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Theme of Awareness and Awakening in Sudha Murty's Short Story *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*

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Abstract:

Sudha Murthy is popular name when it comes to philanthropy. She is a creative writer who writes prolifically. An teacher, Computer Engineer, Social worker and a creative writer who has authored many books including novels, short stories, technical books and non-fiction books. Her themes range from common domestic aspects to high ideals, covering men, women, lifestyle, hospitality, school education, fantasy, mythological stories, act of philanthropy and kindness, social issues, variety of people from different parts of the country, technocrats, life experiences etc.

She is a passionate creative writer whose books get translated into 18 languages from Penguin Publishers. She is a popular writer of popular literature whose mother tongue is Kannada but she started writing in English almost at the age of 50. She continues writing and her target is to reach every household, children, men and women on plenty of variety of subjects. One of her popular story 'The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk' is one such story written by Sudha Murty. Which is heart breaking, eye opener, enlightening, highly humanistic story which unravels many issues related to poverty, hunger, poor people's life style, village life, economical condition of the have-nots, familial concern mother's predicament, challenges of hospitality culture amidst poverty, societal issues in a very poignant way which makes us introspect our own role in correcting the social imbalances in the society and challenges arising out of it.

Key words: Odisha, forest, thatched hut, have-nots, hospitality, translator, Pakhala, milk, lullaby.

The short story The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk by Sudha Murty is small in its content and theme. If you read it and measure it by way of plot construction. The language that is employed by her for the narration of the story is very simple, highly appealing and there is no complexities either in the treatment of theme of this short story or in its understand ability by the reader. It is a short story no doubt but this short story is considered as the path breaking a trend setting story in ways more than one.

The theme of the story is like this, Sudha Murty being a philanthropist of par excellence stature once went to Odisha State situated in the blue mountains of greenery known as Niladri, wherein the enchanting river like Mahanadi, beautiful and highly enchanting forests have the scenic beauty. Historical places like Udayagiri, Dhauli, with the largest saltwater lake, Chilka, marked by the famous Jagnathpuri Rath Yatra. The Kalinga war was fought on the banks of Daya river. The monumental Ashoka's inscription on the rock edict, the significance of Kalinga war one is reminded off, but along with it the Odisha has the bleakness of having, poor destitute and tribal people who constitute larger portion of population and backwardness.

Sudha Murty along with her Infosys's NGO – Philanthropic team was in one of the villages in Odisha who had planned a project of building a school for children there. On one day it started raining very heavily it seems and it was downpour. One cannot come out of that forest area. Sudha Murty had a translator who used to translate Oriya language to her in English in that area. He was helping her with the language problem. He told her it is better to take shelter in the nearby hut till the rain stopped as it is not advisable to move out of the forest in the heavy rains.

They approached a small hut with thatched roof and mud floorings. The long passage like portion was divided into outer area that is hall cum bedroom and attached to it, there owner of the hut came and invited them inside as they had come seeking shelter because of the rain. He gave her a mat and made her to sit on the floor, his young baby was crying & yelling and his wife was singing a lullaby to silence the child by then the translator who used to accompany Sudha Murty told her to be there and went out on some work and telling her that he would be back in a hour i.e. after the rain stops and requested he to be there till he returns. She nodded yes. The host of the hut was very happy receiving a Memsahib from city who has come to their remote village to build a school for their children as philanthropical help. He was poor no doubt but was very keen on treating her by extending the best possible way of hospitality for the rare guest.

He asked her to relax till the rain stops and gave her a glass of water and asked her what she wishes to have tea or coffee? As though he is capable of offering plenty of options. His poverty condition did not stop him or prevent him in anyway remaining him of his poor subaltern position in extending hospitality.

We are Indians very generous in extending our hospitality doesnt matter how socially deprived of we are because we always believe in treating our guests with the dictum Athitidevobhava as scripted in Taittiriya Upanishad. Nothing is needed in extending our hospitality. He decided to make gestures using broken hindi as to Tea or? then Sudha Murty replied she neither drinks tea nor coffee its ok. He was dissuaded, he did not give up, he continued with all his height of humbleness that atleast milk? Sudha Murty was not very keen even on having milk nodded no its ok but since he kept on asking repeatedly she felt like nodding yes, lest he should not feel dejected and hurt because she was a big rich lady who is not down to earth to respect his humble feelings. So she relied yes. Milk will do, then he went inside the small kitchen and told his wife who was bury silencing the crying baby.

He told his wife in his own Oriya language that, madam has come from big city to build school for our children in this remote village. She is our guest we have to treat her well. This is the rare opportunity to treat her in the best possible way in a befitting manner though they were conversing in Oriya language. Sudha Murty was able to follow it, if not by line by line but was able to grasp the major portion and gist of their conversation in the context of that situation, husband told his wife to give a glass of milk to madam but his wife told him and denied to give the milk as she has only one glass of goats milk that too which is procured for her crying child which is supposed to be fed with, he told in an irritated tone,

“The lady sitting outside has grey hair but no common sense. We are poor people. We also have to take care of a child. I have only one glass of goats’ milk left for my baby. In this village, I have to work hard even to get this milk. If madam wants tea, I can give her a few teaspoons of milk, If she wants to eat fish. I can fetch them from the pond and prepare an excellent fish curry. If she wants to eat Pakhala (leftover rice and water, an ordinary peoples delicacy). It is already there. But she shouldn’t ask for an expensive drink such as milk.”

The husband started requesting and persuaded his wife who was irritated by the very demand of a glass of milk. But the host was not ready to accept the defeat at the hands of he kept on requesting to spare the milk. Madam cannot eat fish so we can’t offer her that, she does not drink tea or coffee. So no question of preparing it either, he was almost on his knees begging for a glass of milk which is spared for his crying baby. He told her to add little water and make it big portion out of which she can satisfy the guest as well as the child also. He was bent upon succeeding in the out of extending his hospitality.

He was very firm and ready to share the milk for his rare guest with his baby. The host’s wife was forced to succumb and offer a glass of milk, yes the host was ready with the glass of milk in a small tumbler for Sudha Murty. It was really astonishing for her because she had listened to the arguments and conversation between both poor husband and wife own a glass of milk. Sudha Murty had realised the torturing and haunting predicament and realised at that moment as to. If guests have expensive habits. It will definitely be impossible for the poor hosts to provide. Sudha Murty felt ashamed because of her decision to accept milk who was unaware of the fact that, if she accepts it then it is like snatching the share of a little baby’s food, yes Sudha Murty decided to sacrifice the glass of milk for the sake of little child and she told her translator who was back now from outside that,

“I don’t drink milk as I fast on Wednesday I drink only water and nothing else.”

The translator had the shock because in the morning for breakfast. But he explained it to the host and conveyed it properly. Later her translator asked that people fast on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays but not usually on Wednesdays and was very keen on knowing that, for which God on Wednesday? Sudha Murty told him ‘I fast on Wednesdays for Buddha’. However the host was happy for the reason that he succeeded his best in offering a glass of milk to the guest.

When Sudha Murty very metaphorically said that she fasts on Wednesday for Buddha, it seems it was very apt because she had got the realisation of an truly expensive demand asking for a glass of milk which is beyond the reach of poor common man. she should not have nodded for the acceptance of a glass of milk which had to be shared or snatched from poor child's feeding share. For poor people a glass of goats milk hardened by the hard efforts of one days toiling is like a precious procured weaning food for their poor child. Yes it came as a moment of awakening for Sudha Murty. The rain which was responsible for learning of an lesson in life by way of real experience had come as an eye opener for Sudha Murty and it was like Archimedes' Eureka. Buddha's incarnation which prompted her to say that it was for Buddha on Wednesday that she keeps fast which altered Sudha Murty's feelings and gave her realisation of life for the owner of 4000 crore billion's Infosys Company, a celebrity, philanthropist and owner of a software company of high repute that, life teaches what you do not know, Life's best lessons are always learnt not in the Air Condition rooms or offices, college or universities but in the closed enclosures of thatched huts amidst utter penury and haunting poverty which are rare to erase. She was so much moved by that incident to such an extent that she decided to pledge and take owe that, she stopped drinking milk from that day onwards.

Though it is a short story based on author's real life experience in Odisha. It evokes lot of questions to every citizen of India that, are we not responsible in one or the other way for all that is happening in the lives of poverty stricken people. If not directly atleast indirectly it makes every responsible citizen of India introspect oneself with such interrogation and our hearts melt at such heart rendering incidents and situations when are ponder over such issues. Sudha Murty very poignantly observed it, responded to it and has taken a path breaking decision of taking such a decision of sacrificing drinking of milk from that day onwards. Cudos to Sudha a noble hearted person who responded proactively realising her role of a responsible citizen, philanthropist and as an inspirational role model.

References:

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