



MEDICATED MEDITATIONS OF SUDHA MURTHY IN “WISE AND OTHERWISE”

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ABSTRACT

Sudha Murthy is an Indian social worker and writer. She writes both in Kannada and English languages. Mrs. Murthy began her professional career as a computer scientist and engineer. She is the chairperson of the Infosys foundation and a member of public health care initiatives of the Gates foundation. She has founded several orphanages, participated in rural development efforts, supported the movement to provide all schools in Karnataka with computers and library facilities and established ‘The Murthy classical library of India’ at Harvard University. Mrs. Murthy initiated a bold move to introduce computer and library facilities in all schools in Karnataka and taught computer science. She is best known for her social work and her plethora of stories. She is a multifaceted personality. The wide range of Sudha Murthy’s social work covers the sectors of healthcare, education, empowerment of women, public hygiene, art and culture. She has set up 50,000 libraries in rural areas so far. Sudha Murthy is also a prolific writer in Kannada and English. She has written nine novels, four technical books, three travelogues, one collection of short stories, three collection of non-fiction pieces and two books for children. Marathi movie ‘Pitrurroon’ is based on a story by Sudha Murthy.

INTRODUCTION

Wise and Otherwise - A salute to life, a collection of short stories by Sudha Murthy, throws limelight on author’s encounter with people from all walks of life during her lifetime. Though it is written by a female author containing details of outlook according to feminine mindset, example: colour of sari, bangles, women gossiping at places, and engross even the ‘macho-est’ (man who is aggressively proud of his masculinity) of men. Sudha Murthy has a vantage point in observing life from various perspectives, often at extremes. Her language is simple, crisp and direct. She achieves in communicating the intended message.

Sudha Murthy narrates incidents from the poor and marginalized sections of society that tugs at one’s heart strings; even the person is of stoic emotional type. This book is absolutely a



wakeup call for all our moral senses. Mrs. Murthy portrays the lives of the poorest of the poor in India, human attitudes and characters, which kindles the readers to feel how blessed they are. The collection will surely teach the readers that there is still innocence, love and sympathy left in each person.

As the essays of Francis Bacon, Sudha Murthy's stories are dispersed meditation. It is the style, where, in each story dealing with an experience or thought, the ideas that are coming one by one are not focusing on a particular theme, theory or target group of readers. This is why the applicability of Bacon's 'dispersed meditation' is justified. As Bacon does, Sudha Murthy too does not stay away from the subject that she places before herself. There is nothing irrelevant or unrelated to the mundane encounters and miniatures of human sketches. She does not allow her mind or fancy to loiter and roam there seems to be a strong edifice of authenticity making the narration spontaneous. Like Bacon's essays, her stories are not well-knit compositions because there are no light connections between the various ideas and the ideas do not seem to flow from one another. There is no a structural unity in them.

The cover page of her *Wise and Otherwise*, with an innocent lady and the dove staring at the landscape, suggests someone looking back at life and analyzing one's growth as human amidst incongruent environment. One could visualize the down to earth approach of the author, after reading each story. Her dedication states "For the shirtless people of India, who have taught me so much about my country". She hails from an elite family, but she stoops down to the level of the sons of the soil. As stated in the foreword of *Wise and Otherwise* 'she has built no edifices'.(PNO) No public announcements accompany her work. No statues or tablets or archways proclaim her presence. She goes into tribal forests, into hamlets ravaged by poverty and into communities devastated by disease. She discovers the deserving on her own. Frustration and obstacle do not slow her down. Even human greed, a great deal of which she faces in the course of her work, does not dissuade her. Her work is her vision. She does her duty in the style and the spirit of a 'karma yogi.'" Mrs. Murthy has dedicated her life as a philanthropist unlike other well-to-do people who lead a mechanical life focused only on minting money.

Wise and otherwise opens with a story "Honesty comes from the heart." This story is all about a coolie's son Hanumanthappa, the eldest of five children, who has secured eighth rank in his Higher Secondary Examination and unable to study further. Sudha Murthy helps the bright boy by sponsoring for his education. She paid him Rs.1800 to cover all his expenses for first six months. He acknowledged it. She then paid Rs.1800 for next six months, which was duly acknowledged, but she was startled to see some currency notes in the envelope along with a letter. The letter explained "Madam, it is kind of you to have sent me money for the next six months" and that he has not been to college for two months, because of holidays and strike. "So I stayed at home for those two months. My expenditure during these months was less than Rs.300 per month. Therefore I am sending you the Rs.300 that I have not used

K. ABARNA SRI PREETHI

2P a g e

for the last two months. Kindly accept this amount.”(WO-P NO:4) Sudha Murthy was taken aback.

Though Hanumanthappa is engulfed in poverty, he becomes an epitome of honesty. From this notable incident, one could arrive at the conclusion that “honesty” is not the mark of any particular class, nor it is related to education or wealth, it cannot be taught, but it springs naturally from the heart. It also shatters the idea that needy are always greedy. From this great experience with the great soul Sudha Murthy takes the reader to a mean-minded man, his heart blackened by shameless selfishness. Pride resulted in the fall of the angel, turning him into Satan. A strong resemblance of this is identified in the protagonist of “On Human Foibles”. Man’s weakness of living in falsities is portrayed in this story. It is about the so-called ‘learned man,’ who is unable to mask his shame and behaves eccentric, in the end the story .

Sudha Murthy meets a young man who is supposed to coordinate with her, during her visit to a project site. The man seemed to be well-mannered. After the work was completed, the man insisted Ms. Murthy to join him to have a cup of tea at his residence. She was introduced to his wife and two-year old son. His son seemed to be a robot, who does everything as dictated by his father. As the conversation progresses the author comes to know that the man has studied in the same college where she studied and in the same year. But she felt kick in the teeth, when she heard that the man secured first-rank in his batch and obtained the gold medal for that year. She became alert and asked him to show ‘his’ gold medal. She could see the change in his temper. He became restless and told that it is in bank locker. Mrs. Murthy asked for his bank details, the man was annoyed and questioned her “Why should I give you such details?” Sudha Murthy rose up from her chair and walked towards the door and told the man, “I am sure that the medal cannot be with you.”(WO-P.NO:10) The man became impatient and asked her, how she could tell with such confidence. Sudha Murthy replied to him in a sad tone, “I secured that gold medal in 1972 and only one gold medal is awarded each year.”(WO-P,NO:10) The man was stunned and felt bolt from the blue.

This story portrays the characteristic traits of human beings, though they lead a sophisticated life with a good job, family and endowed with all amenities, they are prone to utter lies which have the power to ruin one’s personality and individuality. The heavy cloud of falsehood hovering above his head falls as in Oliver Goldsmith’s *Man in Black* that “in some unguarded moment the mask falls off”.

A tribal chief in the Sahyadri hills teaches the author that there is humility in receiving too, which is exposed in one of her stories “In Sahyadri hills -A lesson in Humility.” The story begins with a visual treat describing Sahyadri hills, a densely forested region in Karnataka. Through her description, “mild smell of exotic trees, shrubs and flowers, the chirping of different kinds of birds, the gentle whistle of the unpolluted breeze,” (WO-PNO:11) Sudha



Murthy kindles the readers' senses. The poet and writer in her is excited with the scenic beauty of the woods.

The story is all about, Mrs. Murthy's contribution to the rural school students in Sahyadri hills. She brought umbrellas and clothes for the children which was hesitated by Thandappa, who is the senior most man of the tribe and is considered the supreme power almost a living God. The writer asked the children who were standing around her, what they wanted. Few youngsters told her that they have heard of computers but they have not seen them except on TV, so they wanted to learn computers. They asked for books about computers that were written in Kannada. Sudha Murthy promised them that she would look for those books in Bangalore, and if she does not find any, she would write a book herself. The children were extremely pleased. At this juncture Thandappa presented her a bottle of juice extracted from a wild red fruit as a token of love. She felt embarrassed, because those people did not have enough to eat and drink, moreover she felt that she had gone for a mission to give and not to accept anything from them. She declined the gift politely. Thandappa told her that he cannot accept her gift. He further insisted that their ancestors had taught them a set of principles. He said that he would accept gifts from others, only when he has something in return to give them. Along with Sudha Murthy the readers also are impressed by the words of the old man, a tribal man with no schooling, practicing a highly principled philosophy of life. This was the culture at the best. The gesture of high culture and civilization in an uncouth man in the eyes of the so called 'civilized' sensitizes the moral values of the readers.

The story "In India, the Worst of both Worlds," depicts how the old are forsaken by their children and left as orphans. It is heart-aching to see and hear such incidents in everyday life. In Western countries old people die in old-age homes and will their property to home or hospitals, for the benefit of other senior citizens. But in India, children neglect aged parents, and parents routinely leave their property to their children. This story is all about a very old man, who was brought by a middle aged man to Sudha Murthy's office.

The middle aged man discloses that, on his way to office, he came across the old man sitting near a bus stop. He asked Mrs. Murthy to help the old man to get admitted in an old age home. Sudha Murthy felt bad and sent him to an old age home, to which she used to ring up and enquire about him. On one day, she got a call from the caretaker of the home, saying that the man is sick and he is hospitalized. Mrs. Murthy went to see the old man, he was really unwell. She asked the old man for his last wish. With a trembling hand, he wrote a number in a piece of paper and gave it to Mrs. Murthy. She rang up, and informed the receiver know about the condition of the old man. After some time the visitor came, by that time, the old man has breathed his last breath. After all formalities got over, the visitor approached Sudha Murthy. The man seemed very familiar to her. He asked her for the bag, which the old man had. Mrs. Murthy looked puzzled. The man told her that, he was the one who accompanied the old man to her office few days back and that he is the old man's son. Mrs. Murthy felt

K. ABARNA SRI PREETHI

4P a g e

upset. The man had his own story to tell her. He told her that since his wife hated his father and did not accept the idea of having him at home, he has cooked up such a story. Mrs. Murthy accused him for his shameful act and for setting a bad example. Mrs. Murthy unravels the modern India losing its familial values and ties and aping the Western culture of nuclear families. It also reinforces the self-centeredness ruling the mind of modern man.

Most of the stories in this collection are a sort of comparisons. One such story “Unwed mothers,” unveils the pathetic plight of a women being single mother who raise up their children without a male counterpart for her. This story depicts a twofold approach to the problem. Kusuma, one of Sudha Murthy’s students had become pregnant before marriage. Her parents were upset, when they came to know about it. They were afraid of the society and feared what others would think about the issue. Finally the girl committed suicide.

Mrs. Murthy was taken home by her Norwegian friend Martha for a meal. A little boy came running in and hugged Martha. After sometime Martha’s cousin, Mary, a post graduate student in Political Science, joined them. The small boy pulled Mary’s skirt and said “Mom, I want more bread.” Mrs. Murthy was surprised to hear that. Later out of curiosity she asked Martha about Mary. Martha told her Mary’s story. Mary and Daniel fell in love in their teenage and Mary became pregnant. When she got pregnant Daniel did not want to marry her because, he was only in college then. Mary did not want to abort the child, so she gave birth to the baby. Martha told Mrs. Murthy that Mary may marry her new boyfriend next year. She further told her that Daniel has a good job and visits Mary’s little boy twice a year and pays money for child’s maintenance and he too will marry his new girl friend in the New Year. Mrs. Murthy, was reminded of her student. Same situation, at the same age, but the outcome was so different.

Mrs. Sudha Murthy has thrown the pearls of her wisdom before her readers. Though her writing is associated with self help books, readers can find the didactic tinge in her stories make them interesting. Literature of course is for life’s sake and the new bright star in the horizons of Indian writing is very promising, upholding the old Indian values for the new generation.

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