

Socio-Cultural Differences in Sudha Murty's Novel The Mother I Never Knew

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Abstract: Sudha Murty is a writer who contributes to Indian English literature, a field that has been enriched by many renowned Indian English novelists such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jahabvala, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur and Shobhaa De. Through her work, Sudha Murty presents thought-provoking stories that shed light on the ongoing struggles faced by people from all walks of life. She portrays human behavior in a realistic manner and her exceptional storytelling skills allow her to address social challenges that prompt the world to take notice. Sudha Murty's stories revolve around ordinary people and she is renowned for her views on altruism and self-realization. Her latest novel delves into the complexities of being a woman, a mother, and a writer. The novel is a sociological and suspenseful exploration of the theme of maternal abandonment, touching on humanistic values, interpersonal relationships, and the emptiness that comes with being a mother. The book is composed of two novellas that follow the journeys of two men who are in search of their birth mothers. Throughout the novel, Sudha Murty highlights the theme of deception and injustice towards women, making it a central aspect of the book.

Keywords: Human behavior, environment, poverty, rejected, illegitimate, exposed, adoption, hardened, patriarchal, unjustified, sociological and aggravated

Introduction

Indian English literature has a rich and exceptional contribution from women novelists who have focused on various aspects of life and tackled different problems with utmost care. Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jahabvala, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Shobhaa De, and Sudha Murty are some of the notable writers in today's literary world. They present the reality of society and explore issues related to rights, arrogance, responsibility, and different

experiences of existence, as well as the challenges of patriarchal hegemony. Their work is thought-provoking and highlights the importance of ongoing efforts towards social change. Sudha Murty, in particular, writes about the people around her and connects them through her stories. Her work displays compassion for human behavior and her brilliant way of presenting social challenges forces readers to reconsider their perspectives. Her stories deal with the lives of ordinary people and often explore themes of giving and self-realization. Her latest novel, *The Mother I Never Knew*, portrays her loyalty as a woman, a mother, and a writer, and delves into the conflicts of the inner and outer selves of the characters. The novel brings the social mistakes and impure thoughts of society before our eyes and exposes the indignation against women of the weaker sex by the powerful. The novel is notable for its structural innovations, humanistic approach, interpersonal relationships of the characters, and exploration of the inner emptiness of motherhood. The novel is an attempt to fight against the established forms of patriarchy, and while it is written from a male perspective, the undercurrent speaks to the suffering and injustice done to motherhood. The documentary summarizing the novel highlights the injustice done to two innocent mothers, Bhagava and Nirmala, and empowers women to understand their rights and change the mindset of society.

Socio- cultural Differences in Society

Sudha Murty's novel, *A Mother I Didn't Know*, comprises of two short stories that explore the journeys of two men. The novel is skillfully crafted, with a rich interplay of uncertainty and surprise, which keeps readers engaged throughout. In the first novella, Bhagirathi (Bhagava) is mistreated by her husband and mother-in-law, leaving her penniless, widowed and her son orphaned. Venkatesh, her son-in-law who works as a bank executive, is unaware of her existence and sets out to uncover his father's past. Sudha Murty delves deep into the characters' minds, revealing their actions, mistakes, and pain in a genuine and honest manner. The novel is well-structured and captivating, leaving readers eagerly anticipating the next development.

Sudha Murty realistically portrays the respect given to mothers as seen through Venkatesh's gesture of bringing fruit to his stepmother Bhagava. The author paints a vivid picture of Bhagava, a lean Brahmin widow donning a torn white sari and a clean-shaven head, who

struggles with poverty after being abandoned by her family. Despite being deprived of parental, social, and financial support, Bhagava persevered through her difficult life. She was once a beautiful young woman with light complexion and long black hair, and was educated until the fourth grade. Bhagava worked as a cook in Matunga while living with her maternal uncle Gopal in her Shurupari, where she met and married Setu, a distant relative of her neighbor who was studying in Mumbai. Setu was a young, smart, and handsome man, but his mother asked him to stay in Mumbai to prepare for exams shortly after Bhagava became pregnant. During Bhagava's Seemantham ceremony, her mother-in-law whispered to her that the child she carried did not belong to Setu, but rather to Hanuma, Gopal's uncle's son. She sabotages her son's married life with her false messages and orders him to leave her for her infidelity. Setu leaves her and later she learns that her husband died in a train accident. Humanist Shobha De also commented on hypocrisy in relationships: Harmless hypocrisy is okay. Manipulative hypocrisy is not.”² (Human Relations in S.Des Romanen, 197). A woman completely trusts her husband, which makes it very difficult for her to make judgments. A hypocrite, Setu did not tell her that he was alive, nor did he choose to see and care for her. he was encouraged by the dubiousness and relative ambiguity of others' beliefs Sociocultural Differences in Society Sudha Marty's objective work, *The Mother I Didn't Know*, consists of two short stories, examining the quest of two men.

The book is filled with opulent back-and-forth storytelling, creating high expectations for future developments. The interplay of surprise and indecision is the key source of the ongoing story's charisma and vibrancy, showcasing Sudha Marty's cleverness inside and out. In the first novella, Bhagirathi (Bhagava) faces injustice at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law, leaving her impoverished, widowed, and her son orphaned. Venkatesh, her son-in-law and a bank executive, unaware of his stepmother, embarks on a search for his father's past. Sudha Murty delves deep into the characters' minds in both stories, revealing their actions, mistakes, and pain with honesty and sincerity.

Marty realistically portrays respect for mothers by allowing Venkatesh to visit his stepmother Bhagava with fruit. Bhagava is depicted in the foreground as a lean and strong Brahmin widow wearing a torn white sari and with a clean-shaven head, burdened with poverty due to being deprived of parental, social, and financial love by her orphans. Despite being beautiful

in her youth with light skin and long black hair, Bhagava only studied up to the 4th grade. She married Setu, a distant relative of her neighbor who worked as a cook in Matunga and studied in Mumbai while living with her maternal uncle Gopal in Shurupari. Bhagava never claimed her rights and her condition was similar to Vilmati's in Manju Kapur's difficult daughters.

She was a victim of circumstance, as women were often seen as each other's foes. She suffered from the hostile actions of others, which left her traumatized and filled with anger. She was subjected to false accusations and her mother-in-law played dirty politics to secure a higher dowry for her son's marriage. Despite her husband being alive, she carried the heavy burden of being a widow. Her husband unjustly abandoned her, despite her being a chaste and pure virgin. In addition, other factors were considered when constructing the bridge, such as its location and design. (Sanderson, RSCO, LLC. P.11). Sudha Marty portrayed Bhagava as a victim of widowhood who faced numerous social taboos and financial constraints. Fortunately, she was saved by Chouda and left the village behind.

After being wronged by her husband and in-laws, Bhagava moved to Dharwad where she worked as a maid to support herself. She felt a mixture of emotions - embarrassment, anger, and deep hurt - after discovering her husband's infidelity. With no one to turn to, she felt hopeless and attempted suicide by drowning in the river Krishna. In her final moments, she spoke to the river as a mother figure and pleaded for mercy, stating that she was pure and asking for protection for her unborn child. Sudha Marti's portrayal of Bhagava's life highlights the seriousness of the challenges she faced, including being treated as a family curse and being blamed for her husband's death. It shows that while marriage is meant to be a sacred bond, its breakdown can have devastating consequences.

She was also shunned by others. Believing her husband to be dead, she dedicated herself to caring for her newborn, her mother, and cooking for others. Her hands became rough and calloused, and her body stiff from years of hard work. Her son, Shankar, suffered greatly from his father's neglect during his childhood. Despite the hardships, Bhagava's love for Shankar remained strong, and she supported him in becoming an elementary school teacher. Through his job, Shankar was transferred to many places and eventually married a wonderful woman. However, Bhagava continued to endure a difficult life. Records show that Shankar

and his family lived in poverty, with no land of their own, and even his daughter, Mandakini, could only afford to take Mandarin lessons.

Marty contrasts the opulence of the Venkatesh family's house, Anandita, with the hardships endured by Shankar and his mother. Venkatesh enjoys a life of luxury and privilege, while Shankar and Bhagava struggle to make ends meet. The novel reveals that Venkatesh's father, Madhav Rao, is actually Setu Madhav Rao, who changed his name after surviving a train accident. Madhav Rao abandoned his wife and family, but attempted to make amends by sending her a money order, which she did not receive. Setu was very attached to his mother.

The protagonist's husband made several mistakes that had dire consequences. He listened to his mother and abandoned his wife, then remarried Venkatesh's mother. The novel not only portrays the impact of female abandonment but also highlights the importance of self-examination and mistrusting others. Through the novel, the author sheds light on the suffering of women in our country caused by patriarchy and ignorance. After the protagonist's son-in-law Venkatesh searched for her and her son Shankar, he gave her 50 rupees that he had inherited from his father as a form of aid. Venkatesh's daughter, Gauri, is a highly educated and empathetic doctor who donates her own money to help those in need, including Venkatesh himself. Bhagava's life flourished with the help of Venkatesh and Gauri's generosity, which speaks to her resilience. She embodies a modern woman who is educated, compassionate, and will never betray others.

The most prominent feature of the novel is the complexity of its two stories and its theme of injustice against women. *The Mother I Never Knew* portrays the mental crisis of its characters in greater detail and sheds light on how women's rights are suppressed and neglected by men. The mothers in the novel are oppressed and subjugated by a traditional society that disregards their needs and desires. As Anita Desai, the renowned novelist, once said, "Love must be like a tree, it demands nothing, gives everything, and takes no effort. But unable to follow him, his heart shouting a "big no", fighting the tide, fighting it, he knows what the demands are and how much it costs to meet them. Differences in likes, dislikes, and dispositions are removed as immaterial" (Silas Baruch, 6). Nirmala, a victim, has passed her exam, but her period is now late.

After engaging in a premarital relationship, she found herself pregnant and unmarried. Unaware of the repercussions of her actions, she endured immense suffering. She was filled with shame and anxiety about having a child outside of wedlock. She confided in Dulari, who then told her mother, and eventually the news reached her father. To protect her family's honor, her mother sent her away to her father's farm where she gave birth to her child illegitimately, and later remarried following her father's strict advice. This woman was deeply committed in heart and soul. Another story featured in the novel was about Mukesh, the illegitimate son of his biological mother who had abandoned him. He was shocked to discover the truth that he was an adopted child.

The second novella in the book portrays the journey of Mukesh, who was born to Nirmala Kumari, a clueless teenage mother, and was eventually adopted by Rupinder and raised by Sumathi. The author, Sudha Murthy, depicted Nirmala's life as one filled with excessive care and protection from an authoritarian father who wanted her to marry into a powerful family. Despite this, Nirmala fell in love with Anand, a poor college student from another community who was her English teacher. She would bring him food, and one day, he got injured while studying ancient monuments on the outskirts of her village. However, their love story was short-lived as Nirmala became pregnant, and Anand was forced to leave. Mukesh's journey, as an adopted child, is depicted in the novella as he navigates through life with his adoptive mother, Rupinder, and later, his birth mother, Nirmala.

The relationship between the teacher and student took a turn when the teacher unknowingly made a physical advance towards Nirmala, leading them to start spending time together. Nirmala, without realizing it, crossed boundaries and engaged in immoral acts which later caused her suffering. Baruch Silas, a gifted writer and orator, stated that Nirmala faced a difficult choice of abandoning her own child by placing it on the temple steps and keeping it a secret. Her lover remained unknown since her pregnancy. Although it was not entirely her fault, Anand must also be held accountable for not considering the consequences of their love.

The book depicts Rupinder, a compassionate Punjabi woman, who becomes close to Nirmala and learns about her pregnancy. Rupinder, who is unable to have children of her own, becomes Nirmala's savior and her maternal love shines through. Married to a hot-headed

man named Surinder, Rupinder's love for the baby is portrayed in a heart-warming manner. Nirmala, who gives birth to a healthy baby boy, presents Rupinder with a gold chain and requests her to take care of the baby. Overwhelmed, Rupinder asks for the baby's forgiveness and promises to take care of him. She prays that no other woman has to face the same punishment that Nirmala is enduring for her actions.

One of the most shocking scenes in the novel is when Dulari drops a baby down the steps of a temple, and Rupinder comes to the baby's rescue. The author describes a crowd gathering around the baby, and Rupinder claiming that her own baby had died a month earlier, offering to take care of the abandoned child if no one else claims him. Rupinder takes the baby with her to her husband's family in Jalna, Maharashtra, but they are not pleased about having an orphaned child with birthmarks. Even Rupinder's husband suggests leaving the baby at an orphanage or a gurdwara, showing how people can be selfish and disregard the emotions of others.

Lupinder's strong desire to have a child was not shared by her family, and their lack of care towards her son, Az (Mukesh) Munna, was heartbreaking. The family rejected Munna due to a black spot on his right leg, which was believed to bring bad luck. However, Munna found love and acceptance at Sumathi's house. When Rupinder's family decided to move to Amritsar, they didn't want Munna to come with them, and he was left behind. Despite this, Munna grew up to be a confident, innocent and vulnerable child. When Lupinder became pregnant and gave birth to a boy, the family's fortune changed. Munna brought them joy and wealth, and Sumathi's garment business flourished, leading to the establishment of a new factory in Bangalore. Throughout all these changes, Sumathi cherished the gold chain given to her by Rupinder, as a reminder of the love and sacrifice that went into Munna's upbringing.

Munna was overwhelmed with sadness when he learned that he was adopted by Rupinder. His mind was consumed with the desire to meet his birth mother. Upon finding her, he discovered that his father was dying of liver cirrhosis, and his mother worked at Gurupleet. He asked her about his adoption and the reason behind it. Rupinder explained that after her marriage, she was sent to her parents' home and struggled to conceive. Her mother-in-law

constantly belittled her and made her feel inferior. Eventually, she became pregnant but fell ill and was sent to her parents' home to give birth.

The story concludes with Mukesh's successful search for his birth mother, thanks to his intuition. Sumathi decided to take a picture of Neil and Mukesh as a memento of their love before their departure. Rupinder suggested that Sumathi adopt Mukesh, and she agreed. Lupinder urged them to give Mukesh a good education and raise him to be a good person. Although Rupinder was struggling with a difficult home life, an abusive mother-in-law, an alcoholic husband, and a broken family, she sought out Sumathi for a better future for her son. She expressed her despair at having to give him up, but found solace in knowing that Sumathi and Lupinder were friends. Lupinder offered her water to help ease her pain. Regardless of who the mother is, they always want their children to be loved, cared for, and protected. Rupinder also informed Sumathi that Mukesh was born on Buddha Purnima and asked her to feed the poor on that day to celebrate his birthday.

The novel follows the life journey of Mukesh, also known as Munna. From an early age, he was introduced as Rupinder's son to Sumati's family, and they soon grew to love him as their own. Rupinder and Munna frequently visited Sumati's house, and Sumati and her husband Krishna provided Munna with the care and support he needed. Although they knew he was adopted, they kept it a secret from society and their family, who might have treated him differently. Sumati encouraged and supported Mukesh at every step of his life, and his happiness brought Rupinder great joy.

Munna had the opportunity to let go of his distrust and build his self-esteem, embracing his innocence and vulnerability. After Rupinder told her in-laws that she was pregnant, she gave birth to a boy, Munna, who brought immense joy to the family and led to their increasing prosperity. Sumati's garment business grew rapidly every year, and they built a new factory in Bangalore, where they settled. Sumati cherished the gold chain that Rupinder had given to Munna before parting ways.

Munna's revelation that he was adopted left Rupinder feeling sad and distressed. He felt a strong desire to find his birth mother and meet her. After some searching, he discovered that his father Surinder was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver and his mother worked at Gurupreet. He asked her persistently why she had given him up for adoption. Rupinder

explained that after her marriage, she was unable to conceive and was often ridiculed by her mother-in-law. She eventually became pregnant but was told by her mother-in-law to return to her parents' home after giving birth. The story comes to a close when Mukesh, using his clever intuition, is able to locate his birth mother.

Socio-Cultural Theory

John Bowlby, a psychiatrist who worked at a child consultation center in London, proposed attachment theory in his seminal work published in 1958. Through his work with emotionally disturbed children, he gained insights into the psychology of children. Bowlby's attachment theory explains how early separation between mother and child can affect children emotionally.

The storyline reveals how the protagonist's birth parents showed no concern for their son's psychological and emotional well-being as a young child. As the plot unfolds, it is disclosed that the protagonist was twice handed over to Sumathi and Rao Saheb by his biological mother and his parents who kept him for two years. He suffered merciless abuse at a tender age and was easily abandoned by his parents. His heart shatters when he discovers that he was not born out of wedlock and that his parents did not welcome his arrival into the world. As the story progresses, Sumathi shares her past and narrates to Mukesh how she and her husband obtained custody of Mukesh from his biological parents. Sumathi explains that Mukesh's relatively affluent birthplace viewed him as a misfortune for her family and business, except for his birth mother.

Over time, the two families become neighbors and develop a close bond. Mukesh's biological mother, Rupinder, becomes friends with Sumathi and her children, Neil and Munna. However, Rupinder soon realizes that her mother-in-law and husband are abusive towards her and view her son as a bad omen for their family due to a birthmark on his right leg. To escape their toxic environment, Rupinder's family decides to move to Amritsar and start a new business. Unfortunately, Rupinder's mother-in-law and husband insist that she either give up Munna to them or abandon him in an orphanage. Her husband stands by his mother's side, leaving Rupinder to face the difficult decision of parting with her son. Rupinder finds herself in a state of distress and confusion, unable to make a decision about what to do with her son.

The attachment theory perspective highlights the emotional neglect that Munna suffered from both his biological parents and Rupinder's husband and mother-in-law. Initially, Mukesh's biological father showed no interest in his son, while Rupinder struggled to stand up for her son against the abusive behavior of her husband and in-laws. Despite her love for Munna, Rupinder was unable to provide him with the emotional support he needed. In desperation, she turned to Sumathi for help, and after a joint decision, Sumathi and her husband decided to adopt Munna.

Conclusion

The neglect of aging parents by adolescents is a prominent issue in our society, highlighting the importance of attachment and the need to nurture it. In literature, children often exhibit attachment behavior towards their parents, even if they were abandoned as a child, as seen in the protagonist Mukesh's search for his birth parents. The story also showcases socio-cultural differences and how it impacts the behavior towards parents. Despite his situation, Mukesh remains affectionate and caring towards his parents and even extends his care to his girlfriend's mother. This behavior is rare, and it emphasizes the need for attachment in our relationships. When Mukesh finally meets his birth mother Sumathi, he keeps it a secret with Neil and Vasanti. On the other hand, Rupinder and Nirmala's situations show the impact of socio-cultural differences on attachment. Attachment theory plays a crucial role in understanding and nurturing healthy relationships.

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