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**From Oral to Written: The Feminisation of Storytelling Traditions in Sudha Murty's Short Stories**<sup>1</sup>Likhita UPG Student, Department of English, Central University of Andhra Pradesh,  
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Ananthapuramu**Abstract**

Indian storytelling traditions have historically evolved through rich oral practices rooted in community life, ritual, and domestic spaces, in which women, especially elders, have played a central yet often unacknowledged role as transmitters of cultural knowledge. These oral narratives, encompassing folktales, myths, and moral parables, functioned as informal pedagogical tools that shaped ethical values and collective memory. The gradual shift from oral to written modes of narration marks a critical moment in literary history, raising questions of authorship, authority, and cultural preservation. Within this transition emerges the concept of the feminisation of storytelling, wherein qualities traditionally associated with women, such as nurturance, moral instruction, relationality, and care, are re-evaluated as legitimate literary strategies rather than peripheral domestic acts. Situated within this framework, the works of Sudha Murty represent a significant literary intervention. Through texts such as *The Magic Drum and Other Favourite Stories* (2006), *Grandma's Bag of Stories* (2012), and *The Magic of the Lost Temple* (2015), Murty translates women's oral wisdom into written narratives that foreground grandmother figures as moral authorities and cultural custodians. The paper argues that Murty's storytelling reclaims feminine authorship and reinforces cultural continuity by embedding oral traditions within accessible written forms.

**Keywords:** Feminist narratology, gendered authorship, Indian storytelling traditions, oral narrative traditions, nurturance

**Introduction**

Storytelling occupies a foundational and enduring position in Indian cultural history, functioning as one of the earliest modes of knowledge transmission and cultural pedagogy. Long before print culture became prevalent, narratives circulated orally in various forms such as *kathās*, folktales, myths, legends, fables, and moral anecdotes, performed in domestic spaces, village gatherings, temples, and informal communal contexts (Narayan 3-5; Agrawal and Dwivedi 15-16). These oral narratives were deeply embedded in cultural life and served

multifaceted purposes, including entertainment, ethical instruction, moral development, and the reinforcement of social norms. Across regions, oral storytelling exhibited remarkable adaptability, reflecting local cultural values, regional dialects, and specific ethical concerns (Sridevi 6; Lobo 22-24). For instance, stories in the northern and southern regions of India differed in their narrative forms, mythic elements, and moral emphases, yet all relied on performance, memory, and relational authority to transmit cultural knowledge (Bhatt 18; Rameshwar 22).

Women, especially mothers and grandmothers, were central to these oral traditions, occupying crucial roles as transmitters of cultural, ethical, and social knowledge. These female storytellers performed their narrative work during routine domestic activities, festival observances, and intergenerational rituals, creating spaces for informal education (Lobo 23-25; Sridevi 8). Their narratives often emphasized moral virtues, relational ethics, cooperation, and resilience, aligning with feminist notions of an “ethics of care” (Bhardwaj 18; Pavithra and Priya 146-149). Authority in these narratives was derived from lived experience and relational insight, rather than literacy, formal authorship, or textual permanence (Narayan 13; Valarmathi and Davaseeli 45). Women’s storytelling thus functioned not only as cultural preservation but also as moral education and intergenerational continuity, cultivating ethical reasoning and communal values in the absence of formal education (Tharu and Lalita xxiii; ANanthan and Karthikeyan 12).

The advent of print technology and colonial education systems significantly reshaped the valuation of storytelling. Ong notes that literate societies privilege textual permanence, linearity, and abstraction, often marginalizing oral forms that depend on memory, redundancy, and communal performance (Ong 67-69). Colonial and postcolonial literacies, coupled with patriarchal norms, excluded women from public authorship and relegated their domestic storytelling to private spheres, rendering it culturally significant but literarily marginal (Showalter 19; Mishra 11; Rayová 32). Oral narratives, traditionally associated with domesticity and femininity, were dismissed as repetitive, informal, or lacking aesthetic sophistication. Scholars argue that this marginalization reflects broader gendered hierarchies in literary evaluation, where women’s moral instruction, episodic storytelling, and relational narratives were systematically undervalued (Pavithra and Priya 146-149; Navgire 16). Consequently, women’s voices, which had sustained ethical, cultural, and social continuity, were historically erased from Indian literary historiography (Bhatt 15; Rameshwar 22).

Despite such erasures, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the richness and significance of women’s oral storytelling. Studies emphasize how oral narratives adapt to social contexts, embedding cultural values, communal memory, and ethical teachings in performative and repetitive forms (Krishnaswami and Kannada 20; Lobo 24-25). Grandmother-centered storytelling, in particular, functions as a locus for moral education, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and relational authority, highlighting the epistemic power of women in shaping collective memory (Bhardwaj 20; Sridevi 8). The pedagogical role of storytelling is especially pronounced in children’s literature, where oral

traditions are adapted for young audiences to cultivate moral reasoning, ethical reflection, and cultural literacy (Bhatt 18; ANanthan and Karthikeyan 12).

In this historical and cultural context, Sudha Murty emerges as a critical figure bridging oral traditions and written literature. Murty's works, such as *The Magic Drum and Other Favourite Stories*, *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, and *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, draw extensively on oral storytelling practices, particularly those associated with female narrators and domestic spaces (Agrawal and Dwivedi 19; Sridevi 6; Lobo 24). By translating oral narratives into written prose, Murty reclaims domestic storytelling as culturally significant and literarily valid, challenging elitist definitions of literary authority and literary hierarchies (Bag 12-13; CJ 16; Majumder 146). Her stories preserve the episodic structure, repetition, framing, and moral closure characteristic of oral forms, while achieving permanence and accessibility through print. In this process, women are repositioned as central agents of cultural knowledge, ethical guidance, and relational authority (Fatima and Kumar 9; Bhatt 20; Pavithra and Priya 150).

Murty's literary strategies are often critiqued as simplistic or overly didactic; however, such critiques frequently overlook her deliberate engagement with oral aesthetics, narrative structure, and feminist narrative authority (Sivakumar 429; Shukla 5; Navgire 16). By centering female narrators and grandmother figures, Murty enacts a feminist reclamation of narrative space, validating domestic and moral storytelling as significant literary practices (Rayová 32; Pillai 109; Valarmathi and Davaseeli 45). Her narratives, while accessible to young readers, convey complex cultural, ethical, and pedagogical knowledge, demonstrating the societal and educational value of oral storytelling in the Indian context (Krishnaswami and Kannada 22; Bhardwaj 20; Majumder 148).

The feminist and postcolonial significance of Murty's work is further illuminated through theoretical frameworks. Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" emphasizes structural barriers that historically silenced marginalized voices, including women's oral narratives (Spivak 287). Mohanty highlights the importance of attending to localized, culturally specific experiences in feminist critique, advocating for the recognition of women's situated epistemologies (Mohanty 17). bell hooks conceptualises storytelling as an act of care, resistance, and survival, which validates the relational and moral dimensions present in Murty's narratives (hooks 43; Rameshwar 25). Murty's adaptation of myth, folklore, and moral tales demonstrates the integration of oral pedagogy with feminist and postcolonial concerns, emphasizing cultural preservation and ethical development within children's literature (Bhatt 18; ANanthan and Karthikeyan 12; Pavithra and Priya 150).

Murty's stories also highlight the role of oral storytelling as a pedagogical tool. By employing episodic repetition, framing devices, and moral closure, she cultivates ethical reasoning, social empathy, and cultural literacy among young readers (Sridevi 8; Lobo 25; Bag 13). Her focus on intergenerational storytelling ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge, bridging historical oral practices with contemporary literary forms. Murty's narratives exemplify how domestic storytelling can function as both intellectual labour and

moral instruction, thereby integrating cultural feminist principles into Indian children's literature (CJ 18; Fatima and Kumar 9; Majumder 146-148).

Sudha Murty's literary corpus addresses the dual historical marginalization of women's narrative authority and oral storytelling. By foregrounding female narrators, domestic spaces, and grandmother-centered narratives, Murty reclaims women's voices, validates domestic storytelling as literary practice, and engages with postcolonial feminist critique (Navgire 16; Shukla 8; Bhardwaj 20; ANanthan and Karthikeyan 12; Valarmathi and Davaseeli 45). Her works demonstrate that storytelling rooted in women's lived experience can challenge patriarchal literary hierarchies, cultivate ethical and cultural literacy, and ensure the transmission of intergenerational knowledge, thereby enriching the Indian literary canon and contemporary children's literature (Pavithra and Priya 150; Tharu and Lalita xxiii; Rameshwar 22; Majumder 148).

### **The Grandmother as the Feminine Griot**

One of the most defining narrative strategies in Sudha Murty's works is her consistent centering of the grandmother figure as storyteller, moral guide, and cultural custodian. In Indian oral tradition, grandmothers occupy a paradoxical position: while socially located within the private and domestic sphere, they wield significant narrative authority through memory, experience, and ethical instruction. Murty's deliberate elevation of this figure transforms what has historically been an informal, feminised role into a legitimate site of literary authorship.

In *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, the grandmother, Ajji, functions as the narrative nucleus of the text. The children gather around her each evening, recreating the oral storytelling circle within written form. Murty emphasises that Ajji's authority does not derive from literacy or institutional knowledge but from lived experience and remembrance: "Ajji never needed a book; her stories flowed as naturally as her breath" (*Grandma's Bag* 7). This narrative positioning validates oral memory as epistemology, directly challenging the privileging of textual knowledge in literate cultures (Ong 72).

From the perspective of feminist narratology, Ajji exemplifies Susan Lanser's relational narrative authority, in which credibility emerges from trust, care, and communal recognition rather than narrative dominance (Lanser 20). Ajji does not impose meaning; instead, she invites dialogue, reflection, and emotional engagement. Her storytelling style is dialogic rather than authoritarian, aligning with feminist critiques of patriarchal narrative structures that prioritise control and abstraction.

Furthermore, the grandmother figure restores intergenerational female continuity, a theme often disrupted by modern narratives that prioritise individualism. Storytelling becomes a shared act connecting past, present, and future through female lineage. This continuity challenges patriarchal literary traditions that marginalise women's experiential knowledge and exclude domestic wisdom from canonical recognition (Showalter 28). By situating narrative authority within the grandmother, Murty reclaims the domestic sphere as

a site of cultural production, reinforcing feminist arguments that caregiving and storytelling constitute intellectual labour.

### **Oral Aesthetics in Written Form**

Murty's narrative style consciously preserves the aesthetics of oral storytelling while adapting them to the written form. These aesthetics include repetition, episodic sequencing, conversational tone, direct address, and explicit moral closure-features traditionally associated with oral cultures rather than literary prose. Murty's retention of these elements constitutes a deliberate resistance to elitist literary norms that privilege ambiguity and stylistic complexity.

In *The Magic Drum and Other Favourite Stories*, narratives frequently unfold through cyclical patterns common to folktales. Characters encounter moral dilemmas, make ethical choices, and experience consequences that reinforce communal values. Repetition functions as a mnemonic and pedagogical device, reinforcing ethical lessons and aiding comprehension. Ong notes that repetition is central to oral cultures because it sustains memory and collective understanding (Ong 36). Murty's use of repetition thus reflects fidelity to oral tradition rather than narrative simplicity.

Critics have often dismissed Murty's explicit moral endings as didactic. However, feminist scholars argue that didacticism itself is gendered, historically associated with women's roles as caregivers and educators and therefore devalued within literary criticism (Showalter 31). Murty's narratives challenge this bias by reframing moral pedagogy as a vital cultural function. bell hooks conceptualises storytelling rooted in care and ethical instruction as a form of resistance within marginalised communities (hooks 62). Murty's stories align with this framework by emphasising compassion, honesty, and social responsibility.

Murty also succeeds in translating the communal listening experience of oral storytelling into textual form. Her conversational tone and simple diction simulate intimacy, positioning the reader as a participant rather than a detached observer. This strategy fosters what may be termed *textual empathy*, wherein readers engage emotionally and ethically with the narrative. Such narrative intimacy reflects a feminist ethos that prioritises relationality over authority.

### **Feminisation of Authorship**

The feminisation of storytelling in Murty's works extends beyond thematic concerns to encompass a broader redefinition of authorship itself. Murty's narrative voice foregrounds values traditionally associated with femininity-care, patience, empathy, and moral reflection-and repositions them as legitimate literary principles. This challenges masculinist conceptions of authorship that privilege detachment, abstraction, and individual heroism.

In *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, Murty adapts oral storytelling techniques to a novelistic structure. The protagonist Nooni's development is shaped less by solitary achievement than by collective learning and guidance from elders. Knowledge emerges

through listening, observation, and cooperation. Murty writes, “The elders spoke little, but their words stayed with the children long after” (*Magic of the Lost Temple* 91). This emphasis on quiet wisdom reinforces feminist critiques of dominant narrative models that equate authority with power or spectacle.

Susan Lanser argues that women writers often adopt alternative narrative strategies precisely because dominant modes of authority exclude them (Lanser 15). Murty’s accessible style, frequently dismissed as simplistic, thus becomes a deliberate feminist choice. By writing primarily for children and young readers, Murty democratizes literature, expanding access to ethical storytelling and resisting elitist literary gatekeeping (Nayar 152).

The feminisation of authorship in Murty’s work is further evident in her rejection of narrative hierarchy. Her stories privilege community over individuality, cooperation over competition, and care over conquest. In doing so, Murty redefines literary value, suggesting that stories need not be complex to be meaningful nor detached to be profound. This redefinition aligns with cultural feminist perspectives that recognise nurturing and moral instruction as forms of intellectual authority.

### **Reclaiming Silenced Voices**

A central feminist intervention in Murty’s storytelling lies in her reclamation of silenced voices, particularly those of ordinary women. Rather than focusing on exceptional heroines or elite figures, Murty foregrounds everyday experiences-village life, domestic labour, moral dilemmas-that reflect the lived realities of women historically excluded from literary representation.

This narrative choice resonates strongly with postcolonial feminist critiques of representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern can speak within dominant discourses (Spivak 287). While Murty writes from a position of relative privilege, her narratives create textual spaces where marginalised wisdom is acknowledged and preserved. Oral storytelling becomes a medium through which subaltern knowledge is transmitted, even if mediated through written form.

Murty’s emphasis on intergenerational storytelling further reinforces this reclamation. The act of storytelling functions as a survival strategy, preserving cultural memory in the face of modernisation and globalisation. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that women’s narratives in India often operate as counter-histories that resist dominant literary canons (Tharu and Lalita xxiii). Murty’s work exemplifies this counter-historical impulse by archiving domestic and oral narratives that might otherwise disappear.

Importantly, Murty does not romanticise these voices. Her stories acknowledge ethical failure, social inequality, and human vulnerability, lending authenticity to her feminist project. By allowing women’s oral wisdom to occupy written space without translation into elite discourse, Murty preserves its integrity and cultural specificity.

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**Intertextual and Cultural Resonances**

Murty's narratives exhibit strong intertextual resonances with classical Indian storytelling traditions such as the *Pañcatantra*<sup>1</sup> and *Hitopadeśa*.<sup>2</sup> Like these texts, Murty's stories employ moral parables to convey ethical lessons. However, her reinterpretation of these traditions is distinctly feminist.

Where classical texts often emphasise political wisdom, statecraft, and male agency, Murty foregrounds domestic ethics, empathy, and communal harmony. This shift represents a gendered reinterpretation of tradition, demonstrating that cultural heritage can be reimagined through feminist lenses rather than rejected. Murty thus challenges the assumption that tradition and feminism are inherently opposed (Tharu and Lalita xxx).

Murty functions as an oral historian of the domestic feminine experience, archiving stories sustained by women but excluded from formal histories. By translating oral narratives into written form, Murty ensures cultural continuity while adapting tradition to contemporary contexts. This balance between preservation and innovation underscores her contribution to Indian feminist literature.

Taken together, Sudha Murty's narrative strategies collectively constitute a coherent feminist project that reclaims oral storytelling as a form of authorship, pedagogy, and cultural resistance. Central to this project is the grandmother figure, who functions as a feminine griot, embodying relational knowledge, intergenerational continuity, and ethical instruction (Lanser 24; hooks 65; Sridevi 7). Through the preservation of oral aesthetics such as episodic structure, repetition, conversational tone, and moral closure Murty translates communal storytelling into written form without diminishing its relational or performative qualities (Ong 36; Lobo 23; Agrawal and Dwivedi 20). By redefining authorship as care-centered and relational, she challenges patriarchal notions of literary authority, demonstrating that narrative legitimacy can emerge from ethical engagement, lived experience, and domestic knowledge rather than formal education or canonical approval (Showalter 31; Bhardwaj 18; Valarmathi and Davaseeli 46).

Murty's work legitimizes narratives rooted in domestic spaces and feminine experience, challenging dominant literary hierarchies while expanding the boundaries of Indian literature (CJ 17; Majumder 148; Pavithra and Priya 151). Oral storytelling, long marginalized as repetitive and informal, is reimagined as a sophisticated literary practice capable of cultural and moral instruction. The grandmother figure serves as a symbolic locus of intergenerational empowerment, transmitting experiential knowledge, ethical reasoning, and cultural memory (Grandma's Bag 4; Sridevi 8). By centering female narrators, Murty validates domestic storytelling as intellectual labor rather than a limitation imposed by domestic confinement (Bhardwaj 20; Lobo 25).

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The feminization of storytelling in Murty's work operates at structural and ideological levels. Structurally, her narratives reproduce the rhythms of oral traditions through episodic framing, repetition, and didactic closure (Ong 36; Agrawal and Dwivedi 22). Ideologically, they foreground care, empathy, and moral instruction, redefining literary authority in relational and communal terms rather than hierarchical or patriarchal ones (hooks 62; Showalter 31; Navgire 17). This approach bridges the gap between domestic oral traditions and public literary recognition, highlighting the pedagogical potential of storytelling for shaping ethical consciousness and cultural literacy among children (Tharu and Lalita xxiii; Bhatt 19). Murty's narratives cultivate reflective thinking, social empathy, and moral reasoning, demonstrating the value of oral pedagogy in contemporary literary contexts (Krishnaswami and Kannada 22; Bhardwaj 20; Majumder 148).

Moreover, Murty's work performs acts of cultural resistance, preserving marginalized voices and ethical traditions within a literary framework historically dominated by male authorship (Rayová 33; Pillai 110). By integrating myth, folklore, and local ethical paradigms, her stories engage with postcolonial feminist principles, emphasizing culturally situated knowledge and resisting Westernized hierarchies of literary value (Mohanty 18; Spivak 288; CJ 16). The grandmother figure, in particular, embodies relational authority and intergenerational pedagogy, enabling young readers to internalize ethical, cultural, and social lessons through engaging narratives (Grandma's Bag 7; Rameshwar 25).

Ultimately, Murty demonstrates that oral storytelling, historically relegated to domestic spaces, can be transformed into literary acts of authorship, feminist pedagogy, and cultural empowerment. By foregrounding women's voices, relational ethics, and moral pedagogy, Murty challenges patriarchal literary hierarchies, validates domestic and oral labor as intellectual work, and enriches Indian literature with narratives that are both culturally rooted and ethically instructive (Sridevi 10; Lobo 27; Bhardwaj 21; Pavithra and Priya 154; Shukla 9). Her stories offer a model for integrating oral traditions into contemporary feminist writing, illustrating how narrative authority can emerge from care, relationality, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Sudha Murty's storytelling bridges the divide between oral heritage and written authorship, reclaiming the voices of women historically excluded from literary recognition. Through grandmother narrators, oral aesthetics, and moral pedagogy, Murty repositions storytelling as a feminist act of cultural preservation and ethical instruction. This study situates Murty's works as significant contributions to Indian feminist literature, demonstrating that oral tradition remains a living, empowering narrative practice rather than a relic of the past (Nayar 152; Mohanty 45).

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