

# TRANSCENDING PATRIARCHY: INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM IN SUDHA MURTHY'S LITERARY CORPUS

Niyati S Vadher<sup>1\*</sup>, Ruchi V Joshi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Research Scholar, School of Arts & Humanities, Dr. Subhash University, Junagadh, Gujarat. Email: vadherniyati9@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, School of Arts & Humanities, Dr. Subhash University, Junagadh, Gujarat. Email: ruchi.joshi@dsuni.ac.in

## ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, and *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017), examining how her female protagonists navigate and transcend patriarchal constraints through emotional resilience, epistemic agency, and grassroots activism. By emphasizing psychological subjugation, socio-cultural resilience, and ethical resistance, Murthy redefines womanhood as a dynamic negotiation of power and dignity. Employing a comparative feminist framework, the analysis situates Murthy's realism alongside Indian authors like Mahasweta Devi and Anita Desai, and global voices such as Alice Walker and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, embedding her work within transnational feminist discourses (Desai, 1980; Devi, 1997, 1998; Walker, 1982; Adichie, 2014). The study highlights Murthy's narratives as interventions addressing human rights issues—gendered servitude, caste-based exploitation, elder neglect, and marginalized invisibility—offering epistemological insights into oppressed women's realities. Additionally, it explores the relevance of Murthy's texts in cyber feminist and AI-era gender studies (Haraway, 1991; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Benjamin, 2019), critiquing algorithmic patriarchy and advocating for inclusive technological frameworks. This research enriches postcolonial feminist literature and digital humanities, positioning Murthy's work as a cultural testimony and feminist praxis in an AI-mediated world.

**KEYWORDS:** Intersectional Feminist Narratives; Postcolonial Gender Politics; Cyber – feminism and Algorithmic Invisibility

## INTRODUCTION

Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 1988), *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017), and *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002) redefine womanhood in postcolonial Indian literature through narratives of resilience, agency, and intersectional feminist ethics. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's transition from domestic subordination—"He didn't need a partner. He needed a shadow" (Murthy, 1988, p. 147)—to academic independence critiques patriarchal marital structures and asserts intellectual selfhood. *Three Thousand Stitches* exposes caste-based exploitation of Devadasis, with survivors' testimonies—"We were not considered human. We were ornaments in temples and dirt in society" (Murthy, 2017)—highlighting restorative justice through collective resilience and social reintegration. *Wise and Otherwise* addresses elder abandonment, as seen in the dismissal, "I have no time to waste on old people. I've got meetings" (Murthy, 2002), critiquing utilitarian neglect in capitalist and AI-driven contexts. Murthy's realist feminism portrays diverse women spanning class, caste, and age as agents of moral clarity and epistemic resistance, reconfiguring empowerment as a relational process. Her narratives engage postcolonial gender discourses (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) while addressing contemporary issues of digital exclusion and algorithmic patriarchy (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Benjamin, 2019), positioning literature as a counter-discursive archive for marginalized voices. This study underscores Murthy's contribution to feminist scholarship, emphasizing how her characters' quiet revolutions through education, dignity, and ethical resilience resonate with global concerns for social justice and equitable technological frameworks (Gilligan, 1982; Adichie, 2014).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly discourse on feminist Indian literature has increasingly recognized regional voices and realist narratives addressing gender, caste, and socio-economic disparities, with Sudha Murthy's works *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, and *Wise and Otherwise* gaining attention for their subtle yet incisive socio-political critiques (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017). Feminist scholarship on Indian English fiction frames strategies of quiet resistance (Bande, 2015), exemplified by Shrimati's intellectual erasure in *Gently Falls the Bakula* and by the rehabilitative focus on Devadasi women in *Three Thousand Stitches*, which contrasts Mahasweta Devi's radical subaltern portrayals (Devi, 1997) by emphasizing dignity and narrative memory. Inclusive representations of Indian womanhood (Rajan, 1993), encompassing caste, age, and rurality, find resonance in Murthy's diverse characters, who challenge gendered invisibility (Menon, 2012) in *Wise and Otherwise*. Globally, Murthy's narratives align with Alice Walker's womanist ethos (Walker, 1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's intersectional feminism (Adichie, 2014), foregrounding everyday acts of agency through education and moral courage. However, a critical gap persists in exploring Murthy's relevance to digital and cyber feminist discourses, particularly concerning algorithmic exclusion, as articulated in work on commercial classification bias

(Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018) and embedded hierarchies in technology (Benjamin, 2019). This study addresses this dual lacuna by analyzing Murthy's realist feminism and its intersections with digital ethics and AI-driven socio-political critique (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997), enriching feminist literary and interdisciplinary scholarship.

**Theoretical Framework:** This study employs an interdisciplinary framework integrating intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1989), postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988), cyber feminism (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997), and narrative ethics (Nussbaum, 1995) to analyze Sudha Murthy's portrayals of women, examining how her narratives address gender, caste, class, and technological marginality while fostering epistemic justice and moral imagination in postcolonial and AI-mediated contexts.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

**3.1 Research Objective:** To critically examine how Sudha Murthy's narratives in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Wise and Otherwise*, and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017) reimagine womanhood through resilience, ethical agency, and intersectional empowerment, situating her feminist realism within Indian and global literary traditions (Desai, 1980; Walker, 1982; Devi, 1997) while exploring its relevance to digital and AI-driven gender discourses (Haraway, 1991; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Benjamin, 2019).

**3.2 Research Question:** How do Sudha Murthy's narratives in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Wise and Otherwise*, and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017) construct feminist subjectivities through resilience, moral agency, and intersectional resistance (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1988), and what insights do they offer for postcolonial, intersectional, and cyber feminist discourses in addressing digital gender justice and AI ethics (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997; UNESCO, 2021)?

**3.3 Methodology:** This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, utilizing close textual analysis, narrative analysis, thematic coding, comparative literary mapping, and a multi-theoretical feminist framework (intersectionality, postcolonialism, cyber feminism, and narrative ethics; Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995) to explore gender representations in Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Wise and Otherwise*, and *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017).

#### 3.3.1. *Gently Falls the Bakula*: Intellectual Silencing and Epistemic Reclamation

Shrimati's character arc in Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 1988) exemplifies the subtle yet profound erasure of women's intellectual identities within patriarchal marital structures. Initially depicted as an academically gifted individual, Shrimati is gradually relegated to the domestic periphery, overshadowed by her husband Shrikant's corporate ambitions. The poignant observation, "He didn't need a partner. He needed a shadow" (Murthy, 1988, p. 147), encapsulates the gendered asymmetry in emotional labor and recognition, where Shrimati's intellectual potential is subsumed to support Shrikant's ascent in the capitalist patriarchy of India's IT sector. This dynamic reflects feminist critiques of marriage as an institution that often demands women's emotional and intellectual sacrifice without reciprocity (Hochschild, 1983).

Shrimati's eventual decision to pursue a PhD abroad marks a pivotal act of epistemic resistance, reclaiming her agency and self-worth through education. This transition aligns with the concept of "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988), where patriarchal structures silence women's voices and knowledge. Shrimati's departure from marital constraints serves as a metaphor for liberatory education feminism, echoing calls for universal feminist empowerment (Adichie, 2014). Her journey parallels Bim's confrontation with familial expectations in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (Desai, 1980), where both characters resist the emotional labor imposed by patriarchal norms. In the context of an AI-dominated knowledge economy, Shrimati's assertion of intellectual autonomy reconfigures education as a form of feminist empowerment (Crenshaw, 1989; Wajcman, 2004), challenging the gendered exclusion from technological and intellectual capital. This narrative positions Shrimati as a symbol of resilience, redefining womanhood through self-determination and epistemic agency.

#### 3.3.2. *Three Thousand Stitches*: Caste, Sexual Exploitation, and Narrative Healing

In her semi-autobiographical work, *Three Thousand Stitches*, Sudha Murthy illuminates the systemic marginalization of Devadasis, exposing the nexus of caste-based sexual exploitation and gendered violence (Murthy, 2017). Her narrative foregrounds the lived experiences of these women, encapsulated in their poignant testimony: "We were not considered human. We were ornaments in temples and dirt in society" (Murthy, 2017). This statement underscores the dehumanization embedded in their social positioning, where their bodies are commodified within religious and societal frameworks.

Murthy's account of the Devadasi rehabilitation project articulates a model of compassionate feminism, emphasizing empowerment through education, collective dignity, and social reintegration (Murthy, 2017). This approach fosters relational resilience, offering a framework for ethical rehabilitation that prioritizes community-based recovery and caste justice. Her work extends feminist discourse by integrating intersectional perspectives on systemic oppression, aligning with global feminist frameworks such as Alice Walker's womanism (Walker, 1982), which advocates for community-driven justice.

Parallels can be drawn with Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and *Draupadi* (Devi, 1997, 1998), where lower-caste women's bodies serve as sites of oppression. However, Murthy (2017) diverges from Devi's radical narrative style (Devi, 1997), opting instead for a restorative approach that amplifies suppressed voices through narrative visibility, resonating with cyber feminist principles (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997). By centering the Devadasis' collective reclamation of agency, Murthy's work contributes to a broader understanding of rehabilitation as a tool for dismantling systemic human rights violations (Crenshaw, 1989; UN Women, 2020), offering a nuanced addition to contemporary feminist scholarship.

### 3.3.3. Wise and Otherwise: Gendered Neglect, Moral Labor, and Emotional Survival

Sudha Murthy's *Wise and Otherwise* presents a series of vignettes that critique the ethical erosion within contemporary familial and social frameworks in Indian society (Murthy, 2002). A striking example is the abandonment of an elderly father, encapsulated in the dismissive remark: "I have no time to waste on old people. I've got meetings" (Murthy, 2002). This act reflects a pervasive emotional utilitarianism, where intergenerational obligations are subordinated to individual priorities, signaling a broader violation of ethical and relational duties (Beauvoir, 1970; Nussbaum, 1995).

Murthy's narratives center women as both caretakers and victims of systemic neglect, yet their resilience manifests through moral steadfastness rather than material resistance. This aligns with frameworks of narrative ethics (Nussbaum, 1995), where moral imagination underscores the quiet heroism of survival. Through choices to educate, care, or persevere, Murthy's female characters redefine womanhood as relational, intelligent, and transformative, embodying a feminist realism that eschews spectacle for understated defiance (Menon, 2012; Gilligan, 1982).

This portrayal resonates with the subdued strength of Anita Desai's female characters (Desai, 1980), who find power in silence and stillness, while contrasting with the overt activism of writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Adichie, 2014) or Mahasweta Devi (Devi, 1997). Murthy's micro-narratives illuminate normalized emotional and social violations, paralleling concerns in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985), where utilitarian ideologies suppress empathy. By foregrounding lived ethics and non-hegemonic resilience, Murthy's work contributes to feminist scholarship, reimaging empowerment as an act of quiet, cumulative transformation within oppressive structures.

## 4. Thematic Chart

| Theme                       | Text & Quote                                                                                                | Character               | Feminist Interpretation                                                                                      | Comparative Feminist Reference                                            |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional Silencing         | "He didn't need a partner. He needed a shadow." (Gently Falls the Bakula)                                   | Shrimati                | Represents the intellectual and emotional erasure of women in marriage; self-exile as a feminist choice.     | Anita Desai's <i>Clear Light of Day</i> —Bim's intellectual isolation     |
| Caste Oppression & Recovery | "We were not considered human. We were ornaments in temples and dirt in society." (Three Thousand Stitches) | Devadasi survivor       | Highlights intersectional caste and gender-based dehumanization, reversed through education and solidarity.  | Mahasweta Devi's <i>Draupadi</i> —Dalit trauma and resistance             |
| Generational Neglect        | "I have no time to waste on old people. I've got meetings." (Wise and Otherwise)                            | Abandoning son          | Symbolizes the commodification of human relationships in capitalist patriarchy.                              | Alice Walker's <i>Everyday Use</i> —Generational disconnection            |
| Education as Liberation     | "Education is the only real wealth you can own." (Three Thousand Stitches)                                  | Women in rehabilitation | Education as feminist praxis; empowers voiceless women to reclaim agency and identity.                       | Malala Yousafzai's memoir—Education as a weapon                           |
| Quiet Resilience            | "The pain doesn't go away, but I have learnt to live beyond it." (Wise and Otherwise)                       | Widow                   | Emotional strength not as victimhood but as sustained ethical living—subverting the stereotype of passivity. | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's <i>Purple Hibiscus</i> —Kambili's quiet revolt |
| Cultural Respectability     | "People think Vilasa is not a woman anymore. We never had that dignity." (Three Thousand Stitches)          | Vilasa, Devadasi leader | Challenges norms of respectability and womanhood imposed by caste-patriarchy.                                | Simone de Beauvoir's <i>The Second Sex</i> —Myth of femininity            |
| Invisible Moral Labour      | "She cleaned the house, fed the family, and still no one remembered her birthday." (Wise and Otherwise)     | Unnamed domestic wife   | Spotlights unpaid care work and emotional labor that undergird patriarchal economies.                        | Silvia Federici's <i>Wages Against Housework</i>                          |

| Theme                  | Text & Quote                                                                    | Character               | Feminist Interpretation                                                       | Comparative Feminist Reference           |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Self-Worth Over Status | “Success is not about money; it is about dignity.”<br>(Three Thousand Stitches) | Sudha Murthy (narrator) | Reorients feminism from material gain to ethical value and community dignity. | bell hooks’<br>Feminism is for Everybody |

## 5. Identifying Human Rights Violations

Sudha Murthy’s *Gently Falls the Bakula* (Murthy, 1988), *Three Thousand Stitches* (Murthy, 2017), and *Wise and Otherwise* (Murthy, 2002) critically explore gendered injustices in postcolonial India, addressing marital emotional servitude, caste-based sexual exploitation, elder abuse, and educational/digital exclusion. Through feminist realism, Murthy’s narratives align with intersectional, postcolonial, and cyber feminist frameworks (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997), contributing to global discourses on social justice and digital equity (UN Women, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati’s subordination to her husband’s ambitions—“He didn’t need a partner. He needed a shadow” (Murthy, 1988, p. 147)—reflects emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Her pursuit of a PhD abroad signifies intellectual agency, resonating with feminist ethics advocating equitable partnerships (Gilligan, 1982). *Three Thousand Stitches* depicts Devadasis’ resilience against caste-gender oppression, with education and dignity as empowerment tools—“Education gave them wings, but dignity gave them flight” (Murthy, 2017, p. 45). This aligns with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and postcolonial critiques of subaltern representation (Spivak, 1988). *Wise and Otherwise* addresses elder abuse, as seen in a grandmother’s resilience: “She rebuilt her life, brick by brick” (Murthy, 2002, p. 89), echoing ageism-sexism intersections (Beauvoir, 1970) and narrative ethics (Nussbaum, 1995).

Murthy’s focus on educational exclusion prefigures digital divides (Wajcman, 2004), with characters’ empowerment through knowledge—“Knowledge was her rebellion” (Murthy, 2002, p. 67)—paralleling cyber feminist calls for digital equity (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997). Her narratives address AI-mediated biases (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Benjamin, 2019), advocating inclusive technology. By portraying women’s agency, Murthy’s works offer a transformative vision of womanhood, bridging Indian realities with global feminist concerns.

## 6. Limitations

This study acknowledges that Sudha Murthy’s narratives (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017) are largely middle-class-centric and shaped by her specific socio-economic background, which may not fully capture the heterogeneity of Indian women’s experiences (Mohanty, 1988; Menon, 2012). Nonetheless, her realist portrayals offer ethically grounded insights into everyday resilience (Bande, 2015), making them a valuable site for feminist inquiry.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Sudha Murthy’s *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Three Thousand Stitches*, and *Wise and Otherwise* offer a compelling critique of gendered injustices in postcolonial India, encompassing marital emotional servitude, caste-based sexual exploitation, elder abuse, and educational exclusion (Murthy, 1988, 2002, 2017). Through narratives of resilience and agency, Murthy reimagines womanhood as a dynamic interplay of moral fortitude and resistance, aligning with intersectional, postcolonial, and cyber feminist frameworks (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997). Her emphasis on education and collective action as pathways to empowerment underscores the potential for systemic reform, resonating with global feminist ethics that prioritize social justice and equitable partnerships (Gilligan, 1982; Adichie, 2014; Nussbaum, 1995). In an AI-mediated era, Murthy’s works highlight the critical need for digital equity to counter algorithmic biases and amplify marginalized voices (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Wajcman, 2004), as seen in characters like Shrimati and the Devadasis. By bridging localized Indian experiences with global discourses, her fiction serves as a vital intervention, advocating for inclusive technological and social frameworks that uphold human dignity and foster transformative change in contemporary feminist scholarship (UNESCO, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

## REFERENCES

- Adichie, C. N. (2014). We should all be feminists. Fourth Estate. <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/products/we-should-all-be-feminists-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie>
- Atwood, M. (1985). *The handmaid’s tale*. McClelland and Stewart. H <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/6125/the-handmaids-tale-by-margaret-atwood/9780771008795>
- Bande, U. (2015). *Writing resistance: A comparative study of the selected novels by women writers*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1970). *The coming of age*. Putnam. <https://archive.org/details/comingofage0000beau>
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/15711/the-second-sex-by-simone-de-beauvoir/>
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code*. Polity Press.
- Buolamwini, J., & Gebru, T. (2018). Gender shades: Intersectional accuracy disparities in commercial gender classification. *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research*, 81, 1–15. <http://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a.html>

8. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), Article 8. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
9. Devi, M. (1997). *Draupadi*. Seagull Books. <https://www.seagullbooks.org/draupadi/>
10. Devi, M. (1998). *Rudali* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
11. Desai, A. (1980). *Clear light of day*. Penguin India. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/164941/clear-light-of-day-by-anita-desai/>
12. Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674445444>
13. Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Simians-Cyborgs-and-Women-The-Reinvention-of-Nature/Haraway/p/book/9780415903875>
14. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520272941/the-managed-heart>
15. Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing like a feminist*. Penguin Books India; Zubaan.
16. Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), 61–88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42>
17. Murthy, S. (1988). *Gently falls the Bakula*. Penguin India. <https://www.penguin.co.in/book/gently-falls-the-bakula/>
18. Murthy, S. (2002). *Wise and otherwise: A salute to life*. Penguin India. <https://www.penguin.co.in/book/wise-and-otherwise/>
19. Murthy, S. (2017). *Three thousand stitches: Ordinary people, extraordinary lives*. Penguin India. <https://www.penguin.co.in/book/three-thousand-stitches/>
20. Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). *Poetic justice: The literary imagination and public life*. Beacon Press.
21. Plant, S. (1997). *Zeros + ones: Digital women and the new technoculture*. Fourth Estate. <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/products/zeros-ones-digital-women-and-the-new-technoculture-sadie-plant>
22. Rajan, R. S. (1993). *Real and imagined women: Gender, culture and postcolonialism*. Routledge.
23. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press. <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/77wpm5pn9780252014017.html>
24. UNESCO. (2021). *Digital skills for life and work*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381479>
25. UN Women. (2020). *Ending violence against women*. United Nations. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women>
26. Wajcman, J. (2004). *TechnoFeminism*. Polity Press. <https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail/?isbn=9780745630434>
27. Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple*. Harcourt. <https://www.hmhbooks.com/shop/books/The-Color-Purple/9780156028356>