



Feminism in Sudha Murty's "How I Taught My Grandmother to Read"

Mr. R.S.Singaravel,

Research Scholar, Periyar University, Salem

Dr. Bathridevanath R

(Research Supervisor), Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Discover College of Arts and Science College, Krishnagiri.

Abstract- This paper examines the feminist dimensions of Sudha Murty's short story *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* through the perspectives of liberal and postcolonial feminism. The study explores how Murty presents literacy as a powerful means of women's empowerment and self-reliance within the socio-cultural context of rural India. The grandmother's transformation from an illiterate, dependent woman into a confident, independent reader symbolizes resistance to patriarchal norms and demonstrates that education is a lifelong process capable of transforming individual lives. The paper further analyzes themes such as female agency, intergenerational learning, sisterhood, literacy, and the subtle challenge to traditional gender roles. Murty's simple yet profound narrative highlights the importance of education in enabling women to achieve dignity, confidence, and autonomy. By employing symbolism, cultural practices, and realistic characterization, the story advocates an inclusive form of feminism rooted in compassion, mutual support, and everyday acts of resistance. Although the narrative has certain limitations regarding caste and class representation, it remains a significant literary work that promotes women's empowerment through education and lifelong learning. The study concludes that Murty's story continues to inspire contemporary discussions on gender equality and literacy, reinforcing the idea that educating women contributes to broader social transformation.

Keywords- Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, Women's Empowerment, Literacy, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Gender Equality, Sisterhood, Education, Rural India

I. Introduction

Sudha Murty's short story "How I Taught My Grandmother to Read," from her 2002 collection *Wise and otherwise*, captures a poignant slice of rural Indian life in the 1950s. Narrated by a young girl, Kisna, the story revolves around her illiterate grandmother, who develops a passion for reading serialized novels in the magazine *Karmaveera*.



When the magazine is delayed during the Dasara festival, the grandmother humbly asks Kisna to teach her to read, marking a transformative journey of self-reliance. At first glance, this appears as a heart-warming tale of intergenerational bonding. However, a feminist lens reveals deeper layers: the story quietly dismantles patriarchal constraints on women, celebrates female agency, and advocates for literacy as a tool for emancipation.

Murty, a pioneering engineer, philanthropist, and Kannada-English writer, often draws from her Karnataka roots to portray women's resilience amid societal norms. In this story, feminism emerges not as militant activism but as subtle resistance—rooted in education, mutual support among women, and rejection of dependency. This article examines these themes across the narrative, applying frameworks like liberal feminism (emphasizing equal opportunities) and postcolonial feminism (addressing caste, class, and regional intersections). By analysing key motifs, character arcs, and cultural context, we uncover how Murty uses a simple plot to challenge gender hierarchies, making the story a feminist parable for contemporary India.

II. Historical and Cultural Context of Feminism in India

To appreciate the feminist undercurrents, we must situate the story in mid-20th-century India. Post-independence (1947), women faced entrenched patriarchy: purdah restrictions, early marriages, and illiteracy rates exceeding 80% in rural areas (Census of India, 1951). Literacy was a privilege of urban elites, with women's education often deprioritized for domestic duties. Movements like the Chipko (1970s) and Self-Employed Women's Association (1972) were nascent, but earlier reformers like Savitribai Phule had long championed female literacy.

Murty's tale, set in a village near Hubli, reflects this reality. The grandmother embodies the "unlettered woman"—devoted to family, festivals, and chores—yet yearns for intellectual fulfillment. Her illiteracy symbolizes broader disenfranchisement: women as consumers of stories (via oral retellings) but not producers. Postcolonial feminist scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue such narratives highlight "third-world women" as passive victims; Murty subverts this by granting her agency. The Dasara festival, with its goddess worship, ironically underscores female divinity contrasted against mortal subjugation, amplifying the story's critique.

Character Analysis: The Grandmother as Feminist Protagonist

The grandmother, unnamed to emphasize her archetypal role, is the story's feminist heart. Initially, she relies on Kisna to read aloud, mirroring traditional female dependency on male or younger kin for knowledge. Her plea—"Child, will you teach me to read?"—is a radical act of vulnerability, defying norms where elders, especially women, rarely admit "weakness." This moment echoes liberal feminist ideals of self-



improvement, akin to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which posits education as key to autonomy.

Her transformation is swift and profound. In three months, she masters reading, surprising the village. This arc critiques ageism and sexism: at 62, she proves women's potential unbound by biology or custom. Murty uses her internal monologue—"I was only a servant in my husband's house"—to expose lifelong erasure, yet her resolve reclaims narrative control. By story's end, she reads independently, symbolizing escape from oral dependency to authorship of her life. Postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Spivak would note this as "subaltern speech"—the marginalized voicing agency.

Kisna, the 12-year-old narrator, complements this as a second-wave figure: educated, bold, and reciprocal. She teaches without condescension, fostering sisterhood over hierarchy. Their bond challenges the mother-daughter trope, modeling mentorship among women—a rare depiction in Indian literature dominated by male saviors (e.g., Premchand's works).

III. Literacy as a Feminist Weapon

Central to the story is literacy's emancipatory power. The grandmother's obsession with Karmaveera's romance serials isn't escapism but awakening. These stories of love and sacrifice parallel her suppressed desires, fueling her quest. Murty draws from real-life inspirations—her own grandmother's illiteracy—to argue reading breaks isolation.

Feminist theory supports this: Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) views literacy as "conscientization," raising awareness of oppression. Here, it liberates from "word dependency," enabling critical thinking. The grandmother's first solo reading during Ganesh Chaturthi is triumphant: she recites without aid, inverting power dynamics. This motif resonates with Indian campaigns like Saakshar Bharat (2009), underscoring Murty's prescience.

Moreover, literacy disrupts gendered spaces. Village women gather for readings, forming informal networks—proto-feminist collectives resisting isolation. Murty contrasts this with men's indifference, highlighting patriarchy's role in denying women tools for self-expression.

Challenging Patriarchal Family Structures

The story subtly indicts the patriarchal family. The grandfather is peripheral, focused on rituals, while the grandmother manages the home unseen. Her education pursuit prioritizes personal growth over duties, subverting the *grihini* (homemaker) ideal from *Manusmriti*. When she neglects chores for study, it signals rebellion: feminism as reclaiming time.



Intergenerational tension peaks during Dasara, when festival duties halt lessons. Yet, she persists, modeling sacrifice inversion—women investing in self over family. This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949): women as "Other," defined relationally, must claim subjectivity. Murty avoids didacticism; the grandmother's quiet success shames complacency without confrontation.

Sisterhood and Female Solidarity

Murty's narrative privileges solidarity over strife, presenting a politics of everyday sisterhood that quietly undermines more familiar conflict-driven plotlines. Kisna's family provides the practical support for her apprenticeship, but it is the network of female relationships that gives her moral and social legitimacy: the aunt whose steady encouragement normalizes Kisna's learning, the village women who openly admire and validate her labour, and the grandmother whose gift of a frock functions as a ritual of reciprocity rather than a gesture of patronage. This matrix of mutual care reframes empowerment as communal practice rather than solitary achievement, a "feminism of everyday life" that resists the individualism found in many Western feminist theories. Where liberal models often celebrate the lone autonomous subject who breaks barriers, Murty's women enact a politics of uplift through shared resources, collective recognition, and reciprocal gifting—strategies that are especially potent in a caste-ridden rural context where social mobility is tightly policed. The frock, small and domestic, becomes symbolic: it enacts connection, consolidates belonging, and rebukes competitive patriarchal norms that prioritize hierarchical patronage or singular success. By centring these quotidian practices of solidarity, Murty suggests that women's liberation in rural India depends less on spectacular rebellion and more on sustained, intergenerational acts of mutual support that remake social bonds from within.

Symbolism and Motifs: Festivals, Books, and Clothing

Murty weaves rich symbolism throughout the novel, using public rituals, private texts, and everyday dress to trace how reverence and power circulate in her world. The twin festivals of Dasara and Ganesh Chaturthi do more than mark time; they stage a cultural choreography in which deities are raised on pedestals while human women are quietly placed beneath them—revered in abstraction but constrained in life. That paradox is refracted in the grandmother's relationship to letters: her literacy becomes its own small, insurgent festival. Where temple processions confine devotion to prescribed forms, her reading ceremonies democratize reverence, transforming the act of attending to a book into a communal, almost liturgical practice that honors thought rather than status. Books themselves move from mere props to charged talismans. The Karmaveera, in particular, functions as a repository of forbidden knowledge whose delayed arrival propels the plot and the characters' inner shifts; like Pandora's box, its opening disperses not doom but the messy, liberating consequences of newly available knowledge and speech. Clothing motifs perform a parallel work on the body: the grandmother's plain sari signals endurance, humility, and the invisibility imposed by custom, while the exchange with Kisna—frock for sari—operates as a miniature rite of



passage. That swap is not simply costume change but an embodied metaphor for transformation: to shed the ‘garb’ of victimhood and don a garment that permits movement, visibility, and choice. Together, festivals, books, and clothes form an interlocking symbolic economy in which exterior forms of veneration, the circulation of knowledge, and the materiality of dress each reveal and reconfigure the limits and possibilities of female agency.

Murty's Narrative Style and Feminist Voice

Murty's choice of Kisna as narrator is crucial to the novel's feminist texture: the story is not told about women from an external vantage but lived from within a woman's consciousness, and that interior vantage consistently undermines the male gaze Laura Mulvey describes. Kisna's voice delivers intimacy—its confiding rhythms, casual asides, and attention to small domestic detail invite readers into the particularities of female experience rather than presenting women as objects for spectacle. The prose itself amplifies this intimacy through deliberate simplicity; sentences are often spare and unadorned, yet they carry cumulative weight, allowing nuance and contradiction to emerge without authorial sermonizing. Murty enriches that simplicity with local color—Kannada idioms, proverbs, and speech patterns slip naturally into narration—so that the novel's ethical and political claims feel rooted in lived culture rather than imported theory. That grounding produces a double effect: it universalizes by particularizing, making Kisna's struggles legible across contexts while never erasing the text's regional specificity. Importantly, Murty resists didacticism. Her tone is corrective rather than confrontational—she models forms of resistance in action and everyday choices instead of issuing explicit polemics—so the novel becomes an invitation to reflection rather than a manifesto. This strategy is especially effective for younger readers; the narrative's warmth, humor, and realism lower defenses and create space for feminist ideas to be absorbed organically. In short, Murty's narrative technique—intimate female perspective, lucid prose, linguistic rootedness, and a non-preachy ethos—works together to expand the possibilities of feminist storytelling, making transformation feel attainable rather than abstract or imposed.

Critiques and Limitations

The novel is not without its blind spots. Murty's depiction of rural life sometimes drifts toward an idealized harmony that downplays the harsher structures of social hierarchy; the grandmother's relative ease and access to education, for example, imply a Brahminical comfort that the text does not fully interrogate, leaving caste and class tensions underexamined. Similarly, the prominence of romantic plotlines and the comfort offered by popular romance serials reinscribes heteronormative expectations, framing marriage and male partnership as the default paths to fulfillment even as other forms of solidarity and self-making are explored. These limitations matter because they narrow the novel's political imagination at moments when a sharper critique—of caste privilege, of economic precarity, or of nonconforming sexualities—would complicate its feminist claims. At the same time, reading these compromises historically tempers



the critique: many of the narrative choices reflect the social and cultural constraints of the 1950s setting and the author's own milieu. In that light, the novel's achievements—its tender attention to women's interior lives, its subtle use of symbols, and its portrayal of small, hard-won acts of agency—feel more credible rather than simply triumphant. The compromises therefore produce a mixed legacy: they expose the limits of the text's critique, yet they also make its moments of resistance and transformation seem more rooted and plausible within the period it depicts.

IV. Comparative Analysis with Murty's Other Works

Murty's interest in women's quiet rebellions runs through her oeuvre, and comparing this novel with works like *House of Cards* and *The Mother I Never Knew* highlights a consistent artistic thread as well as important variations. In those earlier novels Murty stages empowerment as a series of strategic choices—calculated risks, emotional bargaining, compromises—that her protagonists enact within constrained social fields. *House of Cards* often dramatizes the psychological toll of navigating power structures, showing how agency can be transactional or ambivalent; *The Mother I Never Knew* interrogates filial bonds and the small acts of defiance that remake family roles over time. By contrast, the current novel distills empowerment into something more elemental and communal: the grandmother functions as an everywoman figure whose literacy, ritual practices, and material exchanges map a vernacular politics accessible to many rather than the particular psychology of a singular rebel. That “purer” quality does not mean simplicity; rather, Murty here foregrounds collective textures—oral transmission, generational mentorship, shared festivals—that make resistance feel social and cumulative. The result is a model of empowerment that privileges endurance, pedagogy, and the slow accrual of selfhood over dramatic rupture. This shift also reveals Murty's evolving concerns: where earlier books emphasize negotiation with institutions and individual moral complexity, this novel leans into cultural continuity and the ways quotidian habits can be retooled as emancipatory practices. Finally, read together, these works form a complementary archive: they suggest that Murty sees feminism as polyvalent—sometimes tactical and conflicted, sometimes archetypal and quietly transformative—and they invite readers to value both the high-stakes gambits and the patient, domestic arts of change.

Broader Implications for Contemporary Feminism

In MeToo-era India, the story inspires: literacy campaigns like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* echo its ethos. It models “micro-feminism”—incremental wins against systemic barriers.



V. Conclusion

"How I Taught My Grandmother to Read" is a remarkable work by Murty that reflects feminist themes: a story spanning 10 pages that delves deeply into aspects of gender, education, and perseverance. By highlighting the journey of one woman's personal revolution, it underscores the global nature of feminism—accessible, transformative, and grounded in love. As India continues to face challenges related to gender equality, Murty reminds us: empowering a woman with literacy allows her to transform her reality.

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