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Resonance Of Angst: Bereavement And Psychological Trauma In Sudha Murty's *The Mother I Never Knew*

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Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the psychological dimensions of bereavement and trauma in Sudha Murty's twin novellas, *The Mother I Never Knew* (2014), through the lens of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Pauline Boss's Ambiguous Loss Theory. Sudha Murty's eponymous heroes, Venkatesh and Mukesh endure profound emotional turmoil upon discovering hidden familial truths that subvert their sense of identity and belonging. Their anguish is not for any physical loss by death but for the emotional and symbolic loss of the mother figure and of interpersonal trust. Application of Bowlby's view of attachment as a groundwork for psychological stability and Boss's concept of unresolved grief in the face of ambiguous loss, this research paper interprets Murty's narratives as psychological explorations of separation, guilt, and reconciliation. The paper also situates Murty's empathetic storytelling within the larger psychoanalytic discourse of literature as a space of healing and catharsis. Ultimately, Murty's work represents angst as both a wound and a route toward self-realization, exemplifying how the search for the maternal presence becomes a metaphor for regaining emotional wholeness.

Keywords: Sudha Murty, bereavement, psychological trauma, attachment theory, ambiguous loss, psychoanalysis, motherhood, identity.

Introduction

Sudha Murty, one of India's most acclaimed contemporary writers, is widely known for her passionately articulate narratives that explore familial relationships, moral conflicts, and the ethical fabric of ordinary life. Her repertoire, often written in simple prose, carries complex psychological undercurrents that involve universal human emotions—love, guilt, loss, and forgiveness. *The Mother I Never Knew* (2014) is one of her most contemplative fiction, consisting of two thematically associated novellas that explore the emotional lives of men who shockingly discover mysterious aspects of their biological familial roots. Both Venkatesh and Mukesh the eponymous protagonists embark on parallel journeys to discover facts about their real mothers and, in the process, suffer the pangs, anxieties and woes of their bereavement, sense of being unwanted, destabilizing their lives and identities long buried beneath the disguise of normality.

The dominant concern of both novellas is **bereavement**—not in the literal sense of death, but as a inner experience of loss, displacement, and emotional rupture. As Murty writes, “Sometimes, we lose what we never had; yet the grief is no less real” (Murty, 2014, p. 47). This subtle articulation of loss without death situates her work within the framework of **ambiguous loss**, a concept theorized by Pauline Boss (1999), and aligns with Bowlby’s (1969) understanding of disrupted attachments leading to internalized insecurity and grief. Death settles the loss by acceptance sooner or later but loss without death disrupts the entire life and relationships jeopardizing the identities established in psycho-social space.

This paper argues that *The Mother I Never Knew* presents bereavement as an internalized, psychological condition that occurs from the rupture of filial and maternal bonds. Using Bowlby’s Attachment Theory and Boss’s Ambiguous Loss Theory as interpretive contexts, the study projects how Murty’s protagonists personify the trauma of identity crises and pursuit for emotional closure through self-recognition and compassion.

Theoretical Framework

1. Bowlby’s Attachment Theory: The Psychology of Bond and Separation

John Bowlby (1969) claimed that human beings possess an innate drive to form strong emotional attachments with caregivers, primarily the mother. This attachment provides a “secure base” for psychological development. When such ties are upset or lost, the ensuing anxiety manifests as grief, guilt, and behavioural disorientation. Bowlby emphasized that the absence or rejection of the primary caregiver creates “internal working models” of insecurity and low self-worth, which prevail and continue into adulthood.

In literature, the absence or distortion of maternal attachment often becomes a metaphor for existential anxiety and broken identity. As literary theorist Peter Brooks (1984) observed, “Narrative desire is itself a repetition of the infant’s search for the lost object of attachment” (p. 52). Murty’s protagonists thus mirror this psychoanalytic principle: their journeys are symbolic attempts to reconstitute lost attachments and to mend the internal void created by emotional separation. The quest for their real mothers not only constitute a physical journey but is figurative of their journey inwards leading to self-awareness.

The second theory that supplements the understanding to the narratives is Pauline Boss’s Ambiguous Loss Theory: Grieving Without Closure. Pauline Boss (1999) introduced the concept of *ambiguous loss* to describe losses that lack finality or clarity—when someone is physically absent but psychologically present (as in disappearance or estrangement) or physically present but emotionally unavailable. Boss argues that such losses cause “frozen grief,” thwarting the attempts of persons from attaining closure. This state of incompleteness or uncertainty engenders identity confusion, guilt, and emotional paralysis because the mourner cannot categorize the loss as complete or resolvable.

Murty’s protagonists confront precisely this form of bereavement: their grief is not for death but for a mother denied, unseen, or emotionally inaccessible. Boss’s theory, when applied to Murty’s text, illustrates how emotional ambiguity and incomplete truths about the maternal figure lead to unsettled sadness and a prolonged quest for meaning.

In the first novella, *Venkatesh* the writer renders a touching story about the loss of an unidentified mother. Venkatesh, the protagonist of the first novella, leads an ostensibly secure life until he learns that his biological mother was denied the right to raise him. The disclosure wrecks his identity built over a period and arouses feelings of betrayal, guilt, and longing. His bereavement is unique—it is grief for a relationship that never existed but should have. Murty touchingly portrays his emotional separation: “He

felt as if a part of his childhood had been stolen, not by strangers, but by fate itself” (Murty, 2014, p. 38). His unsettled mind leads him to explore the obscurity of his biological mother and he reaches Bhagavva and his look alike Shankar, a teacher. After the reality dawns on him, he realizes the entire ordeal of Bhagrathi, her desertion by her husband through misunderstanding, miscommunication, the fateful train accident and her attempt at suicide on hearing the news of her husband’s death. Ironically, none of these characters take the efforts to verify the facts that are purely hearsay. The subsequent misconception ruins the lives of Bhagirathi and Shankar forever and affects the life of Setu rao too. Although later Venkatesh tries to compensate for the heavy loss, injustice borne by Bhagavva through financial help, the truth has shattered his life for the years to come. He tries to redress the unpardonable mistake committed by his father but the ties for his real mother are severed forever.

From the perspective of ‘Attachment Theory’, Venkatesh’s tribulation springs from what Bowlby (1980) calls *separation anxiety*. The awareness that his early attachment or affection was unnaturally cut off has serious implications that lead to an internal crisis. Bowlby notes that “the loss of a loved figure arouses anxiety because it threatens the loss of the self that depends upon that figure for security” (p. 39). Venkatesh’s obsessive search for his mother is not purely genealogical—it is an unconscious endeavour to re-establish a missing emotional anchor.

In psychoanalytic terms, Venkatesh’s journey represents the ‘repetition compulsion’ Freud described: the drive to reenact a past trauma in order to master it. His battle with the truth permits him to re-live and re-symbolize the pain of separation, leading toward emotional recuperation. His absolute forgiveness of his foster parents also lines up with Bowlby’s notion of “reorganization,” the final phase of grief where acceptance substitutes anger.

Murty subtly proposes that maternal love remains a sacrosanct presence beyond physical absence. Venkatesh’s acknowledgment, “I have two mothers now, and I love them both in different ways” (Murty, 2014, p. 79) symbolizes the reconciliation of his divided attachments and the resolution of conflicts in personal space. It grants a liberation from the angst and guilt and atonement through sacrifice. This resolution echoes Boss’s (1999) idea that healing from ambiguous loss involves “redefining relationships rather than restoring them” (p. 108).

The second novella, *Mukesh* is a story emotional betrayal and existential damage. Mukesh’s predicament is of a different but equally profound form of bereavement—one caused by emotional betrayal and estrangement. His loss is psychological rather than biological. When he uncovers painful truths within his marriage and social relationships, he experiences what Boss terms *boundary ambiguity*: the confusion of roles and expectations when emotional ties are destabilized. Murty writes, “He felt surrounded by people, yet utterly alone, like a man standing in a crowded station with no destination” (Murty, 2014, p. 121). Mukesh’s grief is more intense as he has been passed on from one mother to another thrice. He is completely wrecked to know that Rupinder is not his real mother but Nirmala Kumari, who gave birth to him out of wedlock and is currently the wife of Minister, Brij Mohan.

Mukesh’s agony and rage of being abandoned, therefore, is not directed at a single person but at the collapse of relational trust—the absence of emotional intimacy and circumstantial dilemma. According to Bowlby (1980), adults re-enact attachment behaviours acquired in childhood; when those bonds of affection are threatened, anxiety and withdrawal ensue. Mukesh’s detachment and guilt demonstrate a breakdown of what Bowlby calls “the secure base function” of relationships. His emotional paralysis reflects the *disorganized attachment* style detected in attachment research, where love and fear coexist.

Boss's framework further demystifies Mukesh's experience. His marriage becomes an instance of *psychological presence but emotional absence or deprivation*—a classic form of ambiguous loss. The failure to bemoan a relationship still intact but emotionally void snares him in lingering pain. Murty depicts this with remarkable psychological precision: "He could not decide whether to cry for what was lost or for what still remained" (Murty, 2014, p. 128). This contradiction captures the essence of Boss's theory, reflects the ambivalence which emphasizes interpretation over closure.

Eventually, Mukesh's journey leads him toward moral and emotional remedy. By accepting agony and seeking self-forgiveness, he achieves what psychoanalytic theorists describe as 'working through'—a process of converting trauma into benevolence and acceptance. Murty's narrative voice reinforces this therapeutic dimension: the catharsis that redefines empathy, introspection, and self-discovery which become instruments of healing.

Thus, Murty's *The Mother I Never Knew* runs at the juncture of psychological realism and moral allegory. Both novellas illustrate the way in which identity is created through relationships and how the absence or distortion of maternal attachment shapes the psyche. The mother figure, whether absent, hidden, or emotionally distant, functions as a metaphor for the lost self.

As is clearly evident, Venkatesh and Mukesh, both forsaken at birth due to unforeseen circumstances have to grapple with complex identity issues. They face the dilemma of belonging and the inevitable internal conflict between their biological families that have been unsafe, unstable and their foster families which continue to provide care, support, identity and social status. The feeling of bereavement and angst unleashes a number of questions about their real identity, the cause of being transferred to foster parentage being the tormenting fact. Moreover, the consequent feelings of insecurity threaten the current stability in every walk of life and disrupt their lives with the poignant question of their real belongingness and if they are really wanted or loved in relationships. Their grief is not pathological but transformative. The search for the mother symbolizes the return to the unconscious source of nurturing, sense of security and belonging—a psychological homecoming. It is essential to re-affirm and align the protagonists to their currently established identities and further overcome the feeling of bereavement and trauma.

Murty's simple language is subtle and intricately illusory as it screens profound emotional turmoil. The author's craftsmanship is noticeable in making the eponymous characters and their families knowingly or unknowingly reconcile to the realities without a façade of melodrama. Her prose mirrors what D. W. Winnicott (1971) described as the "*holding environment*"—a narrative space where readers, like the protagonists, are gently contained as they challenge painful truths. Compensation for loss in both the narratives offers opportunity for redemption and liberation from guilt and trauma. The author's empathetic tone and moral clarity provide what literature often supplies when psychology cannot: the possibility of *narrative healing*.

In both stories, Murty transcends gender stereotypes by showing men as emotionally vulnerable and capable of deep introspection. Intersecting the gender spaces, both the protagonists display exemplary obsession to re-gain love and trust in their filial relationships, and exhibit willingness to acknowledge the painful truths. Their journeys reaffirm that grief, though culturally silenced, is a universal and necessary aspect of psychological growth. Through Bowlby's and Boss's frameworks, we see that their pain is not a symptom of weakness but of human attachment's enduring complexity. Both do not fall into the abyss of depression on confrontation with truth but navigate their lives valiantly to normalcy.

Conclusion

Sudha Murty's *The Mother I Never Knew* is a literary exploration of sorrow without death, loss without absence, and love without possession. Through *Venkatesh* and *Mukesh*, Murty presents bereavement as a condition of the soul—a conflict with emotional truth and the yearning for connection. Using Bowlby's Attachment Theory, their psychological trauma can be read as a disruption of early attachment patterns that leaves them vulnerable to insecurity and guilt. Through Boss's Ambiguous Loss Theory, their prolonged suffering reflects the paralysis of grief without closure and the slow reconstruction of meaning. Threat to security, stability and trust in relationships is efficiently overcome by exploration, acknowledgement and acceptance of reality. Painful truths are transformed to liberating forgiveness, rage to kindness and angst to healing. The storm of emotional upheaval is braved with patience and courage and the families are saved from destruction.

Murty's compassionate portrayal alters bereavement from tragedy into transcendence. As both protagonists learn to integrate love and loss, they personify the essential human capacity to heal through acceptance. The novellas thus affirm what Boss (1999) concludes: "Resilience is not the absence of grief but the ability to live well within it" (p. 146). Ultimately Murty's novellas become work of psychological realism—a testimony to the enduring quest for completeness amidst disintegration.

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