

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

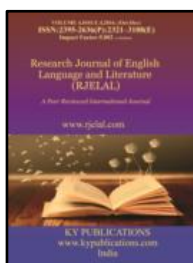
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE SELECTED STORIES IN 'THE DAY I STOPPED DRINKING MILK' BY SUDHA MURTY

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ABSTRACT

Sudha Murty's 'The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk' (Life Stories Here And There) is a collection of real life stories delighting the readers of all ages. Over the years, Sudha Murty has come across some fascinating characters in the real life whose lives made an indelible impression upon her mind and compelled her to write interesting stories about them because all these female protagonists had an astonishing lesson to reveal. This is really great book that describes down to detail about how myriad characters, circumstances and events have had a prominent effect on the author's life. The best touch to this collection is that these are true life stories and we know that good people do still walk this earth. Author writes about life, observations and experiences and that makes these little gems of stories more enjoyable. She works towards the betterment of the society and rural development. She aims to provide the government aided schools with computer education library facility. Apart from all her social work, she even taught computer science. She is also renowned author of many fiction novels. She is also a member of healthcare initiatives of the Gates Foundation. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the female characters -- protagonists -- in the selected stories of Sudha Murty and explore their predicament and the way they overcame their predicament in their lives.

In the story, 'Bombay to Bangalore', Sudha Murty was boarding Udyan Express at Gulbarga railway station as her destination was Bangalore. The ticket collector asked the thirteen years thin, dark and scared girl who was hiding under Sudha Murty's berth. The girl did not say anything and stood quietly. Ticket Collector caught hold of her arms and told her to get down at the next station and he started forcibly pulling her out from the compartment. The travellers around the girl were not bothered at all and went about their business. Suddenly Sudha Murty had a strange feeling. She stood up and called the T.C. "Sir, I will pay for her ticket. It is getting dark. I do not want a young girl on the platform at this time."¹ She said T.C. asked her

to pay from Bombay to Bangalore Sudha Murty paid it.

As the train approached Bangalore, the girls started talking. Her name was Chitra and she lived in a village near Bidar. Her father was a coolie and she lost her mother at birth and father remarried. But a few months ago, her father died. Her step mother started beating her often and did not give her food. She was tired of that life. So she left home in search of something better. Sudha Murty admitted Chitra in the shelter home and highschool where she scored 85 percent in tenth. Then she did her diploma in Computer Science. She got a job in a software company. She was lucky because after some years her company was sending her to the USA!

Eventually Sudha Murty was invited to deliver a lecture in San Francisco. After the lecture she planned to leave for the airport. She went to the reception counter to pay the bill but the receptionist said, 'Maam you don't need to pay us anything. The lady over there has already settled your bill'. Sudha Murty turned around and found Chitra there. She asked Chitra, 'Why did you pay my hotel bill?'

With tears in her eyes and gratitude on her face she said, 'Akka, if you had not helped me, I don't know where I would have been today -- may be a beggar, a prostitute, a runaway child, a servant in someone's house... or I may even have committed suicide. You changed my life. I am ever grateful to you. Then suddenly sobbing Chitra hugged me and said that she paid it because I paid for her ticket from Bombay to Bangalore! The story explains how Chitra's life was completely transformed after meeting Sudha Murty during a train journey from Bombay to Bangalore. Chitra had gotten onto the train without a ticket, but the author took her in and provided her with shelter. She studies and later moves abroad and is very appreciative of Sudha Murty's gesture. The most determined, dedicated and inspired girl -- Chitra confident and powerful -- the "protagonist"² made her life from her predicament with her benefactor Sudha Murty. According to Anthony Robbins, "Power is the ability to produce the results you desire most and create value for others in the process. Power is the ability to change your life: to shape your perceptions, to make things work for you and not against you."³

'Rahman's Avva' is the second story in the non-fiction of Sudha Murty. Kashibai is the protagonist. Fatima Bi was her neighbor. However, both of them did not see eye to eye at all. It is not that they were bad women but their nature was very different. Kashibai was loud, frank and hard-working. Fatima Bi was quiet, lazy and an introvert. Inevitably, there was a fight. But when Kashibai heard that Fatima was admitted to the hospital in critical condition and delivered a son, she started crying forgetting her enmity. They also learnt the next day that Fatima Bi was no more. One night the child started crying non-stop. Her motherly instinct made her go next door. She picked up the baby, held him in her pallu and brought him to her house

holding him tightly to her chest. The body named Rahman grew up in Kashibai's house and started calling her Avva.

When Rahman's father died of tuberculosis Rahman was left alone. Kashibai was conscious about his religion. Every Friday she sent him for nammaz. She told him to participate in all Muslim Festivals. Kashibai's affection and devotion overwhelmed Rahman. He prayed to Allah and then touched Kashibai's feet. He said, "Avva, you are my Ammi. You are my Mecca."⁴ This is a heartwarming story of the life of a Muslim named Rahman, who was brought up by his Hindu neighbor. In simple language the story moves the hearts of the readers and we realize how blessed we are. Uneducated but far advanced in human values, Kashibai the -- protagonist -- had raised Rahman with his own religion and still loved him like her son.

The third story is 'Ganga's Ghat', where the female protagonist -- Ganga, a coolie in a small village, gets up in the morning, goes to the field to work, earns her daily wage and then comes back in the evening, fetches water, bathes, cooks her meal, eats and sleeps to get up in the morning. It is her routine. It was very hard to get water in the summer because there was no electricity. Summer was a curse to the village. One summer evening, she came back after work and felt very tired. She started cooking when she saw an old beggar in front of her hut. Ganga said, "old man, I haven't cooked yet and I have very little rice today. You can come another day and I will give you some food." Then he said, "Akka, I do not want rice. Can you give me one bucket of luckwarm water? My body is itchy. Someone said that I should take a bath in luckwarm water. That will reduce the itching. I am unable to sleep at night. In the summer, there is a lot of dust and it is affecting me in this old age."⁵ At this, Ganga was upset as it was not easy to get water from half kilometre away. But the beggar requested her and convinced her that she had a hut, vessels, firewood and water. Ganga had an indescribable feeling as nobody had told her that she was a rich. Nobody ever called her Akka. This was an unusual feeling and she liked it. She gave him a bucket of luckwarm water daily and the number of beggars for bath increased day by day. The word had spread.

People knew that if you want to have a bath you should go to Ganga's Ghat. We are introduced here to an old lady, who desires to achieve something in life. She experiences contentment as a result of seeing to the needs of her fellow villagers by setting up a bathing facility.

Ganga had found her mission in life. She never got public recognition. She said that it gave her an opportunity to serve people who don't have anything in life. Sudha Murty met Ganga for her service she was offering to the beggar and needy people and said, 'Ganga, I will give you a box of soaps and a hundred cotton towels. But Ganga explained to Sudha Murty that she wanted to do the work within her own limits. Money comes with expectations and spoils the delicate equilibrium of social work. Ganga -- the protagonist's, bathing ghat was no less than Ganga's ghat at Varanasi, Hardwar and Rishikesh as she provides provides bathing water to hundreds of people in a drought stricken area.

'The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk' is the next story of Sudha Murty dealing with a woman in a flooded village in odisha which teaches Sudha Murty a life lesson she will never forget. In the coverstory, 'The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk', we are introduced to a family residing in Odisha, with whom the author had once stayed during her visit to the village. As the author is the guest to the family, host wished to give her some food or drink. The author asked for a glass of milk at which they were completely unable to meet her request. Sudha Murty was working in a remote village. They were building a school for children in a beautiful surrounding of mountain, lake and greenery. Suddenly it started raining heavily. So her translator knowing oriya and English suggested to take shelter in a nearest hut. The hut was small and had thatched roof and mud flooring. The host came and welcomed them. The owner's baby was crying inside and his mother was singing a lullaby to soothe him. After sometime, the translator got bored and went to a shop near the hut. The host wanted to give her something to eat or drink. The Taittiriya Upanishad says, 'Athiti devo bhava.' He offered her tea but she denied as she never drinks tea or coffee. After some time he asked her for milk.

Sudha Murty did not want to hurt his feelings by denying everything. So she nodded her head in affirmation. Her host thought that she did not understand oriya because she had taken a translator. But she knew oriya, though she was not able to speak it fluently. Hearing her husband the wife was very upset. She said in an irritated tone, "The lady sitting outside has grey hair but no common sense. We are poor people. We also have to take care of a child. I have only one glass of goats milk. I have to work hard even to get this milk. If madam wants tea, I can give her a few teaspoons of milk. If she wants to eat fish, I can fetch them from the pond and prepare an excellent fish curry. If she wants to eat pakhal, it is already there. But she should not ask for an expensive drink such as milk."⁶

In Sudha Murty's ignorance and on host's insistence, she had agreed to drink milk but she was not even aware that she was snatching the share of a little baby. She felt ashamed. When translator returned, she told him to tell the host that she was on fast. The translator was baffled because he had seen her having milk in the morning breakfast. The host asked, 'Nobody fasts on Wednesday. Why are you fasting today? She said, 'I fast on Wednesday for Buddha'. From that day onward, Sudha Murty stopped drinking milk.

The wife of the hut owner -- the female protagonist -- taught a lesson to Sudha Murty. Ignorance of the economic condition of the poor people in flooded village changed her mind and she determined on that day to give up drinking milk.

Conclusion

The determined, dedicated and inspired girls Chitra -- the female protagonist overcomes her predicament and becomes a successful lady. Uneducated but far advanced in human values, Hindu Kashibai -- the female protagonist -- had raised Muslim Rahman with his own religion and still loved him like her son. Kashibai is a real philanthropist. Ganga -- a coolie in a small village of drought stricken area who renders her services of providing bathing water to hundreds of people becomes the female protagonists. The wife of the hut owner -- the female protagonist -- taught a lesson to Sudha Murty. Ignorance of the economic condition of the poor people in flooded village

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