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RELEVANCE AND APPEAL OF SUDHA MURTHY'S *GRANDMA'S BAG OF STORIES* FOR
THE INDIAN READERS

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ABSTRACT

In this era of globalisation and internet usage it's easier for the readers and audience to fathom and relate to a piece of literature or art that may have been composed thousands of miles away in a completely different cultural milieu. For instance children's favourite books like the *Harry Potter* series, Enid Blyton's *Bed Time Stories* and many more have a worldwide readership despite a particular cultural setting and portrayal of certain cultural beliefs. A work of literature may have a lot to its merit which help it in transcending the cultural barriers and stand the test of time. Aspects like plot, narrative style, themes, and motifs add to the appeal of a piece of literature but what makes the unfamiliar territory familiar or relatable? The present paper attempts to study the reasons behind the relevance and appeal of Sudha Murthy's *Grandma's Bag of Stories* which make it so appealing to the children and their parents all across India.

Keywords: Children's literature, Family values, Moral education, Universal values, Cultural milieu

India is a fascinating land with a multicultural kaleidoscope. The climate, culture, vegetation and cuisine of every region in a particular cardinal direction is different from that of the rest. While the culture, beliefs and folklore of every state is different from the other even though they maybe adjacent neighbours, there runs a certain sense of unity that makes it relatable to one's own cultural milieu. The country was invaded many times by different invaders and had been under the Mughal rule for a long time. It was followed by the British rule till it fought for its independence and got its freedom in the year 1947. During such invasions many people migrated from one region to the other taking along with them a part of their culture, cuisine and beliefs which then mingled with that of the people in the new land and created something new altogether or left a trace of its influence on the other at the very least. Even today, a lot of migration takes place in the country. A large number of rural population keeps migrating to the urban areas due to the "Push factors" and the "Pull factors" that trigger migration ("NCERT"19). In India people migrate from rural to urban areas due to factors like poverty, lack of basic facilities like health care and education. Sometimes natural disasters and social unrest can also act as factors that push the public to migrate. On the other hand, factors like better employment opportunities and better infrastructural facilities act as pull factors (19). "Migration leads to intermixing of people from diverse cultures. It has a positive contribution such as evolution of composite culture and breaking through the narrow

considerations and it widens up the mental horizons" (20). Thus, the similarity or familiarity maybe be traced in seemingly different cultures and beliefs all across the nation.

Sometimes literary works may portray the culture and peculiarities of a particular region which may be may or may not have any similarity with the reader's milieu, still the reader may find the work relatable. While a lot of factors like the plot, effectiveness of the narrative technique, themes, motifs etc. may contribute to the appeal and success of a piece of literature, a certain degree of cultural familiarity may also add to the appeal of the work. Sudha Murthy's books for children have a special appeal to its Indian readers. Sudha Murthy is a prolific writer who has written many technical books, travelogues, novels, short stories and children's books. She has been awarded a Padma Shri and the R.K. Narayan Award for Literature. She writes in English and Kannada. Murthy's *Grandma's Bag of Stories* is one of her books written for children in English language. It brings to its readers a certain culture and tradition of Indian households from the south of India, but it is still relatable to a reader from any other part of the nation due to the presence of a strong sense of family values and bonding that is present as a subtle undercurrent in her book.

The book is about how four children, Raghu, Meenu, Anand and Krishna enjoy their vacation at their grandparents place while enjoying their grandma's stories. Later in the book they are joined by Vishnu Kaka's three grandchildren Sharan, Suma, and Divya. It is set in a small town called Shiggaon which is the author's hometown in the north of the state of Karnataka. The author in her forward fondly recalls her time spent with her Grandmother and cousins in her hometown and has woven her stories around those memories. This is yet another reason for why they may seem more relatable to the readers as the little peaks into the life of the children in between two stories and their response after each story offer what according to the author is a true reflection of her childhood (Murthy vii). This gives it a sense of familiarity to the readers for the stories maybe flights of fantasy but the bonding between Ajja, Ajji, Kakka and the children has a realistic touch to it. So, even though the tales maybe the result of author's fertile imagination and didactic intention but the portrayal of the family bond and the time well spent with the Grandparents has a realistic touch to it, something to which most of the Indians can relate. Adults who grew up with their grandparents and children who either live with their grandparents or visit them during their vacations or otherwise can all relate to this book. It is a very common practice in Indian households for the grandparents to pamper their grandchildren with stories and good food. Indian population is largely familiar with a joint family system and even with the emergence of nuclear family system in the cities, urban and suburban areas, the family values still run deep largely as an innate part of the Indian culture irrespective of the religious and cultural ethnicity. The author hopes that with the stories in her book, "children and parents will understand the unique relationship between three generations and will continue to create bonds of love with one another and the older generation in their families" (viii). This intention of the author is well received by the Indian readers for they can relate to the importance and sweetness of family values for the adults and the children in their own special way.

For centuries folktales have been used to entertain and instruct all across the globe. Likewise, from many generations local folktales and the stories from *Hitopadesh* and Vishnu Sharma's *Panchtantra* have been read to and read by the young and the adults in India to become acquainted with important moral values and life lessons. It's been a part of Indian culture to teach children about life lessons and moral values with the help of storytelling. According to Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, children's literature essentially means books that are "good for children, and most particularly good in terms of emotional and moral values."(17)

Murthy's *Grandma's Bag of Stories* is a collection of twenty two stories where every story teaches a moral value or a life lesson in a very intriguing and entertaining way. This strikes a familiar ground with the Indian readers for imparting of moral values and teaching important life lessons to the children by encapsulating them in a story or by weaving a story around them has been a common practice in the Indian homes. Sudha Murthy effortlessly weaves stories around such values and lessons. Her stories like "Doctor, Doctor", "Kavery and the Thief", "The Enchanted Scorpions", "What's in it for Me?" and "Fire on the Beard" impart the moral lessons about the pitfall of greediness, importance of wit and hard work, the virtue of honesty, the vice of selfishness and the dangers of laziness respectively. In the story titled "Roopa's Great Escape", Vishnu Kaka becomes the author's mouth piece and narrates the story about a young girl who escapes her kidnaper by using her cleverness

and alertness. Together with the help of this story and Suma's example, the author brings forth the life lesson of why one should not trust any stranger and how one should get out of trouble by keeping one's wits and remaining calm and cool.

Yet another reason that adds to the appeal of this book is the familiarity with the cultural milieu of the stories. It is easier to relate to the setting of the stories, character and place names that sound similar to or familiar with one's real life surroundings or experiences. For instance, in her stories she uses place names like Aruna Marg, and character names like Kavery, Roopa, Amrit, Chandan, Rani and Ramu etc. which are all Indian names and so are more familiar in comparison to names from some story from a foreign land. In "A Treasure for Ramu", the author tries to emphasise the importance of working with sincerity and spending one's money wisely in order to please the goddess of wealth and have a permanent abode of Goddess Laxmi in their house. Also, in "Roopa's Great Escape" the setting of a village festival and fair is used to evoke the memories of familiar experiences in the readers. Before the narrator starts narrating the story the children show their excitement as they reach the fair. "The children from Mumbai said, 'It is just like Chowpati on Juhu beach.' The Delhi kids said, 'It is similar to Janpath.' Others said, 'It is like Karaga or Kallekai Parishe in Bangalore.' (112)" Then Vishnu Kaka explains to the children the tradition behind the festival and how the fair was not just a place for commercial buying and selling of products but was "also about meeting people, exchanging gifts, having a feast and a good time(112)." In "Payasam for the Bear", the narrator explains how "Payasam is known by many names all over India. Some call it kheer, some payesh, and others, payasam. It is made with milk, rice and jaggery and many other ingredients, and it is always yummy!"(90). Thus, the Indian readers find themselves relating to these stories at different levels and Murthy's narration seems closer to their real life memories, experiences and observations.

In the twenty first century, children have a lot of sources to entertain them and instruct them. The television cartoons shows and super hero movies largely seem to prioritise the entertainment purpose over the didactic purpose. Though there are many shows that try to impart moral values through cartoon characters and stories but their approach is different from that of a book written with a similar intention. T.V shows and movies try to capture the child's attention by making it exiting and visually appealing. Whereas books meant for children try to impart life lessons or moral values in a very subtle yet entertaining way and also manage to tickle the reader's imagination. Canadian critic Michele Landsberg advocates the view that:

Good books can do so much for children. At their best, they expand horizons and instil in children a sense of the wonderful complexity of life...No other pastime available to children is so conducive to empathy and the enlargement of human sympathies. No other pleasure can so richly furnish a child's mind with the symbols, patterns, depths, and possibilities of civilisation. (qtd. in Lesnik-Oberstein 17)

Children's books like *Grandma's Bag of Stories* not only instructs but entertains as well and that too in a way that seems relatable and familiar to the children and adults in India, something which has led to its huge popularity with the Indian readers.

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