



Research Paper

Women, Marginality, and Ethical Selfhood: A Feminist Reading of Sudha Murthy's Novels

Kovuru Sara Grace^{1*} & Lavanya Sivapurapu²

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor, Department of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation (Deemed to be University), Vaddeswaram, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India. Corresponding Author.

Abstract

This paper examines how Sudha Murthy reimagines the relationship between the centre and the margin through the lived experiences of women in her fiction. While marked by stylistic simplicity, Murthy's novels expose entrenched patriarchal and cultural hegemonies through narratives of resilience and ethical selfhood. Drawing on feminist theory, intersectionality, trauma studies, and resilience theory, the study offers a comparative textual analysis of *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, *Dollar Bahu*, and *House of Cards*. It argues that the protagonists like Shrimati, Anupama, Vinuta, and Mridula challenge patriarchal structures not through overt rebellion but through moral agency, emotional resilience, and self-realisation. The paper further employs the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 5, 10, and 17) as a critical framework to show the contemporary relevance of Murthy's feminist vision. It concludes that Murthy redefines marginality as a site of ethical strength by advocating empathy, gender justice, and inclusive social transformation while foregrounding the transformative agency of women in everyday life.

Keywords: Sudha Murthy, Feminism, Intersectionality, Trauma, Resilience, Sustainable Development Goals

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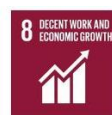
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1. Introduction

Recent developments in Indian feminist theory signal a significant shift in the conceptualisation of women's lived experiences not as passive cultural artefacts, but as dynamic sites of mediation, contestation, and transformation. Literature, in this context, functions as a discursive space in which women articulate repressed voices and interrogate the contradictions inherent in gendered power relations. Among India's most widely read contemporary authors, Sudha Murthy occupies a distinctive position: her accessible, compassionate prose conceals layers of psychological investigation into how ordinary women navigate hardship within patriarchal social structures. Her fiction foregrounds universal moral values embedded in contemporary social milieus, rendering the political personal and the personal transformative.

This paper examines the struggles of four protagonists, Vinuta (*Dollar Bahu*), Anupama (*Mahashweta*), Mridula (*House of Cards*), and Shrimati (*Gently Falls the Bakula*), against class bias, bodily stigmatisation, institutional corruption, and intellectual erasure. These obstacles instantiate what Nivedita Menon (2012) terms the regime of normative femininity, wherein "femininity is not an inborn state but a forced regime formed through repeated expectations" (p. 38). Women are socialised to valorise sacrifice, silence, and emotional labour as moral virtues, thereby naturalising structural injustice rather than recognising it as such. Murthy's protagonists initially inhabit this normative terrain, yet their narrative arcs chronicle a deliberate process of ethical self-scrutiny that transforms silence into agency. By foregrounding these unsaid structures, Murthy's fiction offers a sustained critique aligned with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), specifically the gendered and class-based marginalisation embedded in everyday social systems.

The analysis employs Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of situated agency, through which women's resistance is understood as anchored in particular cultural and historical sites rather than universally applicable templates of liberation (Mohanty, 2003, pp. 21–24). Simultaneously, Simone De Beauvoir's foundational insight that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283) underpins the socially constructed nature of femininity evident across Murthy's narratives. Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectionality framework further illuminates how gendered injustice in Murthy's fiction intersects with class hierarchies, bodily norms, and institutional authority to produce multidimensional expressions of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1244–1246).

Trauma theory, particularly the contributions of Judith Herman (2015) and Cathy Caruth (1996), clarifies the psychological ruptures experienced by characters such as Anupama and Shrimati. Crucially, however, Murthy does not allow trauma to function as an endpoint; her fiction adheres to resilience theory as articulated by Ann Masten (2014) and Emmy Werner (Werner & Smith, 1992), foregrounding recovery through everyday adaptive resources, ethical reasoning, and emotional renewal. This emphasis on self-education and consciousness-raising aligns Murthy's work with SDG 4 (Quality Education), which recognises lifelong learning as an essential instrument of empowerment. The protagonists of Murthy also embody the emerging model of Women 5.0: emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, intellectually independent, and socially conscious agents of change.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative approach, utilising close reading and contextual analysis to examine how Murthy's fiction reflects women's experiences of oppression, resistance, and self-realisation. The qualitative literary method is most appropriate for this study because the central themes, emotional labour, silence, trauma, and ethical awakening, are not quantifiable but require nuanced comprehension through textual interpretation. The primary corpus comprises four of Murthy's novels: *Dollar Bahu* (2007), *Mahashweta* (2007), *House of Cards* (2013), and *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008). These novels were purposefully selected because they feature women protagonists from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds who confront varied forms of gendered oppression. Together, they constitute a representative sample of Murthy's feminist vision, facilitating both intra-textual and comparative analysis. The paper's comparative literary design proceeds in two stages: individual close reading of each novel, followed by cross-textual comparison to identify thematic convergences and divergences. This method enables the study to move beyond isolated readings and discern broader feminist, psychological, and ethical patterns across Murthy's oeuvre.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on five interrelated theoretical frameworks to construct a multidimensional analytical lens. De Beauvoir's (2011) assertion that femininity is socially produced through cultural practices and expectations provides the foundational premise for reading Murthy's fiction. Menon's (2012) deconstruction of "normative femininity" refines this analysis by arguing that women are taught to perceive self-effacement and emotional labour as virtues rather than as manifestations of structural inequality (pp. 38–40). Murthy's protagonists initially embody these norms before undergoing a process of critical awakening.

Mohanty's (2003) concept of situated agency cautions against universalising modes of women's resistance, emphasising that agency is always constructed in relation to specific cultural, historical, and material conditions (pp. 21–24). Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework demonstrates how gender oppression intersects with class, able-bodiedness, and institutional power to generate compounded modes of subordination (pp. 1244–1246). This paper applies intersectionality comparatively across all four novels to reveal overlapping forms of marginalisation insufficiently addressed in prior scholarship.

Herman's (2015) argument that trauma shatters both the survivor's identity and their sense of relational connectedness illuminate the emotional breakdowns experienced by Anupama and Shrimati (pp. 51–53). Caruth's (1996) conceptualisation of trauma as an unassimilated wound that "cries out" in silence further explicates the suppressed intellectual suffering and unarticulated grief that characterise Murthy's women (pp. 4–7).

Masten's (2014) concept of "ordinary magic" defines resilience as the capacity to draw on ordinary adaptive systems rather than extraordinary resources (pp. 15–18). Werner and Smith's (1992) longitudinal research corroborates this, identifying persistent coping strategies and moral stability as the basis of long-term resilience (pp. 82–85). Murthy's fiction accords with these insights, depicting women who regenerate selfhood through reflection, education, and ethical fortitude.

The United Nations SDGs provide an interdisciplinary meta-framework for contextualising Murthy's literary and philanthropic vision within global development discourse. SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) are the four goals most significantly resonant with the themes of Murthy's fiction, as elaborated below.

4. Literature Review

Critical engagement with Sudha Murthy's fiction has grown steadily over the past two decades, consolidating her place within modern Indian English literature. Scholars have progressively moved beyond dismissing her prose as anodyne to recognising the depth of psychological and moral investigation embedded in her narratives. Raghavendra (2018) offers an early substantive reading, characterising Murthy's female protagonists as "quiet revolutionaries" who redefine resistance through moral awareness and emotional strength rather than public protest. His analysis foregrounds the cultural specificity of Murthy's feminist mode but does not extend to comparative or interdisciplinary perspectives.

Meera Krishnan (2019) examines how Murthy demystifies the patriarchal indoctrinations absorbed by women, centring the psychic costs of socially imposed sacrifice and silence. Through characters such as Anupama and Mridula, Krishnan identifies the incongruence between gendered social expectations and authentic selfhood. However, her analysis does not deploy trauma theory systematically, nor does it engage broader comparative feminist frameworks.

Detailed analyses of the major novels reveal recurrent thematic motifs: class-based prejudice, physical rejection, moral decay, and intellectual erasure. The marginalisation of Vinuta in *Dollar Bahu* operates at the intersection of class and domestic emotional labour; the stigmatisation of Anupama in *Mahashweta* exposes the violence of beauty standards and conditional acceptance; the moral compromises forced upon Mridula in *House of Cards* illuminate institutional corruption within marriage; and the intellectual suppression of Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula* demonstrates how women's academic aspirations are subordinated to domestic obligation. Together, these texts situate Murthy's fiction in dialogue with SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Media commentary supplements academic reception. *The Hindu* (2021) highlights Murthy's attention to the "unseen emotional labour" of Indian women; *The Indian Express* (2020) observes that her fiction "accords dignity to the everydayness of female experience"; and *The Week* (2021) describes her heroines as moral actors who "subtly recast patriarchal space." These public interpretations expand literary criticism into cultural conversation, resonant with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

5. Research Gaps

Three significant gaps are identified by this review. First, there is an absence of comparative studies spanning all four major novels simultaneously. Second, existing scholarship offers a limited application of trauma, intersectionality, and resilience theories in conjunction. Third, there is negligible integration of transnational development frameworks, including SDGs 4, 5, 10, and 17,

into literary criticism of Murthy's fiction. This paper addresses all three gaps through a comparative, interdisciplinary, and theory-driven analysis that situates Murthy's storytelling as a crucial literary intervention in feminist comprehension, psychological inquiry, and sustainable human development.

6. Discussion

6.1. Crossing Barriers through Everyday Feminism

A rather comparative reading of *Dollar Bahu*, *Mahashweta*, *House of Cards*, and *Gently Falls the Bakula* indicates that Murthy's feminism was not aggressive or shocking; it was rather more ethical & oriented to everyday life. Each novel sets up a specific yet interconnected axis of oppression: for Vinuta, it is class-based discrimination and domestic emotional labor; for Anupama, it is bodily stigma and social ostracism; for Mridula, it is institutional corruption and her marital compromise; for Shrimati, it is a form of intellectual erasure under the regime of matrimonial sacrifice. These barriers exemplify Menon's (2012) idea of normative femininity, through which women are conditioned to see silence and sacrifice as good qualities rather than recognizing them as tools of structural inequality (pp. 38-40).

Murthy very successfully backs up this theoretical claim with detailed examples in the stories. In *Dollar Bahu*, Vinuta's marginalisation is not something that is told loudly through a dramatic scene; rather, it builds gradually through the very fabric of her domestic life. She is simply not recognised in her mother-in-law's house, is constantly expected to carry on her emotional and physical labour, while Jamuna, the "dollar bahu" who has come back from America, is lavishly taken care of only because of her foreign income. Murthy shows this unfairness through minor, sharp details, the way food is unequally divided on the dinner table, the disproportion of praise and blame, the manner in which Vinuta's presence is used while her innermost feelings remain invisible to those she serves. These are not random details; they are the very means through which normative femininity keeps reproducing itself, which compels compliance by making injustice seem natural.

On the other hand, Anupama's case in *Mahashweta* works on a different but no less harmful logic: the use of beauty as a weapon. Once diagnosed with leukoderma, Anupama is left by her husband and the family that sees her changed skin as a source of social shame rejects her. The novel does not make this cruelty external and spectacular; instead, it shows how Anupama goes along with the decision of her community and views her transformed body as a sign of her own reduced value. This is exactly the mechanism Menon points out, the changing of a standard set by society from without into a deeply held lack of self-worth. However, Murthy does not agree that Anupama should be caught up in this self-limiting logic. Her healing is slow and non-linear, and it depends on her overcoming a doctor's professional identity crisis and, finally, on the ethical realization that human dignity does not depend on the exterior. This transformation from trauma to ethical self-recovery is what Murthy's feminist work is all about.

Mridula's problem in *House of Cards* is different again: it is about the betrayal of the very institutions, marriage, medicine, civic duty, that are supposed to make us trust one another. Her husband Sanjay's gradual follow-up of immoral acts is what pushes Mridula into a spiritual

homelessness within her own home. She can either consent to corruption and give up her values or stand by them even though that means losing her home comfort. Murthy allows this to be more than a dilemma of emotions and victimhood. Mridula thinks it through, goes through the emotional turmoil, and finally resolves to be ethical. This show of character is silent and painful, yet it is a show of character indeed, the denial of the ethics becoming personal and hidden within the confines of the marriage.

Shrimati, needing to suppress her brain in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, most probably touches Murthy the most as it brings back her own life. Shrimati's wishes for university education always take second place to the needs of her husband, Shrikant, moving up the career ladder. The novel shows how this total sacrifice, done willingly out of love, leads to the depletion of Shrimati's intellectual being. Here, the "barrier" is not outside forcing but internalised duty, which makes it all the more dangerous, and all the more a typical example of what Murthy sees as the gross cost that normative femininity demands from the system. The return in learning and self-directed purpose that Shrimati finally makes is the novel's moral conclusion: a quiet, single step that by no means stops at that point but asserts intellectual selfhood once again.

Hence, Murthy's feminism in all four novels works consistently through a certain narrative structure: the main character is a complete product of patriarchal ideology; suffers painful silence for a long time; finally, through experiences and thoughts, reaches a certain moral point of view; and, as a result, goes outside the normal parameters, yet the change is real. It is the feminism of life.

6.2. Situated Agency and Intersectional Oppression

This cross-textual analysis supports Mohanty's (2003) concept of situated agency: The women of Murthy do not escape their social milieus for their freedom; they regain their moral authority within. Their acts of defiance are always bound by the locality of their class position, physical condition, institutional milieu, and family role. Vinuta's realization, Anupama's assertion of dignity, Mridula's moral resilience, and Shrimati's blossoming of mind are all examples of context-specific agency, silent but with a total effect that is revolutionary (Mohanty, 2003, pp. 21, 24).

Reading through the lens of intersectionality, one of the main things that emerges is the multidimensionality of the character of oppression in Murthy's work. A trans-textual application of Crenshaw's (1991) brand of analysis shows how gender oppression is at work, uninterrupted by other factors, in these novels. In *Dollar Bahu*, gender is one of the intersecting factors with class. Vinuta's disempowerment comes from not just being a woman but also from being a poor person, when compared to Jamuna, who earns a dollar. All three elements of being a woman, being poor, and being local function as distinct loci of disadvantage for Vinuta within the family, which is a perfect example of intersectionality complicating analysis beyond the one-dimensional approach. Murthy brings out this compounded logic when she depicts Jamuna enjoying the respect which is denied to Vinuta, not because of her character being better, but due to her economic capital being higher. Therefore, the novel uncovers the existence of an underlying hierarchy operating beneath the apparent equality of the joint family, a hierarchy that is gendered, classed, and culturally specific.

In *Mahashweta*, the combination of gender and physical normalcy is examined in-depth. Anupama's being shunned by her husband is not merely the result of his harshness; rather, it is the result of a social structure that has so closely linked women's value to their physical beauty that, within that system's logic, the husband's abandonment seems to be justified. Through the community's unspoken agreement with her being outcast, we can understand how physical normalcy serves as a tool for gendered domination: physically non-normative females, whether due to disease, disability, or old age, are discarded as a matter of social practice. Crenshaw's model enables us to understand this not as a personal misfortune but as a social mechanism, which Murthy is calling into question by portraying Anupama's professional and moral invulnerability as a different ground for valuing a person.

In *House of Cards*, Mridula is an example of the combination of gender and institutional power. The book gives evidence that the corruption so rampant in the public sphere, medical as well as government bureaucracy, is not a neutral factor when it comes to gender: it inflicts specific damages on women who are socially expected to handle its outcomes in the secret realm of the home and to uphold harmony in the family, irrespective of the circumstances. Therefore, Mridula's being left without moral support has two sources or causes: on the one hand, there is institutional corruption, and on the other, there is the gender-based presumption that she should be shielding her husband's reputation rather than her own moral character. The book is making a strong point with the understanding that changes in lift up the system and the achievement of fairness between genders cannot be considered as two independent issues, something that links very well with the concern about building strong institutions and partnerships for sustainable development in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's SDG 17.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula* Shrimati is an example of the combination of gender and intellectual normativity, a preconception that a woman's intellectual pursuits will always come last after the fulfilment of her household and interpersonal responsibilities. Shrimati's continuous relinquishments of her academic career have come about not through external prohibitions but through the acceptance of a gender-based subordination of desires. When combined with a culture that highly esteems men's career achievements, this intersectionality engenders a mode of intellectual stunting which, while it is one that is self-inflicted, is nevertheless no less genuine. Through skilful tracing of this interaction, Murthy reveals intellectual repression as a societal phenomenon rather than a personal one and thus makes a case for collective compensation in the form of SDG 4, which, among its many targets, aims at providing equality in education and lifelong learning to all. The feminist perspective of Murthy is also evident through the simultaneous unfolding of the feminist analysis of intersectionality in the four books.

6.3. Trauma, Silence, and Psychological Rupture

Trauma theory gives us vital tools to explore the psychological elements in Murthy's stories, and the representation of silence especially reveals this clearly. Herman's (2015) idea that trauma disrupts a person's self-concept and their connections with others finds clear expression in Anupama's utter breakdown after she is left hanging by society (pp. 51-53). Murthy does not dramatise this breakdown through a loud scene; instead, she shows it through Anupama becoming a recluse, her mistrust of human relations, and losing her once self-assured professional

identity. This constitutes, in Herman's understanding, trauma: not one big break but an ongoing wearing away of the feeling of being safe, able to trust, and of oneself.

Caruth's (1996) idea of trauma as a "wound that cries out" in unassimilated silence is an accurate metaphor for Shrimati's predicament in *Gently Falls the Bakula* (pp. 4, 7). She does not fight her intellectual sacrifice but rather turns it into part of her identity as a loyal wife. But the book shows what such merging demands: gradual loss of Shrimati's intellectual brilliance, the build-up of an indescribable void that she is not fully aware of since she has internalized the very values that lead to it. Through Caruth's model, we can consider this a traumatic event: a wound that cannot be understood through ordinary storytelling because the societal language available to Shrimati does not allow the idea of intellectual deprivation as a form of suffering. What Murthy does is make this wound understandable and visible, providing it with a narrative that reveals its working without turning it into a melodrama.

Apart from many artists of her time, Murthy's work of trauma is characterized by her making a conscious decision to locate it in the textures of ordinary life rather than in the rare or spectacular events. Vinuta's distress in *Dollar Bahu* is, for example, hardly linked to one big shocking event; rather, it consists of the piled-up weight of small denials, kindnesses not reciprocated, and labors that remain unseen. This choice of portrayal is a manifestation of a deep comprehension of what Herman (2015) terms "complex trauma", i.e., traumatic situations that are not attributable to one single event but rather to the continuity and repetition of the conditions of the person being rendered helpless and devalued (pp. 74-76). In a sense, Murthy's portrayal brings to the fore a kind of gendered trauma that the dominant social narratives, which usually insist on spectacular proofs, overlook.

The trauma-silence relationship in Murthy's novels also points to a wider role of social testimony theories. The protagonists' suffering is, to some extent, a consequence of the social ban on verbalizing it: complaining on Vinuta's part means being seen as ungrateful; public mourning for Anupama will only deepen her ostracism; Mridula's expression of moral uneasiness is a threat to the very survival of her marriage; and Shrimati's description of her intellectual loss sounds as if she were blaming the husband whom she loves. Murthy's stories, therefore, can be seen as a kind of surrogate testimony, articulating the silhouette of pain which social rules deem unspeakable. This is at the heart of her feminist work: it is not, in a sense, fighting for something in the traditional way, but rather crafting the narrative space wherein the silenced experience is brought to be seen.

6.4. Resilience and Ethical Self-Realisation

The recovery journeys of Murthy's characters in some way resonate with Masten's (2014) concept of "ordinary magic", where resilience springs from ordinary adaptive systems such as firm values, supportive relationships, personal integrity, etc., rather than exceptional interventions or heroic acts (pp. 15-18). Likewise, the longitudinal research of Werner and Smith (1992) on moral stability as the foundation of long-term resilience is supported through examples in each of the four novels (pp. 82-85). What stands out is, in all the cases, that the means for recovery are not external; they don't come from an institutional rescue or a dramatic change in fortune, but internal: moral clarity, intellectual awakening, the determination to uphold one's ethical core without compromise.

In *Mahashweta*, the foundation of Anupama's recovery lies in the rediscovery of her professional identity as a doctor. She reconnects with her healing ability, a healing ability which, importantly, is not tied to her looks after she was left behind. Murthy shows this not as a sentimental victory over hardship, but as an ethical reorientation: Anupama realizes that her worth as a human being lies in what she does and who she is, rather than in the social judgment of her body. This progression from outwardly based worth to internally based dignity is the very "ordinary magic" that Masten talks about, a recovery made not through the use of extraordinary means but through the revival of existing moral and professional talents.

Vinuta's healing in *Dollar Bahu* takes a different plot line but still reflects the same basic framework of resilience. It stems from her values, which remain unchanged over time, her dedication to hard work, her refusal to let bitterness take over, and her decision not to imitate the cruelty she has suffered. Vinuta is not given a spectacular vindication at the end of the story. Instead, it is the quiet integrity of a person living according to her own moral standards in spite of being continuously undervalued that is recognized and celebrated. Murthy argues that this is a sort of victory, one which Menon (2012) might see as reclaiming one's agency in even the most restricting circumstances rather than the dream of unrestricted freedom.

Of the four, Mridula's strength in *House of Cards* is the most explicitly ethical. She is not only resisting Sanjay's corruption because it is not to her personal liking but because it is against her principles: she is aware of the societal implications of institutional dishonesty, and therefore, she refuses to collaborate with it, even if doing so would make her home life significantly more comfortable. What Werner and Smith (1992) term "moral stability", continuing to uphold ethical principles in the face of great pressure, is exactly what Murthy depicts in Mridula's character. Rather than being simply resigned to the situation, her resistance is an embodiment of ethical agency; she consciously, and repeatedly, makes a decision to live according to the values that she has chosen.

Out of the four, the longest philosophical echo is found in Shrimati's recovery in *Gently Falls the Bakula*. It challenges the very notion of recovery when the type of loss one has suffered is not physical but existential. It is not a career that Shrimati recovers, but herself, both her intellectual inquisitiveness and her sense of personal mission, as well as her acknowledgement that her human value was never dependent on Shrikant's achievements. This creation of a storyline around SDG 4 is Shrimati's coming back to education not as a career but as a means of existence, thus confirming that education, broadly understood as the intellectual awakening and re-identification of one's critical self, is a core component of human dignity, as the SDG framework argues. In other words, Shrimati's story is the one that most directly expresses the idea that women's education is structurally linked to women's freedom as Murthy sees it.

Recovery paths in all four novels are raconté with a shared ethical language: trauma, rather than marking the end of the journey, becomes the trigger for self-examination; moral insight is something that develops out of suffering instead of being present before it; and one re-establishes one's agency not by giving up social ties but by making a more truthful, self-sustained relation with them. Ultimately, Murthy's feminism offers one thing: a practice of ethical self-recovery, not a programme of liberation.

6.5. Sudha Murthy's Feminist Vision, SDGs and the Women 5.0 Framework

The performed cross-textual analysis validates that Murthy's fictional characters and themes are deeply and substantially consistent with the objectives of SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This conformity is not just a matter of subject matter; it reflects the very metaphors and plotlines that Murthy uses to depict her characters' hardships and triumphs.

The radical transformation of gender relations to achieve equality, a goal of SDG 5, is celebrated through the fictions of Murthy NOT just as a set of examples but also as a manifestation of her commitment. In other words, Murthy's literary works, by her ability to delineate how normal women embody and live femininity in its imposed form, are equivalent to a feminist policy analysis in that they reveal the hidden workings through which inequality perpetuates itself beneath the facade of an ordinary life. For instance, the way *Dollar Bahu* cleverly unravels the emotional labour economy inside a joint family, Mahashweta's revealing beauty standard as a gender control device, the House of Card's exposure of marriage as a recolonized site of corrupt institutions, and *Gently Falls the Bakula*'s highlighting of intellectual sacrifice as a structural expectation of wifely devotion, all these are narrative illustrations of the need for the SDG 5 structural goals.

While SDG 4's essence is that education can and should lead to one's dignity and freedom, in the novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*, one can see this theme brilliantly portrayed. It is, however, a universal theme and idea present in all the works. A case might be made that Anupama's resurrection through professionally getting involved again, Mridula safeguarding her ethical literacy when battling against institutional corruption, and Vinuta standing firm in her intellectual quietude despite the devaluation in the domestic sphere, all point to education, not just as schooling but as an ever-evolving development of critical self-awareness and moral reasoning, as the main source of women's empowerment and resilience.

Within the SDG 10 framework, which deals with community-level inequalities, Murthy's narratives carve out distinct testimonies through the exposure of the joint family dynamics in *Dollar Bahu* and the alienation of the disabled and diseased in Mahashweta. Murthy, by her writings, shows that inequalities are not an incidental state; they are the result of active, ongoing social processes being re-enacted through family and institutional practices.

As a reflection of SDG 17's idea of partnerships, ethical connections, through which development becomes sustainable, are most graphically captured by the relational ethics in the works of Murthy. For the most part, the character in each book owes her recovery to the presence of at least one solid, ethically supportive relationship: a mentor, a friend, or a community that validates her when society is against her. By highlighting the private ethics of sustaining solidarity and mutual affirmation, Murthy implies that these are not merely alongside development but make up the development itself.

Lastly, the Women 5.0 framework, which portrays women as emotionally tough, morally upright, intellectually free, and socially responsible, is brought to life narratively by the four main characters. The emotional toughness of Vinuta, the moral re-directing of Anupama, the firm ethical resolve of Mridula, and the intellectual awakening of Shrimati together make a comprehensive picture of what Women 5.0 describes conceptually. Even though these characters

are embedded in the traditional Indian social milieu, they still represent feminist futuristic ideals that totally combine personal welfare with community concern. Their stories together emphasize that long-lasting empowerment does not come simply from a complete rejection of one's roots but rather through a heightened sense of self and ethical actions within one's environment, a point that has relevance not just for Indian feminist literary critics but also for global feminist theorists in general.

7. Conclusion

This study establishes that Sudha Murthy's fiction constitutes a significant feminist literary intervention, one that redefines empowerment as internal awakening rather than as rebellious exertion. The analysis has shown that the four protagonists, Vinuta, Anupama, Mridula, and Shrimati, confront a distinct but structurally related form of gendered oppression, and that each recovers through the cultivation of ethical selfhood rather than through institutional rescue or dramatic reversal. The cross-textual comparison reveals the systematic coherence of Murthy's feminist vision: her novels do not offer isolated stories of individual women, but a sustained, cumulative argument about the nature of gendered injustice and the forms of agency available within it. The integration of the SDG framework into literary analysis opens productive avenues for future scholarship at the intersection of postcolonial feminism and global development studies. Researchers might fruitfully examine other writers in the Indian women's literary tradition, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, or Githa Hariharan through the same interdisciplinary lens to assess whether ethical feminism constitutes a broader generic tendency in Indian women's writing. The Women 5.0 model, as a framework for analysing emotionally and ethically sophisticated female characters, also invites application across other national literary traditions.

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Kovuru Sara Grace is a Research Scholar in the Department of English at Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation (Deemed to be University), Vaddeswaram, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India. Her research interests include Indian feminist fiction, postcolonial literature, and sustainable development discourse. ORCID: 0009-0007-0775-9035.

Dr Lavanya Sivapurapu is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation (Deemed to be University). Her scholarly interests encompass gender studies, Indian English literature, and trauma theory. ORCID: 0000-0002-4082-4333.
