctor” are full of moral lessons illustrating ethical principles and fulfilling social expectations. These tales have their origin in past and have passed down to the present and will ensure to impart cultural values for the generations to come.

Respect for Nature, Knowledge, elders and environment: -

Sudha Murty emphasizes on giving respect to the Nature, elders, knowledge and Indian culture and tradition. *How the Sea became salty* influence us to give respect to the Nature for maintaining balance in the eco system and warn against disrupting the systematic order of the Nature. This and some other short stories of Sudha Murty promote respect for the Nature, elders and knowledge which are the hallmark of Indian culture and are inseparable parts of age-old tradition. Environment has been inseparable part of Indian Culture and she supports loving the mother earth in a best possible way.



“Let me tell you an important secret. In our family, we make most of our treatments and medicines at home. For example, this oil contains leaves from the Brahmi creeper and other herbs from my garden. It also has camphor and powder from a red sun-dried hibiscus flower. Look at my hair.” (Murty 72)

The story *A Father's wisdom* deals with the experience of elders. A dying father distributes his wealth equally between his two sons-Puru and Puneet. He provides them mysterious advice like building houses, sleeping comfortably, enjoying food and lending money freely. Puru takes the advice of his father literally, travels regularly and spends his share of wealth lavishly but Puneet invests the same wisely, leads a comfortable and peaceful life and helps those who are really in need. Years later Puru becomes penniless and seeks his brother's secret of having wealthy and contented life. Puneet explains what his father meant for his advice. Their father wanted them to build houses, appreciate the comfort they have, and offer genuine kindness to the persons who are really in need. Thus, the story stresses on the value of wisdom and knowledge for living modestly, practising true kindness for having secure, contented and peaceful future. These stories exhibit the everlasting importance of age-old culture and traditions for guiding the behaviour and nurturing social harmony among the people of the nation.

The Magic of the Lost Temple deals with the natural knowledge and the real connection with the nature that is found in the people of the village. Here Nooni spends her time learning about medicinal plants and also farming from her grandmother. Folktale” The *Varada Hills* and *The Cow's Delivery* narrate deep rooted honour and respect pervading in Indian culture. The story *Kavery and The Thief* delineates the value of knowledge and wisdom. In this story the protagonist Kavery removes her problem due to the wisdom and wit she possesses.

Family Community and Social Responsibility

In the story *The Clever Brother* there are four brothers who go on individual journey for learning unique skills. The eldest brother becomes a thief, the second one an astronomer, the



third one a skilled hunter and the youngest one becomes a tailor. After four years when they return back their home their father tested their newly acquired skills. The test requires the skills of facing the challenges and collaboration. As all the brothers really possess these skills along with team spirit, they overcome each challenge and passed the test conducted by their father. This story highlights the value of Skills, resourcefulness knowledge and most significantly combining the strength to achieve a common goal having co-operation and team spirit.

The story *Sharing is Caring* is a typical example of sharing within the members of a family. *The Act of kindness* stresses on giving importance to those who are really in need. Likewise, *The story of Paan* develops in us the quality of helping others within the people of the community besides members of the family. It also instills in us to be patriotic and be ready to die for the people of the nation. The story promotes social responsibilities and introspection for the collective welfare. *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* also deals with the theme of charity and helping others.

“The happiness of his orphan girl is more important than worshipping Lord Vishweshwara at Kashi” (Murty 2)

Vibrant Festivals and Rituals

Traditional Indian festivals like “Sahastra Purnachandra Darshan” and rituals like “Rathayatra” are presented vividly by Sudha Murty emphasizing everlasting importance of religious practices in past and present Indian society. She presents Indian traditions associating the same with modernity to show their importance even today. Cow holds special status of being sacred in Indian culture it is often depicted as symbol of wealth, motherhood and prosperity. Sudha Murty often educated her readers about the sacredness of cow.

“Ajji broke into a smile. ‘Kamadhenu is the name of a divine cow who gives her owner whatever he asks for. She does the same thing for me—she gives our family plenty of milk and milk products like yogurt, butter, ghee, paneer and buttermilk.’” (Murty 111)



Embracing Modernity

Education as a Catalyst for Progress: -

Sudha Murty has given emphasis on education and knowledge. *How I taught my Grandmother to read and other Stories* exemplifies this. Krishtakka, the writer's grandmother, yearns to understand the world after learning to read. The story stresses on the profound desire of grandmother for acquiring knowledge prompting her to gain education to comprehend the reality of the world. Education can break the cycle of poverty and can create a better future. It empowers the individuals by providing them abilities to participate in the academic activities to access information and utilize their potential to the greater extent possible.

“for a good cause if you are determined, you can overcome any obstacle. I will work harder than anybody, but I will do it. For learning there is no age bar” (Murty 7)

In *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, traditional knowledge is passed down reflecting the importance of both cultural wisdom and formal education. Through these narratives we can deduce that education is not a privilege, but a necessity. Education provides better opportunities, empowers the individuals and allow them to lead a pleasant and contented life.

Education for Holistic Understanding

In *The Lost Temple* Nooni actively acquires information from the internet and libraries for enhancing her knowledge. This kind of desire of Nooni reflects both traditional knowledge and modern research methods for comprehending the past through present method of acquiring knowledge. Sudha Murty exhibits past knowledge connecting the same with the present knowledge having motif of continuing Indian culture and tradition in the modern world.

Redefining Gender Roles

Sudha Murty uses short stories for empowering the women of the society. Her stories *Appro J.R.D.* and *Gowramma's Letter* illustrate her belief in providing equal opportunities to



the women of the society. These stories motivate the girls and the women to go ahead to achieve their targeted goals with strong hope and determination. Murty believes that when women are empowered with decision making skills, education etc. they can do wonder and will have great impact upon the generation to come. Economic progress, innovation from the women are possible if they are provided with equal opportunities. Murty urges the people to realise the inherent potentials of the women to have positive transformation the society. Through the story “Gowramma’s Voice” Murty gives us a powerful message, “A women’s value lies in her character, her contributions and her wavering spirit, not in her biology.” *Gowramma's Letter* discloses the emotional blemish imposed by social expectations. Murty supports empathy and understanding for women. Sudha Murty encourages the readers to break the barriers which are on the way of women and build the kind of world where women are given due respect and also valued so that they can enhance their full potential for the progress of the society and the nation.

Technology as a tool for exploration

Through her short stories Sudha Murty mirrors the advancement in the field of technology to complement and improve the traditional practices prevalent in the society. While adapting modern technology Nooni presents a healthy cynicism of tradition. She utilizes the camera of her phone for documentation of her discoveries reflecting how modern technology can be harnessed for exploring and preserving the age-old tradition of the country. She has tried to promote a balance between the wisdom of tradition and usefulness of modern technology.

A Synergetic Relationship

Murty presents tradition and modern technology as dynamic forces influencing and shaping each other. Traditions foster progress and integrate new knowledge. Tradition and modern new knowledge work together to enrich Nooni’s experience. Tradition and technology often co-exist and complement each other. This is clearly evident in the story *The Magic Drum* presenting fantastic elements from the folklore empowering Rani to fight against injustice.



Creating balance between tradition and modernity is a recurring theme in Sudha Murty's short stories. Following are a few instances in which tradition and modernity are associated S to each other. Modernity has its essence in tradition.

Characters like Ajit, Nooni and her parents adapt modern technology to enhance their knowledge and lives without removing their traditions. For example, a farmer may use his mobile app to know about weather updates together with keeping the traditional method of farming. Technology is shown as preserving and promoting traditional practices. In a story a young woman is shown presenting her grandmother's folktales in a video format creating and preserving record of oral tradition.

Sudha Murty has shown that younger generation respects the cultural heritage and knowledge of the tradition while the older generation acknowledges the prospective benefits of modern advancement in technology. Traditions are not stationary; it is dynamic and passes from generation to generations. Murty has shown how traditional practices flourish over a period of time to integrate elements of modernity. For example, a family recipe has shown as adapting new ingredient or cooking method together with retaining its core essence. It has been found that traditions do not vanish completely. It is found at least to some extent in the present time. Modern advancement in the field of technology rooted in strong foundation of age old enriched tradition. By adapting the best of both tradition and modernity, we can create a more comfortable and meaningful lives for ourselves.

Conclusion:-

Sudha Murty's short stories promote a thoughtful approach to tradition and modernity. She tries to create a future which respects the past and embraces the present. Her stories honour the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity in the country. Through her attractive and appealing stories Murty portrays a society that honours its tradition and cultural heritage. Her stories create a world where tradition remains the guiding force for adapting the modernity



Works Cited

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