



Women Empowerment And Humanitarian Values In Sudha Murty's Children Literature

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Abstract

Sudha Murty, a prominent Indian author and philanthropist, has made significant contributions to children's literature by weaving moral, ethical, and humanitarian values into stories that are simple yet profound. Her works for young readers serve as powerful tools for moral education, promoting empathy, kindness, compassion, and a deep respect for human dignity. This research paper explores the dual themes of humanitarian values and women empowerment as reflected in Sudha Murty's children's stories. Through engaging narratives, Murty introduces children to the importance of treating others with love, respect, and compassion values that are foundational in the study of ethics and axiology. At the same time, she subtly but effectively highlights the strength, resilience, and potential of women and girls, thus planting the seeds of gender equality and empowerment in young minds. Stories such as *The Magic Drum* and *Other Favourite Stories*, *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, and *The Gopi Diaries* feature strong female characters, moral dilemmas, and everyday scenarios that reflect real-world issues. By portraying women as wise, resourceful, and compassionate figures, Murty challenges traditional gender roles and encourages children to view women as equal contributors to society. This paper analyses select stories from Murty's children's books to demonstrate how she uses simple language and relatable plots to instil deep ethical understanding in young readers. Her stories become mirrors of society, encouraging children not only to reflect humanitarian values in their own behaviour but also to recognize and respect the rights and potential of women. Through her literature, Sudha Murty emerges as a guiding figure in nurturing socially responsible and gender-sensitive future citizens.

Keywords: Ethics, humanitarian perspective, humanism, human propensity, philanthropy.

Introduction

The humanitarian perspective, when applied to children's literature, emphasizes nurturing values such as compassion, empathy, respect, and moral responsibility from an early age. It views literature as a powerful tool to shape young minds towards kindness, cooperation, and a deep sense of human dignity. According to the Collins Dictionary, "Humanitarianism is the doctrine that human beings must strive to promote the welfare of their fellow people" [1], and this belief is essential in literature written for children. Children's books across the world from the timeless fairy tales of Europe to African folktales, Japanese fables, and contemporary Indian stories have long been vehicles to instil moral values and humanitarian ideals. These stories not only entertain but also educate children about social justice, emotional intelligence, community, and the importance of helping others, especially in times of crisis or need. Globally recognized children's literature often reflects principles similar to those outlined in the "Principles and Practices of Good Humanitarian Donor ship," which aim to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity [2].

In the Indian context, Sudha Murty's contributions to children's literature are particularly noteworthy. Through her simple yet powerful storytelling, she promotes humanitarian ideals such as kindness, generosity, honesty, and courage. Her stories written specifically for young readers often feature relatable characters who

face moral dilemmas and learn valuable lessons that resonate with children across social and cultural backgrounds. A distinctive element in her writing is the consistent portrayal of strong female characters and themes of women empowerment, which help inspire confidence and independence in young girls. Rather than relying on grand narratives or fantasy, Murty grounds her stories in real-life situations that reflect the ethical struggles and emotional growth of children, encouraging readers to reflect on their own values and behaviour. Her works, such as *The Magic of lost temple*, *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, and *The Gopi Diaries*, demonstrate that children's literature can be both entertaining and transformative, fostering a more humane and compassionate society. In today's fast-paced and self-cantered world, humanitarian values are steadily declining, giving way to materialism, individualism, and emotional detachment. People are becoming more concerned with personal gain than collective well-being, often neglecting compassion and moral responsibility. This global crisis of empathy calls for urgent and long-term solutions, especially through early education and moral development. Children's literature plays a powerful role in addressing this issue by instilling values such as kindness, empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility in young minds. Stories can serve as moral blueprints, shaping children's understanding of human connections, encouraging them to care for others, and preparing them to act ethically in real-life situations.

Around the world, children's books whether drawn from oral traditions, classic tales, or contemporary narratives often serve as mirrors of society and instruments for change. They not only entertain but also educate children about resilience, justice, community support, and human dignity. During global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed acts of humanitarian cooperation that echo the themes often found in children's stories helping those in need, working together, and protecting the vulnerable. Including such themes in children's literature helps young readers grasp the importance of empathy and action in times of need, encouraging them to see themselves as part of a larger, interconnected world. Global initiatives like the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the work of NGOs, and the commemoration of World Humanitarian Day on August 19th by the United Nations highlight the ongoing efforts to preserve human dignity and respond to suffering. These efforts, however, must be supported by a cultural shift that begins at the individual level particularly in how we educate and inspire children. Humanitarian perspectives in children's literature foster a sense of duty toward others and can help create a more compassionate, emotionally intelligent, and socially responsible generation. Literature that reflects shared values and global solidarity reminds us that the world is, at its core, a human family bound together by emotions, empathy, and the collective responsibility to care for one another. Sudha Murty has witnessed the harsh realities of the human world, particularly through her experiences in the corporate sector. Deeply concerned about the decline of humanitarian values, she highlights the shift in people's mind-sets towards materialism and self-interest. Reflecting on her experience, she states, "I have seen that in the corporate world, people who were so simple become so complicated. And they start thinking that money can buy everything"⁴. Unlike many who merely speak of change, Murty actively serves society out of a deep sense of social responsibility. She strives to reform and revive humanitarian perspectives not only through her philanthropic work but also through her widely appreciated short stories for children. These stories are not just narratives; they are moral lessons wrapped in engaging storytelling, aimed at cultivating values like kindness, empathy, honesty, and respect. Through simple language and relatable characters, she introduces young readers to concepts of love, society. Her children's stories are fine examples of how literature can be used to nurture and restore humanitarian perspectives in a world increasingly in need of moral and emotional grounding. Compassion, emotional understanding, and human relationships essential aspects of a humane

1.1 Grandma Bag of Stories

Kaveri and *The thief* revolves around Kaveri, a poor farmer woman who, despite facing poverty, a lazy husband, and the threat of a cunning thief, uses her intelligence, perseverance, and courage to change her life and that of her community. The story opens with a group of city children visiting the paddy fields with their grandfather (Ajja) and grandmother (Ajji), who use the opportunity to teach the children about the realities of farming. Anand's innocent curiosity

"I thought wheat and rice can be just plucked from trees, like mangoes. But today I realized there is so much work in farming" (Murty 23)

This lines reflects the common disconnect between urban lifestyles and the source of food. This scene sets the foundation for the story's deeper exploration of empathy towards farmers and the hardships they face, which is often overlooked. At the heart of the story is Kaveri herself, a woman whose hard work

contrasts sharply with her husband's laziness. When a thief offers her a suspiciously large sum to buy the land, Kavery immediately senses his ill intentions. Rather than simply rejecting him, she cleverly concocts a story about hidden ancestral treasure buried beneath the field, saying

"I will never sell this land. It belonged to my ancestors. ... I am actually looking for hidden treasure!" (Murty 35)

This line reveals Kavery's sharp intellect and resourcefulness. She refuses to be intimidated or deceived and instead uses her knowledge and presence of mind to protect her property this portrayal challenges traditional gender stereotypes by showing a woman as a strategic thinker and protector of her family's interests. After tricking the thief into digging up her field overnight, she benefits from the loosened soil to sow seeds and grow a good crop. Eventually lead to financial stability. To purchase jewellery, symbolizing her rising social her efforts and economic status. When the thief returns disguised as a traveller to rob her, Kavery again outsmarts him by misleading him into destroying her own house, which she had already planned to rebuild. Her laugh-filled declaration to her husband,

"Don't worry. I had planned this all along. I saved money from our last crop to rebuild the house, (Murty 41)

This lines encapsulates her unwavering confidence and strategic mind-set. This sequence emphasizes women's ability to reclaim power even in patriarchal settings where they are often underestimated. The story also highlights the importance of family and community in supporting women's empowerment. Kavery's eventual success not only changes her life but also impacts those around her, including her lazy husband, who is shamed into contributing to the household. The story does not demonize the thief but instead leaves him lost and futile, a contrast to Kavery's thriving life symbolizing that honesty and effort win over greed and deceit. The humanitarian values embedded in the story are inseparable from the theme of women empowerment. Kavery's hospitality towards the stranger, offering him food and water despite her poverty, illustrates compassion and kindness even when faced with potential harm. Her balance of empathy and self-protection teaches children that humanitarianism involves courage and intelligence, not just passivity. Ajji's concluding remark to the children.

The heart of the story is the princess's flaw her insatiable love for new clothes. When the princess notices the admiration others have for a simply dressed girl, she feels a pang of jealousy. In a telling moment, she asks the girl,

"Will you take my dress and give me your sari in return? It is so lovely that people can't take their eyes off it." (Murty 46)

This dialogue illustrates Beena's initial misunderstanding of what truly commands respect she believes outward appearances are everything. The girl's astonishment at the offer underscores the contrast between superficiality and simplicity, making readers reconsider what qualities should be admired. Sudha Murty's story is a subtle critique of consumerism and vanity, which resonates strongly in today's image-conscious world. Women empowerment in this story is portrayed through Beena's growth and realization rather than through traditional heroic deeds. When Beena accepts the goddess's punishment and makes a final wish, she says,

"I will go away, but do grant me one last wish. Turn me into something that will remind everyone about their beloved princess, something they may even find useful." (Murty 55)

This plea reflects her acceptance of responsibility and her desire to leave a legacy that teaches others. The princess's punishment for exchanging the goddess's gift is symbolic: she is transformed into an onion, a humble plant with many layers that bring tears when cut. This metaphor beautifully conveys the complexity beneath external appearances and the pain often hidden behind a seemingly perfect facade. Beena's journey from self-centeredness to self-awareness is not just a personal transformation; it is an allegory for the importance of humility and gratitude in a society that often rewards excess and pride.

2.1 The Magic of the Lost Temple

The protagonist, Nooni, is a young girl whose curiosity and determination drive the plot of the story. She embarks on a mission to uncover the mystery of a lost temple, an adventure traditionally expected to be undertaken by male characters in many stories. From the beginning, Nooni displays a rare courage and confidence, which directly confronts societal expectations about what girls can or cannot do. Early in the story, when her uncle doubts her ability to solve the mystery,

He says sceptically, “Nooni, this is not a game for girls. You should leave this to the men who know more about history.” To this, Nooni confidently replies, “I may be young, but I won’t let anyone stop me from finding the truth. I want to prove that girls can do anything boys can.” (Murty 10)

This exchange is a powerful moment in the narrative, showcasing her resolve and rejecting the limiting beliefs about gender roles. Through Nooni’s character, Murty not only promotes women empowerment but also stresses the importance of self-belief and perseverance. Nooni’s refusal to back down in the face of doubt becomes a symbol of empowerment for young girls who often encounter similar scepticism in real life. Nooni’s reverence for the temple is not just about solving a puzzle; it symbolizes respect for cultural heritage and collective identity. At one point, Nooni says to her friends,

“We must protect the temple, not just for ourselves, but for everyone who values our history and culture.” (Murty 22)

This statement underscores a deep sense of social responsibility and empathy. It reflects an understanding that humanitarianism involves caring for something larger than oneself one’s community, culture, and collective memory. Murty uses Nooni’s interactions with family and villagers to emphasize kindness, patience, and cooperation. These qualities highlight the importance of human connection and collective effort, teaching young readers that compassion and empathy are fundamental in any quest or challenge.

At a critical point, when she is tempted to use a quick but dishonest method to unlock the temple’s secrets, Nooni firmly declares, “I will not cheat or lie. The truth is worth the wait, and I want to solve this with honesty.” (Murty 32) This highlights the theme of moral integrity that runs through the narrative. The story encourages young readers, especially girls, to be curious, ask questions, and rely on their intellect. When Nooni expresses doubt about whether she can succeed, her mother lovingly assures her, “You have the strength to do anything you set your mind to, Nooni. Never let anyone tell you otherwise.” (Murty 39) This dialogue is a powerful reminder of how encouragement and belief within families are foundational to women’s empowerment. It teaches children that support systems, especially within families, are essential to overcoming societal barriers. Nooni’s reverence for the temple is shown in her dialogue with her grandfather, who says “This temple is not just stones and carvings. It is the story of our people and their beliefs.” Nooni responds with understanding, “Then we must protect it with all our hearts, so future generations can know their story too.” (Murty 59) This exchange highlights how respect for heritage is a key humanitarian value that fosters community and identity.

3.1 How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Write

The story traces the granddaughter’s journey to teach her illiterate grandmother to read and write, an act that embodies compassion, empathy, respect, and determination. These qualities, which are foundational to humanitarianism, are instrumental in fostering empowerment, especially for women who have historically been denied access to education due to social, economic, and cultural constraints. When the granddaughter approaches her grandmother and says, “Amma, I want to teach you to read. It is never too late to learn,” (Murty 12) She asserts the idea that education is a universal right and that age should not be a barrier to learning. This moment sets the tone for the entire story, establishing the granddaughter’s role as an agent of change and emphasizing the value of inclusivity and lifelong learning. From a research perspective, this interaction reflects the humanitarian value of respect for human dignity, recognizing that every individual, regardless of age or gender, deserves opportunities for self-improvement and growth. Initially, the grandmother is sceptical and hesitant, mirroring the mind-set shaped by societal norms of her generation. She questions the necessity of literacy, asking, “Why would a grown woman need to learn to read? I have managed all my life without it.” (Murty 22)

This dialogue encapsulates the internalized limitations imposed on women by patriarchal traditions, where literacy was often seen as unnecessary or even inappropriate for women, especially in rural or traditional settings. The granddaughter cheerfully remarks, “You are doing so well, Amma! Imagine, now you can read your own letters!” (Murty 36) This statement acknowledges progress and reinforces the grandmother’s growing self-efficacy. The grandmother’s journey from reluctance to enthusiasm embodies the empowerment process, where acquiring knowledge enhances self-confidence and expands horizons. The story also subtly addresses the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values. The grandmother, once illiterate, becomes an example of resilience and hope, inspiring not only herself but also the wider community. The story challenges gender stereotypes by portraying the grandmother as a woman capable of growth and change despite societal limitations. Her transformation highlights the potential within every woman to break free from imposed restrictions. The narrative champions the idea that women’s empowerment begins with access to education, which fosters economic independence, decision-making power, and self-respect. As the granddaughter lovingly states, “Amma, now you can read stories to me!” (Murty 56) The narrative ends on a hopeful and inspiring note, affirming that education enriches lives across generations and transforms communities.

