



MYRIAD SHADES OF HUMAN NATURE: A STUDY OF SUDHA MURTHY'S STORIES

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Padam Shree Sudha Kulkarni Murthy is a well known social worker and author. Among other things, she is known for her philanthropic work through the Infosys Foundation and her campaign to provide all government schools in Karnataka with computer and library facility. She is a prolific writer of fiction both in Kannada and English. Having written the books like *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, *Dollar Bahu*, *Old Man and His God*, *Wise and Otherwise*, *How I Taught My Grandmother and Other Stories* etc., today she, along with writers like Ruskin Bond, R.K. Narayan and Devdutt Pattanaik, is a household name in India so far as the children's literature is concerned. She deservedly received the R.K. Narayan Award for Literature in 2006.

Sudha Murthy has written a number of story books which are meant for children and youngsters. She has a way with words and writes in such a smooth and captivating style that not only the children but grown-up people also enjoy reading her stories. She has a simple and unique style where she blends morality with fun in such a way that children get the message alongwith the enjoyment without being conscious of it.

While reading a story by Sudha Murthy, the reader becomes a part of the gang of youngsters including Raghu, Meenu, Anand and Krishna who surround their Ajji and often get lost in the fictional world of the grandmother's stories. As has been stated earlier, morality and fun go hand-in-hand in Sudha Murthy's stories. For example, in the story "Doctor, Doctor" we have a shopkeeper called Ravi in a small village somewhere near a great desert in India. On a very hot day, Ravi receives a visitor in the form of a very old man in his shop. The old man is so tired and thirsty that he even cannot speak. He somehow opens his mouth to utter the word 'water'. It being an acute drought, the villagers bring water from a faraway stream, making it extremely precious- every drop of it. Ravi offers water to the old man who, very surprisingly, empties the whole pitcher. Ravi is dismayed to

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lose all water but feels a sense of satisfaction also thinking that he had helped someone in real need. His kindness to the old, thirsty man turns the ordinary pot into a magical pot. Whosoever drinks water from this pot is cured of his/her ailments and deformities. And it never gets empty. The shopkeeper and his pot become very famous even in faraway places. Then Ravi turns greedy and starts favouring rich patients to earn a few bucks. One day again the old man returns but instead of quenching his thirst, Ravi goes to the palace to take care of the queen who was exasperated due to a mosquito bite. If Ravi's kindness had given the pot magical powers, his greed turns it into an ordinary pot again. The readers as well as Ravi get their message.

"Five Spoons of Salt" is a story which makes the reader split his sides while it gives a beautiful message to him. This story is about a young girl named Gita who has this embarrassing habit of forgetting things. She leaves the home to bring medicine for her grandfather who has a severe headache but returns home empty-handed after visiting a sweet shop and chatting with a friend for a long time whom she accidentally comes across in the market. She forgets to remove the clothes from the washing line. Instead of taking her sister's lunchbox to school she spends the whole day forgetfully in a circus watching the animals. And, only the smoke billowing out of her room's window reminds her that she had forgotten a shirt under a hot iron. Finally comes the day, when she does not forget to put five spoons of salt in the *sambar*, but then her grandfather, grandmother, her father, brother, and her sister add five spoons of salt each to the *sambar* thinking that Gita would certainly forget her mother's instruction about the five spoons of salt. The story is related in a very delightful way so much so that the reader finds it a pure fun to read it. Besides the fun, Gita learns the lesson of her life and starts behaving like a careful and responsible girl. Almost every story by Sudha Murthy has a separate beginning and closing part which may not directly be related to the story but tells a lot to the reader about the south Indian culture and way of life. This story tells us about *Santhe*, a village market day which is observed once a week. It makes an interesting reading how the seven children undertake an on foot journey to *Santhe* in the company of Damu, who is Vishnu Kaka's right-hand man. Damu tells them the story on their way to the market. Again, we have Indian culture and morality at display when at the end of the story a fruit vendor refuses to accept money from



Ajja because he was an old student of Ajja and his conscience does not allow him to take money from his teacher. He says:

After all you were my master ji, my teacher. Can't I give seven mangoes as gifts to your grand children? They are from my garden, not that I purchased them. (Grandma's Bag of Stories, 123)

In her book *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* Sudha Murthy tells her stories in a colloquial way and strikes a rapport with the reader straightaway. Her style of telling stories-within-story definitely marks the beginning of a new and charming way of storytelling in the history of children's literature. The story "A Journey through Desert" begins with the reminiscent author telling a tale from her own past.

She recounts how she met two identical twins in a workshop where she used to get her car serviced from. Ram and Gopal, the fatherless boys, work as errand boys in the workshop and they can't afford the school education as they belong to a very poor family. In spite of all the difficulty they face, they keep smiling. The author starts visiting them on regular intervals and she tells them quite a few stories. With the passage of time she hires a driver and stops going to the workshop, thus forgetting the boys completely. After a decade or so, one day her driver tells her about a garage owner who was inquiring about her. Out of her curiosity, she pays a visit to the garage and to her pleasant surprise finds one of the twins as owner. Ram, the owner, tells her that one of her stories had changed his life. The story was about two boys who decided to cross a big desert to go to the next town where according to the elders the life was better and the future more promising. The elders advised them to pick up stones from the desert and carry them to that town. Some buyers would pay money for those rare stones. The boys carried food and water and did not feel tired in the beginning. The sun rose over their heads and the sand under their feet became hot. After walking for a few hours they thought that they had reached the edge of the desert and finished their food and water. After some time they realized they had covered only half the way. They picked up stones and their bags became very heavy. One of the boys lost his heart and decided to go back. The other continued to walk towards his destination. It was a difficult journey and he had his doubts. But faith and hope kept him going and ultimately he reached the town. He was disappointed to find that this was just another town and there was nothing special about it. He yearned to return but it was already dark and he decided to



spend the night in the town. In the morning he opened his bag to throw away the stones. He couldn't believe his eyes when he found that the stones had turned into diamonds. The brothers had enjoyed the story but Ram had got his message too. He says to the narrator: Do you remember Madam, you also told us the meaning of the story? A student's life is like the desert, examinations are the hot sun, difficulties are like the warm sand and study is like hunger and thirst. As a student you have to travel all alone collecting knowledge and skill the way the boy in the story collected stones. The more you collect the better is the life you lead later. (How I Taught... 76)

There is another story in this story which explains the mental state of Gopal, the other boy. He is compared to a jackal in the desert that on looking at his large shadow in the early morning sun decided that he would hunt a camel for his afternoon meal. He kept searching for a camel without paying any attention to the smaller animals that he could easily catch. At noon he looked at his shadow again and found that his shadow had become even smaller than his actual size. He dropped the camel idea and started for a mouse.

Though these stories by Sudha Murthy are meant for children, yet these stories are no less entertaining and educative for any grown-up reader. One is transported to one's childhood where there are green, grassy fields, ponds, canals, village streets, marriages, festivals, rituals, uncles, aunts, grand-parents and a group of lovable youngsters, who have arrived in the calmness and serenity of a sleepy village somewhere in south India from the hustle and bustle of a metropolitan city. These are refreshing stories about ordinary people told in an extraordinarily simple and impressive style. These stories, besides being interesting and entertaining, have astonishing lessons to reveal. We have examples of both incredible generosity and unbelievable meanness which define general human nature on this planet. They showcase the myriad shades of human nature.

WORKS CITED

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3. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudha_Murthy>