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## The daughter from a wishing tree: Eternal to contemporary ethics

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### Abstract

Sudha Murthy's anthology of short-stories *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* is a meaningful and relevant contribution on the part of the author to revive and re-instill interest and new perspective to the Puranic tales that codify the Indian social code and moral ethics. Each story has a viewpoint that encourages the reader to understand and recognize the contribution of women- be they mythical or this worldly- in the creation and its physical, moral, emotional and spiritual upkeep.

**Keywords:** Myth, devis, woman, creation, nurturer, destroyer, world-view, moral-order, Indian social-system, puranic traditions

### Introduction

A reading of Sudha Murthy's book *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* (2019) <sup>[1]</sup> persuades the reader to trace the underlying patterns of world-view that has always guided and molded the Indian cultural practices and belief-system through its myths. Myths in any culture are as old as the existence of human beings. Emanating from the quest to understand the larger issues related to existence and the inability to override the mighty and unconquerable Unknown, myths gradually acquire the rank which demands acceptance and submission. These are the traditional, cultural lores of Gods and superhuman beings that mark the uniqueness of a culture as part of the collective cultural consciousness of its people. Myths, like dreams, can be interpreted to derive personal meaning or reach archetypal truths about human nature. Being mostly culture specific, myths can be investigated for their meaning in the culture that 'dreams' them and they can be reinterpreted to understand life's meaning at large. Myth, according to Devdutt Pattanaik "is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular <sup>[2]</sup>". Myths are based on faith and not proof.

Sudha Murthy's anthology consisting of twenty-four short-stories, is a rich and enriching collection showcasing Indian belief-system and cultural practices. Dominated by the goddesses and their nurturing and annihilating powers, it presents a world order that rules the cultural psyche of Indian people. The origin of the consorts of the Creator, Nurturer and Annihilator-Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh-and their separate identities, characteristic traits and responsibilities accord them status even higher than the Trinity. The Goddesses are seen performing their roles and fulfilling their duties, taking cudgels in their own hands where Gods feel restrained. These goddesses interact with and rescue not only their own *Lokas*, they also defend saints and seers from the evils and wrath of *asuras*. Assisting their consorts, they are inalienable from their spiritual as well as human world and most often emerge more powerful than their husbands. Goddesses are the nurturer and the fountainhead of life. Myths of a culture influence the perceptions, and weave and build the truths for a society.

Through these stories, the writer very skillfully addresses the permanent as well as contemporary problems and concerns of our world. Goddess Saraswati is evoked for wisdom, knowledge and peace as these are the prerequisite for creativity. She was evoked by Brahma to facilitate his act of Creation and without her support, the Creator would have felt incomplete. Goddess Lakshmi is ever prepared to play her part in the sustenance of this world along with her husband Vishnu, and Goddess Parvati, the consort of Shiva the destroyer, is seen as a fierce and just goddess who is worshipped for strength and benevolence. In Indian Mythology, goddesses play a pivotal role and they set examples to be

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followed by women in their day-to-day life reminding them of their inherent strength and individuality. A woman is expected to play diverse roles under different circumstances and share household and social responsibilities along with her husband. Our Gods and Goddesses have also been conceptualized having their own families and sets of responsibilities. The loyalty, commitment, respect and support reflected through their mutual relationships are the guiding principles for any human being. A number of times the Trinity or one of them gets trapped by the penance performed by some mighty and devious *asura* who would invariably demand to be blessed with immortality. Once, thus ensnared, the Devas would invoke Goddess Durga or Shakti, the fierce form of Goddess Parvati to save the world from the anarchy and suffering unleashed by such *asuras*.

The three Devis archetypal of knowledge, prosperity and destruction merged and united to protect Indra, the king of gods from Andhak, sage Kashyap's powerful *asura* son, who fascinated by celestial Parijat flowers wanted to steal the tree from Indralok in the story "The Source of Knowledge". This Trinity of goddesses is worshipped twice a year by the people during Navaratri, reminding the world of the compassion and fury of Goddess who is also a protector and nurturer. It is also indicative of the fact that to contest the evil, the best strategy would be a collective front of all the faculties and resources.

As the name suggests, Goddess Parvati in the story "The Woman of the Battlefields" was evoked as Durga by Brahma on behalf of all the gods "O Goddess, none of us can kill the mighty and uncontrollable Mahishasura... We beseech you to help us." (pg.46) To assist Lord Shiva in the battle against a mighty demon Andhakasura, goddess Yogishwari emerged out of the flames coming out of Shiva's mouth and seven goddesses Brahma, Vaishnavi, Rudrani, Indrani, Kaumari, Varahi and Chamunda joined hands with Goddess Yogishwari as depicted in "The Seven Fierce Mothers". An Andhaka would emerge with every drop of blood falling from the demon's body, thus creating umpteen number of Andhakas. So all the Devis "stopped Andhaka's blood from falling on the earth by drinking it instead." (pg.146) With the help of these Devis, Lord Shiva defeated the demon. These incidents are also symbolic of the fact that a woman playing constructive and fostering roles is also capable of unmatched valor and rage whenever the situation demands. She can be benevolent and compassionate as well as a disciplining and demanding mother. To sustain the uprightness in the world, both men and women should unite and assist one another.

In the story "The Power of Faith", Sudarshana the orphaned and destitute prince of Kosala, is rescued and reinstated to the throne of his father's kingdom by the Devi as a 'just' Mother. In the story "Goddess of Fruits and Vegetables", the Goddess Parvati first tries to persuade Durgamasura to take pity on the drought-stricken world and release Vedas from pataloka where he had kept them under guard. Out of concern for the hungry and dying world, her heart melts and her eyes start shedding tears. As her tears acquire the form of rivers, she replicates hundred eyes to save the world before slaying the *asura* who enchanted by her charm and beauty trespasses his limits and asks her to accept his proposal of marriage. In our religion, Devis are depicted essentially as compassionate and considerate, but the deliberate offenders are not spared and suitably punished. These stories are the mainstay of our religious faith as they

confirm the faith in righteousness and annihilation of the evil. The female figure in Hindu Mythology is the ultimate form of Maa Shakti whose role is inspiring and remarkable in establishing and maintaining the righteous world order. Devdutt Pattanaik underlines that "To call the goddess 'Mother' is to acknowledge only one half of her personality. She is also a 'killer'. She is the source of joy and sorrow, of hope and despair, life and death. Nature (prakriti), delusion (maya), energy (shakti)—she is the world we react to<sup>[3]</sup>."

"The Steps to Heaven" very beautifully illustrates concern and consideration of the divine mother, Goddess Parvati towards another mother as she consents to come to earth from heaven when Kunti decides to perform Gaja Gowri puja for her sons. On the auspicious time she comes along with Lord Shiva and his *ganas* to bless Kunti and her sons. Devis are considered generous and sympathetic while answering to a mother's prayers. So, they are always worshipped as Mothers in our religion. Goddess Parvati, consort of Shiva and mother of Ganesha and Kartekeya too felt lonely at times and yearned for a daughter. Her desire was fulfilled by Kalpavriksha and she became the mother of a beautiful daughter whom she named "Ashokasundari --- 'a gorgeous damsel who reduces loneliness'." (pg.47) The story "The Daughter from a Wishing Tree" is a thoughtful portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship as a daughter is considered mother's extension and they fulfil each-other's destiny. A mother feels complete and contented when she has a daughter by her side to share pleasures and woes of life. This story underlines the role and importance of daughters in a household for sustaining its joy and contentment as daughters indeed are precious.

A society where women are respected and happy grows and flourishes, and our religion teaches: Yatra Naryastu Pujyante Ramante Tatra Devata. Whenever and wherever women have been wronged or violated, the very basis of that social system gets crumpled. We have our epics The Ramayana and Mahabharata teaching these ethics pointedly. This is a known fact that the end of the mighty demon king Ravana was expedited as he kidnapped Lord Ram's wife and had his evil designs. Sudha Murthy, however, brings in another dimension to the fore and portrays how Ravan's sister Shurpanakha plans "The Perfect Revenge" to avenge her husband Vidyujjihva's death. Overwhelmed by her sense of grief and vengeance, she approaches her brother Ravana praising the exquisite beauty of Sita and coaxes him to get her by force or guile. She was mad with rage and was confident that Ravana would be suitably punished for this sin by Ram and she would also avenge her husband's murder. The evil cannot reign for long howsoever mighty or influential it might be. It is self-annihilating. Shurpanakha not only schemed about her own brother's downfall, her actions led to further complications in the lives of other innocent people. It also teaches that the people very dear to us can also be very lethal as they know our lacunae and weaknesses.

Lord Shiva himself came to Arundhati in the form of a boy and stayed with her during famine and learnt Vedas from her as her husband sage Vasishtha was doing penance in Himalayas along with his pupils for the welfare of the people. They both were blessed by Lord Shiva for their commitment and loyalty to each-other as well as for the mankind "you will become a star in the sky, along with your husband". (pg.119) Their dedication towards the pursuit of knowledge and teaching was so great that Lord Brahma

presented them with Nandini, a wish fulfilling cow, which became instrumental in bringing King Vishwamitra who tried to snatch Nandini by force, to his senses and making him realize that “it is knowledge with supreme compassion that brings supreme power.” (pg.117) Abdicating his throne and kingdom, Vishwamitra started his journey in search of the supreme knowledge. This story “Stars of True Love” reaffirms our faith in love for knowledge, love for mankind and love in marital relationship. Faithful pursuit of knowledge and compassion for mankind is acknowledged even by Gods and they support and bless such people unreservedly.

“The Weight of a Leaf” bailed Satyabhama out of a very unbecoming situation when out of jealousy and sense of competition, she gave her husband Krishna in charity to Narada. She wanted to prove that she was better off than Rukmini whom she suspected Krishna valued more than her. Krishna’s gift of Parijata flowers to Rukmini, Satyabhama’s insistence for the Parijata tree from Indralok and despite watering the tree planted in her lawn and the bent branches shedding flowers in Rukmini’s garden, make her livid with jealousy. She gets ensnared in Narada’s trap and unmindfully pledges Krishna in charity to him to prove herself having greater right over her husband than Rukmini. Soon she realizes her fault and gives up every ounce of gold she possesses in exchange of her husband’s freedom but the weighing scales do not budge till Rukmini comes to salvage her and puts a leaf of Tulsi in the scale, making her and the whole world realize that “Devotion is more important than possession.” (pg.156) She finally learns that it is unconditional love that triumphs and not the sense of ownership.

Through “The Maiden of the River”, Sudha Murty projects the relationship between the Gods and the human-world. Omissions are not accepted even on the part of the celestial beings. The origin of Ganga entails a number of anecdotes as she is associated with the Trinity and considered to be a holy river, cursed to come down on earth and blessed with the ability of absolving sins whosoever takes a dip in her waters. Another version of her earthly existence relates her with Bhagirath who after a long penance could beseech her to come on the earth as he wanted the ashes of his ancestors immersed in her water. Rishi Vasishtha’s curse fructified through Ganga as the eight Vasus took birth on earth and one of them who stole Nandini, the wish fulfilling celestial cow, stayed longer as Ganga’s son Bhisma. On the other hand, a frog with his consistent and passionate pursuit of Ganga emerged as Shantanu who married her after a number of births and trials. In our culture, River Ganga is worshipped as a compassionate holy Mother who assists us in releasing our bad karmas and gaining salvation.

Sages and seers are sought for guidance and protection as they are considered intermediaries between the divine and human world. They have special spiritual insights and powers inculcated through intense penance and meditation. Mandodari, the queen of Ravana was a frog in her previous birth, who sacrificed his life to save the lives of some seers. In turn they blessed the frog and he desired “to be beautiful like Parvati and marry someone who is extremely learned and is an emperor.”(pg.67) She was born as Mandodari whose wish was fulfilled but as she forgot to ask for happiness, she was sad all her life. This story “The Frog Who Forgot Happiness” is a clear dictum for us that wealth, beauty and learning lose all its charm and value if there is no

happiness in one’s life. In our culture, along with prosperity, we pray for the joy and contentment of all. The greatest joy and contentment are realized with the goodwill and togetherness of family and friends. In the story “The Goddess of the White Lake”, Bahubali the son of first Tirthankara renounced the conquered territory and kingdom in favor of his brother Bharat who had demanded submission from his ninety-nine brothers to become the emperor of the earth. While ninety-eight of his brothers submitted grudgingly to his authority, Bahubali invited him for one- to-one duel and defeated Bharat. The moment he gained everything was the moment of his supreme realization. He abandoned the earthly gains which had created a wedge between brothers and started his search for the ultimate bliss. In the same story, the pride of King Chamundaraya was shattered by an old lady who with small amount of milk out of her container could bathe the huge statue of Bahubali, whereas the king could not perform the ritual with all the milk in his kingdom. She taught the king that “what you can do with ... faith is much more important than what you can do with money.” (pg.72).

“The Temple without a Deity” sagaciously illustrates human follies and their repercussions. Due to the impatience and haste of King Indradyumna of Kalinga, Vishwakarma had to leave the statues of Lord Jagannath, his brother Balbhadra and sister Subhadra unfinished. Till date “the half-made wooden statues...three deities without their hands” (pg.160). adorn the inner sanctum of the Jagannath Temple in Orissa, but to express their genuine reverence and dedication towards the Lord, Indradyumna and his generations would clean the chariot before Rath Yatra every year. Generations later, one of his successors Purushottam Deva, the royal prince would sweep the chariot with gold broom every year “indicating to the world and his subjects that he was a mere servant of the lord.” (pg.161). His humility and self-pride, however, get bruised by the rejection of Kanchipuram’s arrogant princess Padmavati. He not only invades her father’s kingdom but also imprisons her and orders his chief minister to get her married to a sweeper. It’s the wisdom and farsightedness of the old man that protects the princess from her impending fate and also saves the prince from guilt. After an year the remorseful princess suddenly garlands the prince while he was sweeping the road with golden broom. When the identity of the princess gets revealed, the prince gets furious but good sense is instilled into him by the old wise man and he says “You must never do anything in anger or in a hurry. Important decisions that affect people’s lives must be deliberated over with care and concern.” (pg.162).

The matchless sacrifice made by the women characters in the stories “Soldiers in the Elephant’s Stomach” and “The Forgotten Wife” is highly commendable. To save her husband, Udayana’s kingdom, Vatasdesha from outside invasion, his wife Vasavadatta, princess of neighboring state Avanti consented to feign her own death as planned by the well-meaning Chief Minister. King Udayana was so much in love with his Veena called Ghoshavati and wife Vasavadatta that he completely ignored his kingly duties, thus, jeopardizing the very existence of his kingdom. Vasavadatta, however, understood the importance of strategic marriage and coaxed her husband to marry Padmavati, the princess of Magadha, but he flatly refused to take another wife out of his unflinching love for her. To keep her husband and his kingdom secure, she decides to make the supreme sacrifice of sharing her husband with

another woman and agrees to fake her own death till her husband marries Padmavati. Another beautiful and touching tale of wifely duties and unconditional love is narrated in the story "The Forgotten Wife". On the suggestion of marriage, Vachaspati Mishra declares to his mother "My sole purpose is to write bhashya, a commentary, on Vedant Sutras or Brahma Sutras...once I start writing a bhashya, I will be immersed in it and won't be able to perform the duties of a husband or a father." (pg.176) Knowing full-well what was in the offing, a young beautiful girl consented to this marriage and looked after him with great patience and dedication without expecting anything in return. The night Vachaspati finishes the Bhashya and finally put his pen to rest, he finds an old woman sleeping in the corner of his room. On enquiring she tells him "I am your wife. You married me decades ago. All this time you have been so busy writing that I never disturbed you." (pg.178) Touched to the core by the compassion, unconditional love and sacrifice of his wife, he asks her names and dedicates the just Bhashya to his wife Bhamati acknowledging her unconditional love, unparalleled patience and contribution in his life. He professes "Whoever reads this may or may not remember me, but they will definitely remember you. Behind every great work of man, there always exists the unconditional love from a woman who deserves more recognition than the man himself." (pg.180).

Thus, we find this anthology of short stories dealing with Indian myths and puranic tales that shape the social order based on moral values. She does not ignore the role of these myths in the social sphere by calling them absurd stories as were branded by the colonial intelligentsia under British rule. Indian Dharma and social system have a unique structuring order in defining and understanding the inter-relationship of nature, creation and its behaviour. Every story unfolds the meaning behind a particular myth or a puranic tale which explains the role of nature and its powers related to the creation of existence. This explanatory perspective further translated into the schema of moral and ethical values are reflected in Indian social behaviours. Sudha Murthy has narrated these myths in an easily understandable idiom and style. Her storytelling further incites the interest of readers to delve deeper into the depth of these wonderfully structured myths and puranic tales. Myths are not mere false or absurd stories, but deeply codified and thickly imbibed with ancient knowledge-creating practices. Reading and retelling these narratives in a right and meaningful perspective is what this anthology has contributed to in the contemporary post-colonial Indian English literature.

### Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* revitalizes Puranic tales by highlighting the crucial roles of goddesses in Indian mythology. Through twenty-four stories, Murthy reaffirms the significance of female deities like Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, who embody wisdom, sustenance, and strength. These narratives bridge ancient mythological constructs with contemporary moral and ethical issues, reflecting their enduring relevance. Murthy's accessible retelling invites modern readers to appreciate the profound cultural values embedded in these myths. Her work challenges the colonial critique of myths as obsolete, showcasing their continued importance in shaping moral frameworks and ethical behavior. *The Daughter from a*

*Wishing Tree* effectively demonstrates how these ancient stories remain vibrant and instructive, reinforcing the cultural and moral values of Indian traditions.

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