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## Influence of Myths, Legends, Fables and Folktales in Children's Fiction: A Study of Sudha Murty's Book *Grandparents' Bag of Stories*

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**Abstract:** Sudha Murty's book *Grandparents' Bag of Stories* is a collection of nineteen short stories narrated by grandparents to their grandkids while they visit them during nationwide lockdown in India. The present study explores the use of myths, legends, fables and folktales indigenous to Indian culture as a medium of storytelling with a purpose of teaching life lessons to children. Such stories have significant impact on how children perceive something in their lives. They help them understand the difference between good and bad and have an impact on their overall behaviour and deeds. By narrating her stories with the use of age old myths, legends, fables and folktales Sudha Murty intends to create stories that are thought provoking, entertaining and also teach interesting lessons. The lockdown period during COVID-19 pandemic and the stay with the grandparents present a great opportunity to revitalise the tradition of storytelling. Sudha Murty successfully inter-weave stories inside a story about gods and goddesses, kings, prince, princesses and magic to transport the children into a dreamy world of imagination.

**Keywords:** Legends, Myths, fables, folktales, children, life lessons, thought provoking.

We all have grown up listening to stories from our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. These were all sorts of stories. Sometimes powerful, sometimes meaningless, sometimes moral based and sometimes they were just hilarious! No matter what- we enjoyed them and just loved to be transported into a magical world which seemed so full of wonder. Stories we heard mostly were folklores from various cultures and religions, traditional beliefs- the stories full of myths, legends, fables and tales of our own ancestors. These stories were a great medium of connecting children with their family, elders and family history. Stories connect by sharing of cultural experiences through generations.

Ursula K. Le Guin (1979) asserts, 'A Person who had never listened to nor read a tale or myth or parable or a story, would remain ignorant of his own emotional and spiritual heights and depths, would not know quite fully what it is to be human'.

Every country has its own traditions and culture with which the storytelling also varies. With time they get reinterpreted, modified and narrated in their own way at different places. Storytelling being an art and each storyteller being an artist adds their own flair and creates a different version of the same story. However this synthesis is quite common within a culture and becomes a part of the texts of the society which it belongs to. Hence the children's literature to a greater part comprises of those stories which are a part of the culture and tradition of the society to which it belong.

The storytelling can be a great method of teaching the indigenous culture and function as a great educational method of values, virtue, culture and history with the use of myths, legends and folktales. Sudha Murty's stories relate with such old myths, legends and folktales indigenous to Indian culture and traditions. The ancestral and traditional stories passed on from generation to generation and voiced by grandparents to their grandchildren is a great means of creating a bond in the family and directs children to possess or demonstrate moral virtues towards others. By narrating her stories with the use of age old myths, legends and fables Sudha Murty intends to create stories that are thought provoking, entertaining and also teach interesting life lessons.

Performing research in children's literature provides a deep look not only into the cultural side of our lives, but also the psychological, ethical, religious, social and many more. Present research studies the influence of myths, legends, fables and folktales on Sudha Murty's book *Grandparent's Bag of Stories*. This collection of tales is in continuation to her previous bestselling book *Grandmother's Bag of stories*. The book is a collection of nineteen short stories narrated by grandparents to their children. It is a fresh take on the culture of oral story telling followed in earlier times which with the advent of technology and various sources of entertainment slithered to the background. While spending time with their grandparents and elders, children get to bond more with them and at the same time the gathering also become a mode of sharing the cultural heritage associated with the stories. Albert Einstein points out the importance of storytelling, "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent then read them more fairy tales." (qtd. in Homespun)

One of the happiest childhood memories for most of us is during holidays when we used to visit our grandparents. Our grandmother used to tell us all kinds of magical stories and the warmth of a grandparent spinning tales held us captivated. Sudha Murty reminds us of this memory and everything in it. Her story telling is quite charming and nostalgic. Through her tales, we get to revisit gods, kings, animals, demons, prince and princesses, and saintly men who manage to impart some essential tidbit of everyday wisdom. Lockdown brought a lot of uncertainty in our lives, and kids were equally affected. Ajju and Ajji (grandparents) tried to make these difficult times a bit easier for their grandchildren by taking them to a magical world of stories.

The book begins with Grandparent Ajja and Ajji watching television and listening to the news about spread of corona virus during early March in 2020. The news of self-quarantine and national lockdown makes them worried about their children and grandchildren living in city of Mumbai and Bangalore. To keep the kids safe parents decide to send them to their grandparents a village named Shiggaon. Grandparents Ajja and Ajji are more than happy to have all the grandchildren. They will be staying with them for a while till situation becomes normal during the Pandemic where corona virus is spreading like a wildfire.

Although the story starts in the backdrop of pandemic but the time spent together by grandchildren and grandparents become memorable one for all of them. Meanwhile Ajji's sister Kamlu and her granddaughter Aditi has already arrived at Shiggaon. All the children Raghu, Meenu, Krishna and Anoushka are so happy to get the opportunity to stay together at grandparent's house for there will be no school, no homework and freedom to play.

The day they arrive, they demand Ajji to tell them a story before sleep as she always used to do whenever they visited Shiggaon. Anushka one of the granddaughter affirms: "A story a day keeps all difficulties away... (Murty, 2020)." Ajji agreed smilingly and she starts narrating the story about rice. Rice is part of our daily diet and we can't imagine living without rice or wheat. The children began listening to the story earnestly, just as the quarantine period was formally declared by Prime Minister of India.

'Let us all listen to the story of how rice came to earth,' said Ajji' (10). Ajji informs the kids about the journey of rice from heaven to the earth. The story witnesses the mingling of myths and

legends about heaven, gods and goddesses. Rice according to Ajji was the food of Gods and it was one mortal named Madhav who stole four seeds of rice from heaven. Those were the times when “humans could walk on clouds and wander freely in heaven. (10) This deed of Madhav infuriated Annapurna, the Goddess of grains. Madhav clarifies that his intention was good and he wanted to help his people to have the taste of such delicious food. “This is so much better than what we eat and it makes us energetic too. Wouldn’t you like your children to have this? Please I request you to pardon me.” (14)

Annapurna forgives him but she adds that from now on “no mortal will be allowed to come freely to heaven any more. They will be allowed to do so only after they discard their body at death.” (14)

Who can resist a good story, especially when it's told by grandparents? With the end of this first story all kids are amazed that they never knew how rice came to earth. Sudha Murty in footnotes to the book mentions the tradition of offering the first produce of rice to Goddess Annapurna and other gods. These grains of rice are used during auspicious occasions to be offered to Gods.

Through her simple yet gripping stories Murty has been successful in making kids learn about old traditions which have been followed for long and are the part of cultural heritage. By narrating a story grandparents are able to entertain their grandchildren and at the same time they get to know about the legends and myths related to the origin of all their favorite festivals. Donna Eder in her book, *Life Lessons through Storytelling*, illustrates how stories act to affect children’s sense of ethics and how this knowledge can be applied to the developments of more enlightened curricula that help develop children’s ethical character (qtd. in Cajete, *Global Studies of Childhood*).

Mesmerized by the first story kids want to listen one more story before going to sleep. Now it’s turn of Kamlu Ajji (sister of Ajja) to tell the story about wheat. In this story Kamlu Ajji introduces serpent King and his kingdom terrified by the menace of Eagle. A young boy named Arun helps the Serpent King in killing the eagle and in return as a token of gratitude the serpent king offers him ‘bags of gold nuggets, diamonds and emeralds.’ (22) However, Arun politely refused the gift. He said, ‘I don’t need these expensive stones or metals. If you really want to give me something, please give me a handful of wheat seeds that I can plant and help my fellow men enjoy it too!’ In this manner wheat came from the serpent kingdom to the land of human beings. Through the story of serpent

kingdom and offering wheat seed to Arun as a gift Kamlu Ajji teaches a lesson about gratitude. 'Gratitude is the highest representation of civilization.'(22) By sharing their favorite food with the person who helped them become free from the terror of a giant eagle Serpent kingdom showed his gratitude by sharing their secret and to remember the timely help by Arun to them.

It's important that younger generations should know about the past and their roots. There is no denying the fact that the stories about the Gods and Goddesses, magic, fairy tales and fables have deep rooted archetypal motifs which serves a purpose in the growth and progress of a civilization in some significant way.

Ajja and Ajji ensure that kids during lockdown shouldn't sit idle and divides them duties to help in the household chores. They decide to help the needy people by making masks and food packets. When children see the grownups engaged in helping others in one or other ways they also feel motivated to help others. They also learn the importance of kindness, empathy and being helpful. Kids feel proud that for their grandparents "helping others is more important than other things' (27). The children are excited and felt happy about lending a hand. As a reward for the great work they had done Ajji tells them a story about the beanstalk and magical bean seeds. Through the story kids learn about not to be greedy and earning through hard work.

Next story is told by Ajja about "The Goddess of Luck". Ajja makes clear to kids "I am only telling you this story so you realize how important it is to lend a hand. When we help others, things happen the way they should- almost as if someone is helping you too!" In the story the Goddess of luck rewards with her benevolence a man named Mahesh for not asking "anything for himself, but for others." In return the Goddess of Luck rewards him by gifting him two boxes full of diamonds and gold for being a virtuous and pure hearted man.

Grandfather, Ajja while teaching his grandparents always introduced topics and tied them to a story. He explains the idea behind doing it to Raghu, one of the grandkids. Ajja says: "A long, long time ago, stories were used to teach various subjects and life skills. The thought was that children will find things easier to understand if concepts are explained through interesting stories or anecdotes.... That is the origin of the Panchatantra."

This book features captivating tales and engaging characters that also inculcate values such as sharing, resilience and empathy in children. Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. (qtd. in Cajate, 2017) In the Indian context, there are plenty of stories based on myths which are famous from the ancient times, as we see stories of Panchtantra, Jataka, Kathayen, Betal Pachchisi, VikramBetal, and many other such stories. Panchtantra which was written in Sanskrit in 200 B.C. is still popular. Although the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are epics but their stories are most popular among children. As the Indian mythology is not specifically for children but is most popular among children in the same way in Norwegian collection of folklores.

Next story in Sudha Murty's book is about sibling love. For this she takes the myth of Naga Panchami to show how "the two days in rainy season are dedicated to the worship of snakes. This festival is known as Naga Panchami, and it is a custom for sisters to visit their brothers' homes during this time." (58)

"A Handful of Grains" is the story about helping the small creatures like a mouse. "Four grains of rice can change the world?" A handful of rice can help a small mouse sustain a mouse to live up to a week. "The Mouse that became a Mouse" tells the story of a sage and a mouse. The mouse in his urge to become more and more powerful keeps going to the Sage and becomes cat-dog-lion-ant-snake-man-mouse. The sage finally makes the mouse understand the meaning of life. "Life is an experience. We all face challenges on this journey. Accept what has been given to you." (61)

"A Word of Honour" tells the story of a king who abides his words given to a poor man who lived in a small hut where the King was building his new palace. The king for the sake of his word of honour let him keep his hut.

"April Showers bring May Flowers" teaches the lesson of having faith and being grateful for what we receive from God Almighty and nature. In the story "Two Blind Beggars" the human and animal world intermingle with each other. Through this story children learn the lesson of being at the right place at the right time can change our lives!

Mythical folklores and tales present deep insights into the affective dimension of human learning, socialization in community, and the role of story in the transfer of cultural knowledge and values. Eder, D with Holyan, R (2010) opines that: "The deep psychological mechanisms associated

with myths, stories, and storytelling facilitates the development of not only self-knowledge but also social and communal knowledge on the part of children”. (qtd. in Cajete, *Global Studies of Childhood*)

Ajji and Ajja try to make the lockdown as stress-free and productive as possible for their grandchildren. Between doing simple household chores and making arrangements for the people who have been adversely affected by the lockdown, the elders keep the children entranced with their never-ending stories. Through these tales, we revisit age old myths and legends passed down to us through many generations. The myriad stories told by their grandparents become the biggest source of joy, making the children compassionate, worldly-wise and more resilient than ever.

There is a need to reflect on and develop insights into how stories are internalized and passed on through personal relationships which develop as a result of both peer and intergenerational mentoring. Children’s psychology and social development are enhanced through the telling and processing of stories. Donna Eder (2010) in her book, *Life Lessons through Storytelling*, illustrates how stories act to affect children’s sense of ethics and how this knowledge can be applied to the development of more enlightened curricula that help develop children’s ethical character. (Cajete, *Global Studies of Childhood*)

Stories based on myths and legends of olden times explain what it means to live in community with one another. Sudha Murty’s stories in a simple yet gripping way succeed in explaining the human dependence on the natural world. They reflect on the concerns which are basic *and* crucial to humans’ understanding of themselves. Creation, survival, relationship, healing, wholeness, and death are the consistent themes of myth in every culture, place, and time. In short, myths are everything that the people and community which create them are.

Myths, as human creations, are messages—as well as a way of conscious reflection—which live through the people who share them through the breath of their thoughts, words, and actions. Renowned and bestselling author Neil Gaiman, used a fascinating metaphor:

Reading books are the way we communicate with the dead. The way that we learn lessons from those who are not with us, that humanity has built on itself, progressed, made knowledge incremental rather than something that has to be relearned, over and over. There are tales that are older than most

countries, tales that have long outlasted the cultures, and the buildings in which they were first told (Roue, 2020).

Sudha Murty is the simplest yet beautiful author. Her stories make us smile even in the hardest of times. Her writing style is straightforward and admirable. The book *Grandparents Bag of Stories* teaches us the value of family ties and to stay close to our dear one, to lend a helping hand whenever possible, and to rejuvenate the close tie between grandparents and grandkids and rekindle the tradition of storytelling by grandparents. It reminds us that difficult situations can be dealt better if we have someone to get it through with. Her stories are thought provoking, entertaining and also teach interesting life lessons.

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