

**DEPICTION OF MIDDLECLASS INDIAN WOMAN - AN IDEALISTIC  
APPROACH BY SUDHA MURTHY**

**Rachna Nathaniel**

Research Scholar, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University (JVWU), Jaipur  
[rachnanathaniel154@gmail.com](mailto:rachnanathaniel154@gmail.com)

**Dr. Suman Devi**

Associate Professor, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University (JVWU), Jaipur,  
[sumandevi.english@gmail.com](mailto:sumandevi.english@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the literary portrayal of middle-class Indian women in the works of Sudha Murthy, focusing on the theme of idealism as a central narrative and ethical framework. Unlike radical feminist texts that often highlight rebellion and defiance, Murthy's female characters embody strength through moral integrity, compassion, and resilience. The research analyzes selected stories to examine how these women navigate societal expectations, gender roles, and cultural responsibilities while upholding personal values and pursuing meaningful change. Using a qualitative, thematic analysis of Murthy's English-language prose, the study reveals that her protagonists do not reject tradition but reinterpret it, crafting a quiet yet powerful form of empowerment. They reflect the complex realities of India's middle class, where aspirations for education and independence co-exist with duties to family and community. Murthy's accessible storytelling, rooted in ethical clarity and cultural nuance, offers an alternative feminist vision that highlights the importance of inner strength and everyday heroism. By contextualizing Murthy's narratives within Indian socio-cultural norms, the study contributes to a broader understanding of gender, morality, and literary representation. It affirms that idealism, far from being outdated, serves as a vital tool for resistance, transformation, and identity formation in contemporary Indian literature.

**Keywords:-** Middle-Class Indian Women, Idealism, Sudha Murthy, Feminist Representation, Cultural Empowerment

**INTRODUCTION**

Sudha Murthy, a renowned Indian author, social worker, and philanthropist, has emerged as a powerful literary voice that brings forth the nuanced narratives of India's middle-class society.

Her stories are deeply embedded in Indian culture and tradition, yet they convey a universal resonance through themes of gender, morality, and personal integrity. At the heart of her narratives lies the portrayal of the middle-class Indian woman—often overlooked or stereotyped in mainstream literature—as a resilient, value-driven, and self-aware individual. These women are not symbols of passive domesticity; instead, they are depicted as dynamic personalities navigating a complex social landscape with grace, conviction, and quiet strength. Murthy's stories often feature women who, despite limited financial means or societal privileges, exhibit emotional intelligence, ethical clarity, and an unwavering sense of duty. This idealism, however, is not unrealistic or overly romanticized. It stems from a deep understanding of the middle-class value system, one that emphasizes education, honesty, familial bonds, and community service. For instance, in *Three Thousand Stitches*, she recounts her experiences working with sex workers and other marginalized women, bringing to light stories of transformation where courage and compassion are key tools of survival and progress (Murthy, 2017). Her female characters are often inspired by real people—mothers, teachers, housewives—who embody the quiet heroism of everyday life.

What sets Murthy apart is her ability to craft narratives that are both accessible and profound. Through simple yet poignant prose, she delves into the intricacies of gender roles, generational expectations, and the subtle moral dilemmas that shape the lives of women in middle-class households. In *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, the title story reflects the personal growth of a woman as she balances career aspirations with societal norms, capturing the dichotomy faced by many middle-class Indian women (Murthy, 2012). Murthy's characters are rarely radical or rebellious; instead, they transform their realities through education, ethical choices, and empathy—traits that the author presents as the pillars of an ideal Indian woman.

From a socio-cultural lens, Murthy's depiction of women stands in contrast to both Western feminist narratives and the often glamorized portrayals in Indian popular culture. She chooses to focus on the ordinary, the rooted, and the real. These women are neither victims nor revolutionaries—they are self-aware individuals who bring about change through patience, sacrifice, and moral strength. According to scholar Ritu Sharma, Murthy's characters—redefine womanhood not through defiance but through dignity,<sup>ll</sup> making her an important contributor to Indian feminist thought (Sharma, 2019).

Furthermore, the middle-class setting in Murthy's works is not just a backdrop but a character in itself. It informs decisions, limits opportunities, and also provides a strong moral framework. Values such as thrift, discipline, and duty are not imposed but embraced by the women Murthy writes about. These are not merely gendered virtues but survival strategies that allow women to assert agency in constrained circumstances. In essence, Sudha Murthy's portrayal of middle-class Indian women is both a reflection and a reimagining. Her characters mirror the real challenges faced by women, yet they also represent an aspirational ideal rooted in Indian ethos. The idealism in her writing does not lie in unrealistic heroism but in the belief that even the smallest acts of courage, kindness, and wisdom can lead to profound change. This narrative strategy not only empowers the reader but also redefines the archetype of the Indian woman in literature.

### **Contextualize Sudha Murthy's contribution to Indian English literature**

Sudha Murthy holds a distinctive place in Indian English literature, not for stylistic flamboyance or political radicalism, but for the quiet depth and clarity with which she captures everyday Indian life. Her works operate at the intersection of realism and ethical idealism, often reflecting the layered complexities of Indian society through seemingly simple narratives. Unlike contemporaries who delve into themes of globalization, diaspora, or post-colonial alienation, Murthy remains committed to representing indigenous experiences, particularly those of the Indian middle and lower-middle classes (Joshi 87).

One of Murthy's most notable literary contributions is her effort to democratize Indian English fiction. She bridges the gap between literature and lay readership, presenting stories that are rooted in the moral dilemmas and cultural dynamics of ordinary people. In this sense, her work resembles a continuation of R.K. Narayan's tradition of Indian realism, though she narrows the thematic lens to focus particularly on women's agency, education, and ethical decision-making (Kaur 34). Her protagonists—often teachers, nurses, or social workers—live lives of quiet dignity, navigating a web of familial, social, and professional expectations.

Linguistically, Murthy opts for accessible prose and an anecdotal narrative style that leans toward the didactic, consciously rejecting literary elitism. This stylistic choice may invite critique from formalists, yet it aligns with her larger goal: to use storytelling as a vehicle for moral and social reflection (Rajagopal 102). In doing so, she challenges the notion that complexity is a prerequisite for literary merit, suggesting instead that emotional clarity and ethical insight can be equally potent literary tools.

Culturally, Murthy's stories serve as moral compasses at a time when rapid modernization often conflicts with traditional values. As Indian literature increasingly engages with global themes and fragmented narratives, Murthy's work retains a rootedness that reaffirms collective identity and human connection. Her tales foreground social responsibility, empathy, and resilience—values that resonate with readers across generations (Banerjee 69). From a feminist perspective, Murthy's portrayal of women is subtle yet impactful. She does not present rebellion in overt terms but instead portrays the internal strength of women who reform, resist, and resolve through persistence and moral clarity. Her characters frequently challenge the status quo not through confrontation but through courage and ethical fortitude (Mukherjee 54). This nuanced representation positions Murthy within the broader discourse of Indian feminist literature, offering an alternative to more radical or Westernized feminist tropes.

Her works are increasingly being included in academic syllabi and analyzed in terms of their ethical orientation, class representation, and gender dynamics. Critics have noted that Murthy's stories reflect a form of —developmental literature— one that aims to inspire societal growth by highlighting the virtues of education, integrity, and compassion (Verma 21).

In essence, Sudha Murthy's contribution to Indian English literature lies not just in what she writes, but in how and for whom she writes. She elevates the voices of the voiceless, reclaims dignity for the overlooked, and reaffirms literature's potential to be morally instructive and socially transformative.

### **Concept of the "Middle-Class Indian Woman" in a Socio-Cultural Framework**

The concept of the "middle-class Indian woman" is a multifaceted construct shaped by the intersection of socio-economic status, cultural expectations, historical narratives, and evolving gender roles. In the Indian context, middle-class status is not solely defined by income, but by a complex amalgam of aspirations, values, education, consumption patterns, and social behavior. Within this framework, the middle-class Indian woman emerges as a pivotal figure negotiating tradition and modernity, family and individuality, and public and private identities. Historically, the Indian middle class began expanding significantly during the post-liberalization era of the 1990s, which witnessed increased access to education, employment, and media. Women from this class, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, found new spaces of participation in professional, academic, and political domains. However, this expansion did not necessarily erase traditional expectations regarding domesticity, marriage, and morality. Thus, the middle-class woman in India often embodies a dual burden: to be

progressive yet respectful of conventions, autonomous yet family- oriented (Fuller and Narasimhan 46).

Socially, she is expected to uphold cultural capital— such as language, modesty, and ritual observance— while simultaneously adapting to modern values like career ambition, digital literacy, and financial independence. This duality manifests in everyday life choices, from balancing professional responsibilities with caregiving roles to navigating societal judgments on attire, lifestyle, and mobility. Her identity is deeply influenced by patriarchal norms but also subtly resistant to them. She may not always engage in overt rebellion but participates in forms of —negotiated empowerment—reshaping the domestic sphere through subtle acts of agency (Chatterjee 112).

Culturally, the ideal of the middle-class woman is often linked to her moral conduct and her role as the custodian of tradition. Literature, cinema, and media representations frequently reinforce this image, portraying her as self-sacrificing, nurturing, and emotionally intelligent. This idealization, however, can become a restrictive framework that diminishes the diversity of women’s experiences. Scholars like Leela Dube have argued that such representations risk homogenizing women's realities, ignoring caste, region, religion, and generational differences that significantly affect their social positioning (Dube 93).

Religiously and ritually, many middle-class women continue to be gatekeepers of cultural practices— celebrating festivals, maintaining household customs, and instilling values in children. These roles are often seen as extensions of gendered responsibilities rather than conscious choices, further reinforcing domestic labor as a feminine obligation (Banerjee 208). Yet, there is growing recognition of how women reinterpret these roles to assert their relevance and reconfigure power dynamics within families.

The middle-class Indian woman also occupies a significant place in the discourse on women's education and empowerment. Government policies and NGO initiatives often target this demographic, viewing them as strategic agents of social change. Studies indicate that increased educational attainment among middle-class women correlates with improved health, economic participation, and civic engagement (Desai et al. 5). However, systemic barriers such as gender pay gaps, workplace discrimination, and unequal distribution of domestic labor continue to limit their full potential. In conclusion, the middle- class Indian woman cannot be defined through a single lens. She exists at the crossroads of continuity

and change, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary challenges. Her lived reality is a blend of aspiration and adaptation, compliance and critique, all of which make her a powerful symbol of India's socio-cultural transformation.

### **Theme of Idealism in Murthy's Female Characters**

Idealism is a recurring and defining theme in Sudha Murthy's literary portrayal of women, serving not as a mere narrative device but as a deeper commentary on moral resilience and the pursuit of a principled life. Her female characters are not constructed as flawless heroines, but as embodiments of ethical values and emotional strength who uphold dignity in the face of adversity. Murthy's idealism is not abstract or romanticized; it is rooted in everyday actions—honesty at work, loyalty to family, compassion toward others, and the ability to choose right over convenient. Through this lens, her female protagonists become moral agents who challenge societal expectations not with rebellion, but with quiet conviction and ethical clarity. This idealism often reflects the Indian philosophical tradition where dharma (duty and righteousness) is central to one's role in society. In many of her stories, the female protagonists confront personal or social challenges—be it in the form of gender bias, financial struggle, or emotional trauma—and navigate them not by rejecting tradition but by redefining it from within. For instance, in several narratives, women choose to pursue education or careers not for individualistic ambition alone but as a way of fulfilling responsibilities and contributing meaningfully to their families or communities (Ramakrishnan 61).

Murthy's women consistently represent a balance between selfhood and service. Whether it is a young girl who insists on continuing her studies despite financial constraints or a widow who rebuilds her life through self-reliance, the common thread is the belief that integrity and perseverance are redemptive forces. This brand of idealism is not naive but consciously chosen, often at a personal cost. It challenges the cynical worldview that moral choices are impractical, instead suggesting that idealism is not the absence of struggle but the courage to endure it with dignity (Kanchana 49).

Moreover, Murthy's idealism is distinctly inclusive. It is not reserved for the educated elite but extends to women from diverse backgrounds—migrant workers, rural mothers, and even former victims of abuse. Her stories emphasize that moral strength is not bound by class or education but is intrinsic to human dignity. This inclusive vision contributes to a redefinition of what it means to be idealistic in a contemporary Indian context—grounded, accessible, and transformative.



Critically, Murthy's narrative strategy also resists the tendency to equate female strength with rebellion or confrontation. Instead, her characters achieve transformation through endurance, introspection, and ethical consistency. While critics have debated whether such portrayals are overly conservative or moralistic, others argue that Murthy offers an alternative feminist vision rooted in cultural context rather than imported ideologies (Pillai 88). In conclusion, the idealism of Sudha Murthy's female characters is neither utopian nor escapist. It is a deliberate response to the imperfections of the world—a hopeful insistence that integrity, humility, and compassion still matter. Her characters teach us that idealism is not about being perfect, but about striving to do what is right in a world where that is often the harder choice.

### **RESEARCH PROBLEM OF THE STATEMENT**

In Indian English literature, the representation of middle-class women often lacks depth, caught between portrayals of passive homemakers and radical feminists. Sudha Murthy's writings offer a unique perspective by depicting middle-class Indian women as morally strong, resilient, and guided by idealism. However, her approach is often overlooked in literary scholarship, which tends to favor more overt forms of resistance and complexity.

There is a clear gap in analyzing how Murthy uses idealism not as escapism but as a meaningful strategy of empowerment. This study aims to explore how her female characters challenge gender norms through ethical choices and cultural rootedness, contributing to a broader understanding of feminine agency in Indian literature.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To analyze the portrayal of middle-class Indian women in Sudha Murthy's selected works.
- To examine the role of idealism as a defining trait in Murthy's female characters.
- To explore how Murthy's narratives reflect cultural values and ethical frameworks through her depiction of women.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The representation of Indian women in English literature has undergone significant transformation over time, evolving from traditional depictions of domesticity to narratives exploring identity, agency, and resistance. Scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have highlighted the historical limitations placed on women characters in Indian fiction, emphasizing how many narratives reinforced patriarchal norms while sidelining authentic

female experiences (Women Writing in India, 1991). In contrast, contemporary writers have increasingly focused on nuanced portrayals, capturing the layered struggles and strengths of women across social classes.

In this evolving discourse, Sudha Murthy's contribution is distinctive. Her characters are neither radically rebellious nor entirely submissive. Instead, they operate within social conventions while subtly asserting their agency. Patil (2016) argues that Murthy's protagonists embody —quiet resistance, often choosing moral strength over confrontation, thereby redefining feminine empowerment through internal resolve rather than outward defiance. This approach diverges from the more confrontational feminist narratives seen in the works of authors like Mahasweta Devi or Kamala Das.

Chaudhuri (2018) notes that Murthy's narratives center on the lived realities of the middle-class woman—her duties, desires, and dilemmas—grounded in cultural ethics and social expectations. This focus is especially significant given that Indian middle-class women are often underrepresented or stereotyped in both literature and media. Murthy's works, such as *The Old Man and His God* and *Wise and Otherwise*, present everyday stories that reveal how idealism becomes a coping mechanism and a form of personal empowerment.

Further, Deshpande (2020) points out that Murthy's writing style—simple, direct, and emotionally resonant—makes her accessible to a wide readership, including younger audiences. Her ability to infuse moral lessons within personal narratives positions her as a —literary reformist who uses fiction to promote ethical introspection and social awareness.

From a sociological perspective, scholars like Uberoi (2006) have examined the cultural construction of the Indian middle-class woman as a bearer of tradition and moral order. Murthy's characters often fulfill this role while simultaneously pushing its boundaries—through education, self-reliance, or compassionate activism—thereby offering a progressive reinterpretation of conventional roles. existing literature acknowledges Murthy's unique position in Indian English writing: her female characters do not challenge patriarchy through rebellion, but through dignity, resilience, and moral idealism. This subtle yet powerful mode of representation enriches the field of gender studies in Indian literature, inviting further exploration of alternative forms of agency and resistance.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**



This study follows a qualitative, interpretative research design grounded in literary analysis. It employs textual and thematic analysis to explore how Sudha Murthy portrays the idealism of middle-class Indian women in her selected works. The research is descriptive in nature and aims to analyze the moral, cultural, and emotional dimensions of Murthy's female characters within a socio-cultural context.

### **Selection of Texts**

The primary sources for this study include selected works of Sudha Murthy where the lives of middle-class women are prominently featured. These include but are not limited to:

- Wise and Otherwise
- The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk
- Three Thousand Stitches
- The Old Man and His God

These texts have been chosen for their thematic relevance and for representing a variety of women's experiences across class, region, and personal struggles.

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data is collected through close reading of the primary texts. Key passages, character dialogues, and narrative events are examined to identify themes of idealism, gender roles, moral dilemmas, and cultural expectations. Relevant secondary sources, such as critical essays, journal articles, and interviews with or about Sudha Murthy, are also reviewed to provide scholarly context.

### **Analytical Framework**

The study uses a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and values in Murthy's female characters. The analysis is informed by feminist literary theory, with specific attention to Indian cultural frameworks. Concepts such as "negotiated agency," "domestic idealism," and "moral strength" are central to interpreting character development and narrative outcomes.

### **Scope and Delimitation**

This study is limited to Sudha Murthy's English-language prose collections that depict Indian middle-class women. It does not include her Kannada works, children's books, or texts focusing primarily on male protagonists. The research does not aim to provide a comparative analysis with other authors, but instead focuses exclusively on Murthy's literary contribution.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

**1. Moral Idealism and Everyday Agency**

Sudha Murthy's female characters consistently reflect a form of idealism grounded in everyday ethical choices rather than abstract moral superiority. In *Wise and Otherwise*, the character of a widowed woman who refuses monetary help from her estranged son reflects emotional dignity and self-reliance. Her decision is not portrayed as dramatic or revolutionary, but as an assertion of self-worth. This reflects Murthy's recurring theme that real strength lies in the ability to uphold values even in isolation or adversity.

Such characters represent what may be called "practical idealism"—a moral framework that is adaptable yet unyielding in core values like honesty, compassion, and duty. These women do not seek validation from society; instead, their internal moral compass guides them, often leading to subtle yet impactful social change.

**2. Cultural Rootedness and Modern Aspirations**

Murthy's protagonists frequently embody a balance between cultural rootedness and personal ambition. For instance, in *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, the narrative of a young village girl aspiring to become a teacher despite poverty highlights not only the value of education but also a deep respect for familial responsibility. Her ambition is not at the cost of tradition but aligned with it—showing how modern aspirations can coexist with cultural values. This reflects the typical Indian middle-class female dilemma—caught between self-advancement and societal roles. Murthy doesn't see this as conflict but as cohabitation of identities. Her characters do not reject cultural norms but rather reinterpret them to carve out their space.

**3. Gender Roles and Silent Resistance**

Sudha Murthy's stories do not depict women engaged in open rebellion, but they often contain quiet acts of defiance that challenge gender norms. In *Three Thousand Stitches*, the narrative of rehabilitated sex workers led by Murthy herself highlights how societal outcasts can reclaim their dignity through work, community, and education. Though not fictional, the portrayal exemplifies Murthy's commitment to showcasing feminine resilience in marginalized spaces. Similarly, many of her fictional women resist patriarchy not with confrontation but through "negotiated strength"—choosing to endure when necessary, and act when possible. This silent resistance is a recurring theme, offering a powerful counter-narrative to dominant Western feminist tropes of radical activism.

**4. Ethical Narratives and Reader Impact**

Murthy's idealism is not limited to her characters—it extends to her readers. Her simple prose and emotionally accessible storytelling invite moral reflection. The stories often end with a subtle moral conclusion, allowing readers to evaluate their own values. This ethical engagement is part of what makes her writing impactful and widely relatable, especially among middle-class readers who see fragments of themselves in her narratives.

The didactic nature of her work, often criticized in academic circles, is in fact central to her literary intent: to restore moral imagination in a fast-changing society. Her works argue that idealism is not outdated—it is necessary.

### **FINDINGS**

This study finds that idealism serves as the cornerstone of Sudha Murthy's literary depiction of middle-class Indian women. Her female characters are not extraordinary by birth or circumstance, but by their consistent moral resolve and ability to uphold ethical principles in everyday life. Whether it is honesty in the workplace, loyalty in relationships, or compassion toward the marginalized, these characters make conscious choices guided by a strong sense of duty and values. Unlike conventional portrayals of empowered women that rely on visible rebellion or radical transformation, Murthy's women exhibit strength through quiet persistence, moral courage, and inner conviction. They do not reject societal expectations outright; instead, they navigate them with grace, reshaping roles from within rather than challenging them externally.

Another key finding is that Murthy's women represent the interplay between tradition and modernity. These characters often strive for self-reliance through education or employment, but without severing ties to cultural roots. For example, many protagonists continue to uphold religious practices, familial responsibilities, and social customs while also aspiring to personal growth. This dual engagement with progress and tradition is a defining feature of the middle-class Indian woman in Murthy's works, reflecting the real-life tension experienced by many Indian women today. Moreover, the study highlights Murthy's use of "silent resistance" as a literary strategy. Her female characters often endure patriarchal pressures or personal loss, but rather than becoming passive victims, they assert their agency through emotional intelligence, self-respect, and perseverance. This form of resistance, though subtle, carries transformative potential. It demonstrates that not all empowerment is loud or revolutionary; sometimes, the most profound shifts happen through ethical constancy and moral resilience.

Additionally, Murthy's storytelling style—marked by simplicity and moral clarity—serves to inspire ethical introspection among readers. The relatability of her characters, especially for middle-class audiences, bridges the gap between fiction and real life. Her stories act not only as literary narratives but also as social reflections, encouraging readers to reconsider their understanding of womanhood, strength, and cultural values. In conclusion, the findings underscore that Sudha Murthy's portrayal of middle-class Indian women challenges literary and societal stereotypes by offering a model of empowerment rooted in idealism, tradition, and quiet moral strength. Her characters stand as symbols of everyday heroism, offering a counter-narrative to both submissive and hyper-independent depictions of women in Indian English literature.

## CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that Sudha Murthy's portrayal of middle-class Indian women is rooted in a unique blend of realism and idealism, offering a literary space where traditional values and modern aspirations co-exist. Her female characters are not defined by rebellion or dramatic transformations but by their unwavering moral clarity, emotional strength, and ethical decisions. These women embody quiet empowerment—asserting their individuality, dignity, and agency through everyday acts of kindness, perseverance, and responsibility.

Murthy's narratives redefine the idea of female strength by shifting the focus from external resistance to internal conviction. Her characters challenge gender roles and societal expectations not through overt defiance but through the ability to remain ethically grounded in a rapidly changing world. They symbolize a form of empowerment that is deeply Indian—one that respects cultural norms while subtly transforming them. Furthermore, the study recognizes Murthy's significant contribution to Indian English literature by giving voice to a segment often neglected or stereotyped: the middle-class Indian woman. Through her simple yet powerful storytelling, Murthy has created relatable, inspiring role models who reflect the complexities and capabilities of women in India's socio-cultural landscape. Her work not only enriches literary discourse but also encourages readers to engage in self-reflection, moral responsibility, and inclusive thinking. Murthy's literary universe challenges the notion that idealism is outdated or impractical. Instead, it repositions idealism as a relevant, transformative force—especially in the hands of women who live ordinary lives with extraordinary integrity.

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