

**ETHICS, EDUCATION, AND EVERYDAY NARRATIVES: A CRITICAL
STUDY OF SUDHA MURTY'S *HOW I TAUGHT MY GRANDMOTHER TO
READ AND OTHER STORIES***

Archana Singh

Research Scholar,
Department of English
Jai Prakash University
Chhapra, Bihar

Dr. Suruchi Upadhyay

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
DAV PG College, Siwan
A Constituent College of Jai Prakash University,
Chhapra

Abstract

This paper offers a critical study of Sudha Murty's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories*, a collection that exemplifies the pedagogical and cultural functions of Indian children's literature. Rooted in the country's long tradition of oral storytelling, the book sustains the dual purpose of delight and instruction by weaving entertainment with ethical reflection. The study investigates the collection's ethical, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions through a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in textual analysis and supported by comparative references to authors such as Ruskin Bond and Devdutt Pattanaik. Murty's background, shaped by the Gandhian ethos of "simple living and high thinking" and her engagement in philanthropy, informs her literary vision of compassion, humility, and social responsibility. The narratives dramatize values such as honesty, kindness, literacy, and selflessness through ordinary characters and relatable contexts, thereby transforming everyday incidents into moral parables. The analysis further highlights Murty's narrative style, characterized by clarity, brevity, and accessibility, enhanced by oral storytelling techniques, symbolism, and respect for the reader's interpretive intelligence. The reception of the collection demonstrates its widespread appeal, with stories integrated into school curricula and recognized as tools for moral and social education. Awards and national honors reinforce her cultural significance, underscoring the broader impact of her writing. The study situates Murty as a central voice in contemporary Indian children's literature, bridging traditional storytelling with modern educational and cultural concerns.

Keywords: children's literature, moral instruction, pedagogy, Indian storytelling, literacy, cultural values

Introduction

Children's literature has historically functioned as both a source of delight and a vehicle of instruction, offering imaginative entertainment while simultaneously shaping moral and cultural awareness. In the Indian context, this dual purpose has been deeply embedded within oral storytelling traditions such as the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*, along with countless regional folktales. These narratives, as scholars like Meena Khorana observe, were never meant solely for amusement; they also served to transmit ethical lessons and communal wisdom across generations. The moral economy of these tales—where virtues are rewarded and vices punished—created a cultural foundation for later written works for children. In contemporary times, children's literature faced the task of preserving this heritage while responding to shifting realities. The forces of globalization, the dominance of digital media, and evolving pedagogical frameworks have reshaped the expectations of young readers. Scholars such as Viney Kirpal emphasize that modern children's texts must combine "didactic purpose with narrative appeal" to remain relevant in today's educational landscape. Writers therefore confront the challenge of crafting stories that are culturally grounded yet responsive to global influences. Within this context, Sudha Murty has emerged as a defining literary figure. Her widely acclaimed collection *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* illustrates her distinctive approach: linguistic simplicity, moral clarity, and cultural authenticity. Critics such as Hajira Banu argue that Murty "wraps values in attractive envelopes," allowing ethical instruction to emerge organically from engaging plots. By blending traditional storytelling techniques with contemporary sensibilities, Murty reinforces the enduring pedagogical and cultural role of children's literature in India.

Objectives, Methodology, and Scope of the Study

This study aims to critically examine Sudha Murty's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* by exploring its ethical, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions in the context of Indian and global children's literature. The objectives include analyzing the values embedded within the stories, investigating the narrative strategies employed to sustain children's engagement, and assessing the collection's role in shaping young readers' worldviews in an increasingly globalized and digital age. To achieve these aims, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis. Each story is studied in detail to identify recurring themes, symbolic elements, and the moral frameworks that guide the narrative arc. A comparative lens further strengthens the analysis by situating Murty's approach alongside the writings of other prominent figures in Indian children's literature such as Ruskin Bond, whose stories emphasize nature, innocence, and simplicity, and Devdutt Pattanaik, whose mythological retellings highlight cultural symbolism and historical depth. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly essays, and critical commentaries, are also incorporated to contextualize Murty's work within larger academic debates, with all references documented according to MLA 9 guidelines. The scope of this paper is deliberately circumscribed, focusing primarily on *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* while occasionally drawing comparative insights from Murty's broader oeuvre. This focused approach allows for a concentrated examination of how a single collection encapsulates Murty's literary philosophy of simplicity, moral clarity, and cultural rootedness, while also reflecting her pedagogical intent. By narrowing its attention to one text, the study highlights the ways in which

Murty successfully bridges India's oral storytelling heritage with contemporary concerns, positioning her as a key voice in shaping the ethical and cultural imagination of young readers in India.

Sudha Murty's Background and Literary Vision

Sudha Murty, born in 1950, is a multifaceted personality whose career spans engineering, literature, and philanthropy. Trained as an engineer, she broke significant barriers by becoming the first woman engineer employed by TELCO, a pioneering achievement that reflected both her determination and her ability to challenge social norms of her time. Her transition from engineering to literature and social service was deeply influenced by her upbringing in Karnataka, a region rich in oral storytelling traditions that have shaped generations through tales of morality and wisdom. As Menon observes, Murty's early life in a household committed to the Gandhian principle of "simple living and high thinking" nurtured values of humility, empathy, and service, which later became central to her writings and philanthropic endeavors. Her co-founding of the Infosys Foundation provided a platform where her literary commitments and social consciousness intersected. Through this foundation, Murty has not only championed education, healthcare, and rural development but has also emphasized storytelling as a form of moral engagement. She consistently treats writing to cultivate compassion, empathy, and ethical reflection among readers. Critics such as Chatterjee and Khan note that Murty's strength lies in her ability to "think like a child," a quality that enables her to weave humor, simplicity, and relatability into narratives while embedding moral insights in ways that feel organic rather than imposed (Chatterjee and Khan 212). This synthesis of authenticity and didactic purpose accounts for the enduring popularity of her stories in classrooms and households alike, ensuring her position as one of the most influential voices in contemporary Indian children's literature.

Overview of the Collection

Sudha Murty's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* is a collection of twenty-five narratives that seamlessly weave together entertainment and moral instruction. Many of these stories are rooted in Murty's personal experiences and observations, lending them an air of authenticity that resonates strongly with readers of all ages. The title story, the most celebrated in the collection, portrays a young girl teaching her illiterate grandmother to read, thereby dramatizing the transformative power of literacy, and highlighting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Through this poignant tale, Murty underscores how education can liberate individuals and bridge social and generational divides. Beyond the title story, the collection explores recurring themes such as honesty, humility, kindness, selflessness, and the dignity of labor. Ordinary characters—students, villagers, teachers, and family members—become the vehicles through which profound moral lessons are conveyed. As Kher observes, "each narration of Sudha Murty is akin to a precious gem imparting the light of wisdom and values" (Kher 3). Unlike prescriptive moral essays that tend to preach, Murty's stories dramatize values through lived experiences and familiar situations. A simple act of generosity, a child's perseverance in the face of hardship, or a subtle critique of social inequality becomes the narrative foundation for moral reflection. By situating ethical dilemmas within everyday contexts, Murty not only preserves the traditional pedagogical function of storytelling but also makes it accessible to contemporary readers. Her ability to transform the commonplace into

moral parables has ensured the enduring relevance of the collection in classrooms, households, and cultural discourse on children's literature.

Thematic Concerns: Ethics, Culture, and Empowerment

A central thematic axis of the collection is morality and ethical instruction. Murty's stories consistently highlight virtues such as honesty, humility, perseverance, and kindness, which she frames as the cornerstones of a meaningful life. Importantly, she avoids abstract sermonizing, allowing values to emerge through character choices and consequences. Education, particularly literacy, occupies another key theme. The story of the grandmother's empowerment through reading underscores the democratizing force of education, especially for women who were historically denied such opportunities. Her celebration of Indian culture and heritage is equally notable. Festivals, regional foods, and village life form the backdrop of several narratives, giving young readers a sense of cultural identity while also serving as cross-cultural education for non-Indian readers. Simultaneously, Murty addresses issues of empathy and social awareness, encouraging readers to confront realities such as poverty, gender inequality, and environmental responsibility. As Menon notes, her fiction "encourages children to develop moral values and become socially responsible individuals" (Menon). These thematic concerns converge to create a corpus that is at once pedagogical, entertaining, and socially engaged.

Narrative Style and Techniques

Sudha Murty's narrative style is distinguished by its clarity, brevity, and accessibility, qualities that render her stories both engaging and pedagogically effective. As Dumpala notes, her prose consciously avoids unnecessary complexity, instead relying on "natural dialogues, brisk pacing, and gentle humor" to capture and sustain the attention of young readers. This stylistic simplicity does not equate to superficiality; rather, it demonstrates Murty's sensitivity to her audience, ensuring that profound ethical lessons are communicated in a manner that children can readily grasp. One of the hallmarks of her style is her respect for the intelligence of her readers. She refrains from heavy-handed moralizing, allowing values to emerge naturally through the unfolding of events and character interactions. In this way, Murty promotes active reflection, encouraging children to infer meaning rather than passively absorb didactic lessons. Her frequent use of oral storytelling techniques, including conversational dialogues, proverbs, and episodic structures—further enhances this effect, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and familiarity reminiscent of traditional tales narrated by elders. Symbolism is another important dimension of Murty's style. Literacy, for example, often symbolizes empowerment and liberation, as seen in her widely anthologized title story. Likewise, acts of generosity or kindness function as metaphors for moral wealth, emphasizing that ethical richness surpasses material gain. By balancing simplicity with symbolic resonance, Murty crafts narratives that are approachable for children while offering interpretive depth for teachers, scholars, and parents. This stylistic balance explains the enduring relevance of her stories across both educational and cultural contexts.

Reception and Pedagogical Value

The enduring popularity of Sudha Murty's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* demonstrates the breadth of her appeal among both children and adults. The collection is

admired not only for its engaging storytelling but also for its ability to communicate ethical clarity and cultural rootedness. Many of her stories have been integrated into school curricula, where they serve as valuable tools for fostering reading habits and encouraging students to think critically about moral choices. By presenting relatable characters in everyday situations, Murty enables readers to reflect on values such as honesty, empathy, and perseverance without the burden of overt didacticism. Her writing also carries a strong pedagogical dimension, making it relevant for educators and parents who seek literature that both entertains and instructs. The simplicity of her language, combined with the depth of her themes, ensures that her stories remain accessible to children while offering meaningful insights for adult readers. This dual resonance allows her work to transcend age boundaries, positioning her as a bridge between traditional storytelling practices and modern educational needs. Murty's cultural significance is further reflected in the recognition she has received through awards and honors that celebrate her literary achievements and her broader contributions to society. Such acknowledgments affirm her place as a writer who combines creativity with social responsibility. Her influence operates on multiple levels—captivating audiences, enriching pedagogy, and contributing to the cultural discourse on values—making her one of the most influential figures in contemporary Indian children's literature.

Conclusion

Sudha Murty's *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* stands as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature, embodying the delicate balance between storytelling and pedagogy. Drawing from India's rich oral traditions, Murty reinterprets timeless values of honesty, humility, compassion, and perseverance within contexts that are accessible to modern readers. Her stories highlight the transformative power of literacy, the importance of ethical living, and the relevance of cultural identity in shaping young minds. By presenting everyday characters engaged in moral dilemmas, she bridges the gap between traditional fables and contemporary experiences, thereby ensuring that children not only enjoy the narratives but also internalize their lessons. Her narrative style—marked by clarity, simplicity, and symbolic resonance—further enhances the pedagogical value of the collection. Rather than imposing values through overt moralizing, Murty allows them to emerge naturally from actions and consequences, respecting the intelligence of her young readers. This approach makes her works suitable for use in educational contexts while simultaneously appealing to parents, teachers, and general audiences. The reception of the collection, including its integration into school curricula and recognition through awards, affirms Murty's cultural and literary impact. This study demonstrates that Murty's work not only preserves the legacy of Indian storytelling traditions but also adapts them to contemporary social and educational challenges. In doing so, she positions herself as a defining voice in Indian children's literature—one whose stories continue to nurture imagination, moral awareness, and cultural pride across generations.

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