



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

## Transnational Longings and Local Duties: Women's Negotiations in Sudha Murthy's Writing

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.208](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.208)



Article information

Article Received:15/02/2026  
Article Accepted:12/03/2026  
Published online:17/03/2026

### Abstract

This paper examines how Sudha Murthy's writing articulates the complex negotiations women undertake between transnational aspirations and local responsibilities in contemporary Indian society. Through characters who traverse geographical, cultural, and emotional boundaries, Murthy foregrounds the tensions between global mobility, economic opportunity, and traditional familial expectations. Her narratives often feature women positioned at the crossroads of duty toward family, community, and inherited values and longing for education, autonomy, and professional fulfilment. By analysing select novels and stories, the study highlights how Murthy portrays women's agency not as outright rebellion but as a continuous balancing act shaped by empathy, resilience, and ethical responsibility. The paper argues that Murthy's fiction reframes transnational experiences not as a rupture from the local but as an expansion of women's identities, enabling them to negotiate belonging across multiple cultural contexts. Ultimately, the study reveals how Murthy's work contributes to broader discourses on gender, migration, and cultural continuity by presenting women who navigate global possibilities without severing ties to their rooted traditions.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism, Gender Negotiation, Cultural Identity, Women's Agency, Sudha Murthy.

### 1. Introduction

In an era shaped by accelerated globalisation, transnational mobility, and shifting socio-cultural values, Indian women increasingly find themselves negotiating identities that span multiple

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geographies and emotional landscapes. Literature has emerged as a vital medium through which these negotiations are explored, questioned, and reimaged. Sudha Murthy renowned writer, philanthropist, and chronicler of everyday Indian life occupies a distinctive position in this discourse. Her narratives illuminate how women navigate the interplay between global aspirations and deeply rooted cultural responsibilities, portraying lives shaped simultaneously by mobility and belonging.

Murthy's fiction consistently foregrounds women who are neither confined by traditional roles nor entirely liberated by modernity. Instead, they inhabit spaces of negotiation, where education, migration, career ambitions, and exposure to global cultures coexist with familial duties, community expectations, and moral values. Whether depicting the emotional dislocations of migration in *Dollar Bahu*, the thwarted intellectual aspirations of Shri in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, or the ethical determination of Anupama in *Mahashweta*, Murthy captures the subtle tensions that define contemporary Indian womanhood.

The central concern of this study is to examine how Murthy's female characters reconcile transnational longings the desire for education, professional growth, mobility, and self-realisation with local duties rooted in family, culture, and tradition. Rather than framing these forces as oppositional, Murthy reveals how they intersect, overlap, and mutually shape women's lived experiences. Her protagonists do not seek rupture from their cultural foundations; instead, they rework their identities to include multiple forms of belonging.

Employing feminist, cultural, and transnational lenses, this paper analyses selected novels and stories to explore how Murthy constructs women's agency as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice. The study argues that her portrayal challenges simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity, proposing instead a nuanced understanding of women's empowerment grounded in relational ethics, resilience, and self-awareness. By situating Murthy's works within broader debates on gender and globalisation, the paper demonstrates how her writing contributes to contemporary conversations about the evolving landscape of Indian womanhood.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study draws on key ideas from transnational feminism, cultural studies, and gender theory to analyse how Sudha Murthy's female characters negotiate competing demands shaped by mobility, aspiration, and tradition. These theoretical strands illuminate the intersections of identity, agency, and social expectation that define women's experiences in Murthy's writing.

### 2.1 Transnational Feminism

Transnational feminism critiques universalised notions of womanhood and instead examines how women's experiences are shaped by borders, migration, global labour flows, and cultural displacement. It highlights that mobility is never neutral; it is structured by unequal access to economic opportunity, patriarchal norms, and national ideologies. In Murthy's narratives, transnationalism appears not only as physical migration as seen in *Dollar Bahu* but also as a psychological and aspirational dimension. Women long for education, global exposure, and autonomy, yet these desires are mediated by obligations to family and community. The framework of transnational feminism helps interpret these layered negotiations, showing how Murthy's protagonists balance global dreams with culturally rooted responsibilities.

### 2.2 Gendered Cultural Expectations

Indian socio-cultural systems place women at the centre of maintaining familial honour, emotional harmony, and cultural continuity. Duties such as caregiving, marital commitment, and multi-generational bonding often shape women's choices, sometimes constraining movement, aspiration, or economic independence. Murthy's writing foregrounds this reality through characters

who internalise cultural expectations yet attempt to interpret them in personally meaningful ways. This framework enables an understanding of how “local duties” function not merely as restrictions but as socially embedded practices that structure women’s identities. It also highlights how Murthy’s protagonists navigate these expectations through negotiation rather than confrontation.

### 2.3 Agency as Negotiation

Contemporary feminist scholarship shifts the meaning of agency away from binary understandings of resistance versus submission. Instead, agency is conceptualised as relational, situational, and negotiated. Women exercise power not only through rebellion but also through compromise, ethical decision-making, and strategic adaptation. In Murthy’s fiction, protagonist such as Shri (*Gently Falls the Bakula*), Vinuta (*Dollar Bahu*), and Anupama (*Mahashweta*) exemplify this nuanced form of agency. Their decisions reflect self-awareness, empathy, resilience, and the capacity to balance competing demands, illustrating a model of empowerment deeply rooted in everyday lived experience.

### 2.4 Locality and Belonging

The concept of locality extends beyond geography to encompass cultural memory, rituals, emotional ties, and inherited values. Local belonging provides identity and moral grounding even as women engage with global spaces. In Murthy’s writing, the “local” is neither static nor regressive; rather, it offers a cultural anchor that shapes women’s emotional and ethical frameworks. This framework helps explain why Murthy’s characters often return emotionally or physically to their roots even after experiencing transnational mobility. Their sense of home becomes a site of reconciliation between aspiration and responsibility.

### 2.5 Hybrid Identities in Globalised Contexts

Globalisation encourages the formation of hybrid identities that merge local values with global experiences. Indian women who migrate, study abroad, or work transnationally often develop layered identities shaped by multiple cultural affiliations. Murthy’s protagonists embody this hybridity: they may aspire to global success, yet they remain emotionally grounded in familial bonds and culturally anchored ethics. Hybrid identity thus becomes a lens for understanding how Murthy’s women sustain both mobility and rootedness without perceiving them as contradictory.

## 3. Sudha Murthy’s Women: Negotiations and Transformations

Sudha Murthy’s literary universe is populated by women who stand at the crossroads of aspiration and obligation. They carry the weight of socio-cultural expectations while simultaneously nurturing dreams shaped by education, global exposure, and personal ambition. Rather than situating her female characters in binaries tradition versus modernity, duty versus desire, India versus the West Murthy portrays their journeys as continual negotiations. These negotiations produce profound emotional, ethical, and psychological transformations that define contemporary Indian womanhood. Through her accessible yet insightful narrative voice, Murthy foregrounds the nuances of women’s lived experiences, shedding light on the often invisible labour that accompanies their choices.

### 3.1 Education as a Pathway to Mobility and Self-Realisation

For many of Murthy’s protagonists, education represents both opportunity and conflict. It offers the possibility of independence, global mobility, and personal fulfilment, but it also generates tensions within the domestic sphere. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shri is academically gifted and aspires to pursue research abroad. Her intellectual hunger signifies a longing to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. However, her marriage to Shrikant gradually subdues her ambitions, revealing how patriarchal expectations overshadow women’s educational dreams. Similarly, in *Dollar Bahu*, education becomes aspirational capital that promises upward social mobility, offering characters the prospect of

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a transnational life. Yet Murthy demonstrates that education alone cannot dismantle deeply embedded gendered norms or ensure emotional satisfaction. Women's mobility is shaped by the interplay of structural limitations and personal sacrifices that accompany their desires.

### 3.2 Migration, Distance, and Re-evaluations of "Home"

Migration physical, emotional, or aspirational is a recurring theme in Murthy's work. In *Dollar Bahu*, the alluring promise of America is contrasted with the alienation, cultural displacement, and emotional fragmentation experienced by women living abroad. The foreign land, though symbolising modernity and success, often amplifies their vulnerability and distance from familial warmth. Murthy's portrayal of migrant women highlights that transnational mobility does not automatically equate to empowerment. Instead, it exposes them to new layers of emotional labour as they attempt to maintain familial bonds across continents. Through this, Murthy suggests that "home" is not merely a location but a space of emotional connectedness and cultural familiarity. Migration forces women to reassess what they value, often deepening their appreciation of their roots.

### 3.3 Resilience through Adversity: Reclaiming Identity

Murthy's women often encounter situations that challenge their dignity, autonomy, and place within family structures. Their struggles, however, become avenues for transformation. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's journey from rejection and humiliation to self-reliance exemplifies Murthy's belief in inner strength. Abandoned due to her medical condition, she rebuilds her life through self-confidence and economic independence. Her transformation is not a rejection of cultural values but a reconfiguration of her identity on her own terms. Murthy consistently frames adversity as an opportunity for self-discovery. Her protagonists grow not through rebellion but through resilience, compassion, and quiet assertion qualities deeply embedded in Indian cultural ethos yet adaptable to global contexts.

### 3.4 Local Duties as a Framework for Ethical Agency

Murthy does not portray tradition as inherently oppressive. Instead, she often shows how women reinterpret their local duties to exercise ethical and emotional agency. Characters like Vinuta in *Dollar Bahu* exemplify the dignity that arises from fulfilling responsibilities with sincerity, even when confronted with material disadvantage or emotional neglect. Here, "duty" becomes a moral compass rather than a constraint. Murthy's women demonstrate that fulfilling familial expectations can coexist with personal integrity and aspirations. Their strength emerges from navigating cultural expectations with empathy, moral clarity, and an understanding of collective well-being.

### 3.5 Relational Autonomy and Hybrid Identities

Murthy's protagonists rarely adopt Western models of individualism. Instead, they pursue what scholar's term relational autonomy, making decisions that honour both personal needs and relational contexts. Their identities often become hybrid shaped by exposure to global ideas while remaining rooted in Indian cultural sensibilities. Whether it is Shri's eventual decision to leave a marriage that suppresses her potential, or the women in Murthy's nonfiction narratives who balance global careers with familial values, autonomy in Murthy's world is fluid and context-sensitive. It emerges not through rupture but through a rebalancing of priorities that integrates transnational experiences with local obligations.

## 4. Thematic Patterns across Murthy's Fiction

Sudha Murthy's oeuvre reveals a consistent set of thematic preoccupations that illuminate the experiences of Indian women negotiating between transnational opportunities and local responsibilities. Her stories transcend the simplistic dichotomy of "traditional India" versus "modern

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West," offering instead a nuanced portrayal of how women construct meaning within rapidly shifting socio-cultural landscapes. Several thematic patterns recur across her novels and stories, shaping her broader commentary on contemporary womanhood.

#### 4.1 The Ethics of Care and Emotional Labour

One of the strongest threads running through Murthy's fiction is the centrality of care emotional, moral, and familial. Women shoulder the invisible labour of nurturing relationships, sustaining intergenerational bonds, and maintaining moral equilibrium within families. Whether it is Vinuta in *Dollar Bahu* or Anupama in *Mahashweta*, Murthy's women perform caregiving duties not merely as obligations but as ethical acts that stem from empathy and integrity. This theme underscores the gendered expectation that women remain guardians of domestic harmony, even when navigating global aspirations. Murthy's portrayal suggests that care is not a weakness but a form of strength that anchors women's identities.

#### 4.2 Cultural Continuity in a Globalised World

For Murthy, local culture is not an outdated relic but a living, evolving force. Festivals, rituals, language, food, and familial relationships form emotional anchors for her characters, particularly those who migrate or aspire to transnational lives. In *Dollar Bahu*, the contrast between the American lifestyle and Indian cultural intimacy highlights how the local acts as a reservoir of belonging. Thematic emphasis on cultural continuity enables readers to see how Murthy's women retain their rootedness even in global spaces. This continuity becomes a stabilising force, helping them reconcile Western opportunities with Indian values.

#### 4.3 Aspirations without Alienation

Murthy rejects the notion that aspiration necessarily leads to cultural alienation. Her protagonist's dream of education, professional success, and mobility, but these aspirations rarely sever their ties to family or culture. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shri's intellectual ambitions do not make her dismissive of her familial roots; rather, her longing to study abroad is an extension of her quest for self-realisation. Murthy's thematic treatment of aspiration demonstrates that women can pursue global opportunities without abandoning their sense of place or identity.

#### 4.4 Conflict Between Individual Desire and Collective Responsibility

Across Murthy's fiction, women's journeys are shaped by the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. Marriage, caregiving, and the demands of extended family often complicate women's attempts to pursue their goals. The emotional burden of maintaining harmony frequently falls on women, who must weigh individual fulfillment against collective well-being. Murthy does not romanticise this conflict; instead, she presents it as a realistic dimension of women's lives in South Asian cultural contexts. Her characters often choose compromise and negotiation over outright defiance, reflecting the lived constraints of patriarchy.

#### 4.5 Resilience and Self-Transformation

A recurring theme across Murthy's writing is women's **resilience** in the face of personal, social, and structural challenges. Murthy depicts transformation as emerging not from dramatic rebellion but from quiet, steady self-discovery. Characters such as Anupama (*Mahashweta*) and Vinuta (*Dollar Bahu*) undergo profound inner growth as they confront adversity. Their transformations highlight the power of dignity, perseverance, and self-esteem. This theme underscores Murthy's belief that resilience is integral to women's empowerment.

#### 4.6 Morality, Simplicity, and Everyday Ethics

Murthy consistently grounds her characters in a world where ethical choices matter. Honesty, compassion, humility, and responsibility guide the actions of many protagonists. This moral compass

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shapes how women navigate modernity without losing ethical grounding. Murthy's focus on everyday ethics distinguishes her work from more radical feminist narratives; she values simplicity not as passivity but as moral clarity. Women's decisions whether to migrate, remain in India, leave a marriage, or pursue a career are framed within an ethical worldview that balances self-interest with compassion.

#### **4.7 Hybrid Identities and Negotiated Modernities**

Murthy's women often embody hybrid identities shaped by exposure to both global ideas and local values. Their modernity is not borrowed from the West but emerges organically from navigating multiple cultural contexts. This theme supports the central argument of the paper: Murthy's fiction reframes transnational experiences not as departures from tradition but as expansions of identity. Her characters craft multifaceted selves that draw strength from both worlds.

### **5. Murthy's Narrative Strategy**

Sudha Murthy's narrative strategy is marked by clarity, accessibility, and a deep ethical sensibility that allows her stories to resonate across diverse readerships. Her writing style eschews linguistic ornamentation in favour of direct and transparent prose, enabling readers to engage with complex social issues through relatable characters and everyday scenarios. This simplicity is not a stylistic limitation but a deliberate narrative choice that reflects Murthy's belief that profound truths can emerge from ordinary lives. Her narrative voice is grounded in empathy, moral reflection, and cultural awareness, positioning her works within the tradition of socially oriented Indian writing. Through this approachable style, Murthy invites readers to contemplate the emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions of women's negotiations between transnational aspirations and local responsibilities.

A significant feature of Murthy's narrative strategy is her use of middle-class domestic settings as the primary space of action. Homes, kitchens, living rooms, and workplaces serve as microcosms of broader social structures, making the personal inherently political. By situating her protagonists within these familiar spaces, Murthy highlights the subtle, often invisible negotiations women undertake in everyday contexts. Domestic routines, familial disputes, and intergenerational interactions become narrative tools through which she examines the tension between aspiration and duty. This grounding in the ordinary elevates women's experiences from the background to the centre of narrative inquiry, suggesting that transformation and agency often emerge through the decisions women make within their immediate environments.

Murthy frequently employs a linear, realist narrative structure that reinforces the credibility and emotional authenticity of her fiction. Her stories unfold chronologically, allowing readers to witness character growth organically and understand the internal processes that shape women's decisions. This realist mode gives prominence to psychological depth over plot-driven drama. Characters evolve through slow shifts in understanding, emotional resilience, or ethical awakening rather than through sudden, dramatic turning points. This narrative pacing mirrors real-life patterns of transformation, especially for women whose agency is constrained by cultural expectations and familial responsibilities. Murthy's commitment to realism also allows her to foreground the socio-economic and cultural conditions that influence women's choices, from societal scrutiny to economic pressures.

Another key element of Murthy's storytelling is her use of moral contrast and ethical dilemmas. Her protagonists often confront situations that require them to choose between personal aspiration and familial duty, illustrating the complexities of their lived realities. These dilemmas are not framed as simple conflicts between right and wrong; instead, Murthy presents them as layered decisions shaped by cultural, emotional, and relational contexts. Through this, she foregrounds the relational nature of women's agency, portraying empowerment as the ability to make choices that align with both personal

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values and collective well-being. Moral dilemmas also serve as narrative catalysts that propel character development, prompting women to reflect, reassess, and redefine their roles within family structures and transnational contexts.

Murthy's narrative strategy also draws heavily on ethical realism, a style that blends social critique with compassion. Her portrayals of injustice whether in the form of gender discrimination, economic inequality, or cultural prejudice are rendered without sensationalism. Instead, she focuses on the lived experiences of ordinary women, showing how systemic inequalities manifest in household interactions, workplace dynamics, or migration stories. Her tone remains empathetic even when critiquing social norms, underscoring her belief in the possibility of moral improvement and human kindness. This ethical orientation aligns with the broader thematic concern of her work: that women's resilience and humanity can challenge oppressive structures without necessitating radical rupture from cultural values.

Finally, Murthy's narrative strategy integrates autobiographical insights and real-life encounters, particularly in her nonfiction works like *Wise and Otherwise* and *Three Thousand Stitches*. These narratives expand the fictional world by grounding her thematic concerns in actual experiences. Her firsthand engagement with rural communities, migrant women, and socially vulnerable groups informs the authenticity of her fictional characters. This blending of lived experience with literary creation enriches her storytelling and reinforces her portrayal of women as complex individuals negotiating multiple identities across local and transnational spaces. Through these strategies, Murthy constructs a narrative universe that is both socially grounded and emotionally resonant, offering a compelling lens through which to understand the evolving negotiations of contemporary Indian women.

## 6. Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's fiction occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian English literature for its ability to blend social realism with ethical reflection while maintaining a narrative simplicity that appeals to a broad readership. Her women characters ordinary, resilient, and morally grounded serve as vehicles through which larger questions of agency, gender justice, and socio-cultural transformation are explored. Throughout her works, Murthy foregrounds women's negotiations with structural constraints such as poverty, patriarchy, caste hierarchies, domestic expectations, and economic vulnerability. Yet she avoids portraying them merely as victims; instead, they emerge as individuals capable of ethical choice, emotional strength, and purposeful action. This unique balance differentiates her from both overtly political feminist writers and purely didactic storytellers, situating her at the intersection of social engagement and accessible literature.

The thematic strands woven across Murthy's novels education as empowerment, moral integrity, economic independence, compassion, and community responsibility strengthen the argument that transformation begins in everyday life. Whether through the journeys of protagonists who challenge gender prescriptions, families that confront moral dilemmas, or communities undergoing social change, Murthy underscores the human capacity for renewal. Her emphasis on middle-class ethics, value-based living, and interpersonal responsibility also brings forward a distinctly Indian mode of feminist thought rooted not in confrontation but in negotiation, self-respect, and reform from within social systems. This contextualised feminism is central to understanding why her fiction resonates deeply with diverse readers, particularly women navigating similar cultural constraints.

Murthy's narrative strategy marked by linear structure, lucid language, anecdotal episodes, and realist detailing further reinforces the accessibility and impact of her themes. The simplicity of her storytelling is not a limitation but a deliberate choice that enhances readability while maintaining emotional depth and moral clarity. By employing first-person reflections, dialogues, and culturally grounded settings, she creates narratives that are both intimate and socially observant. Her stories

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function as mirrors of everyday India, capturing the nuances of small towns, working-class struggles, family networks, and value-driven interpersonal relationships. The didactic undertones, often subtle and empathetic, play a significant role in shaping the ethical consciousness of readers.

In conclusion, Sudha Murthy's fiction demonstrates how literature can serve as a site for social awareness, moral introspection, and gender-sensitized transformation while remaining grounded in the rhythms of ordinary life. Her works challenge readers to reconsider notions of women's roles, societal responsibilities, and the possibilities of change within traditional frameworks. In bringing together feminist negotiations, thematic richness, and an unpretentious narrative craft, Murthy contributes to a compassionate and transformative vision of Indian womanhood. Through her portrayals, she asserts that empowerment is not always dramatic or revolutionary but can be quietly enacted in everyday decisions, relationships, and acts of resilience.

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