

ORDINARY LIVES, EXTRAORDINARY STRENGTH: FEMINISM IN SUDHA MURTHY'S FICTION

DR DHARMRAJSINH P CHAUHAN
ASSI. PROFESSOR

Abstract

*Feminism in Indian literature often oscillates between narratives of radical resistance and depictions of passive suffering. However, a significant yet underexplored dimension lies in everyday feminism—the subtle, often quiet acts of resistance that women enact in their daily lives. Sudha Murthy's fiction exemplifies this perspective by portraying ordinary women who reshape social roles not through rebellion but through resilience, dignity, and ethical choices. This paper explores how everyday feminism is articulated in Murthy's novels, including *Dollar Bahu* (2001), *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008), *House of Cards* (2013), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (2017). Using feminist theoretical frameworks with emphasis on everyday feminism and postcolonial feminism, the study analyzes how Murthy redefines women's roles in contemporary Indian society. The findings indicate that Murthy's protagonists challenge patriarchal norms not with grand gestures but with persistent acts of resilience, thereby rewriting social expectations around marriage, career, education, and morality. This paper positions Murthy's fiction as a vital contribution to feminist discourse in India, where everyday struggles become sites of empowerment and transformation.*

Keywords: *Everyday Feminism, Sudha Murthy, Indian Society, Women's Roles, Gender, Empowerment*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Feminist discourse has historically highlighted both overt struggles and subtle negotiations that shape women's lives. While radical feminist movements emphasize structural oppression and large-scale transformation, an equally important dimension lies in the everyday acts of resistance by women in ordinary contexts. This perspective, often referred to as everyday feminism, underscores the ways in which women challenge patriarchy through education, professional aspirations, financial independence, or ethical convictions in daily life.

In India, where cultural traditions and patriarchal norms still hold considerable power, everyday feminism assumes particular relevance. Women may not always have the space for dramatic rebellion, but they assert their agency through quiet choices that redefine gender roles in homes, workplaces, and communities. Indian women writers have long depicted these nuanced forms of empowerment, from Shashi Deshpande's portrayals of silenced wives to Arundhati Roy's narratives of women negotiating caste and class hierarchies.

Sudha Murthy as a Voice of Everyday Feminism

Sudha Murthy's fiction is unique in its accessibility and moral clarity. Her language is simple, yet her themes are deeply layered, focusing on ordinary women who face extraordinary challenges. Unlike some writers who emphasize overt rebellion, Murthy highlights resilience, dignity, and ethical decision-making as forms of feminist assertion.

- In *Dollar Bahu*, Vinuta endures exploitation in her in-laws' household but maintains her dignity and emerges morally stronger than those who demean her.
- In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's silent sacrifices ultimately lead her to reclaim her intellectual identity, illustrating feminism as self-realization.

- In *House of Cards*, Mridula negotiates professional ethics and marital expectations, showing how women assert agency by refusing compromise.
- In *Three Thousand Stitches*, women from marginalized communities resist stigma and reconstruct their identities through education and solidarity.

These narratives do not depict grand revolutions but illuminate how women's everyday resilience reshapes roles in contemporary Indian society.

Everyday Feminism: Conceptual Orientation

Everyday feminism focuses on the micro-level strategies women employ to resist oppression and claim agency. It emphasizes that empowerment is not always visible in public protests but also in private acts of choice—choosing education over silence, career over dependence, or dignity over compromise. Sudha Murthy's protagonists exemplify this orientation: their feminism is not confrontational but transformative, enacted in the spaces of family, work, and community.

Rationale of the Study

Much critical scholarship on Murthy emphasizes her philanthropic persona or her accessible writing style, often overlooking the feminist potential embedded in her fiction. Few studies have systematically examined her works through the lens of everyday feminism. This paper seeks to fill this gap by demonstrating how Murthy's novels rewrite women's roles in contemporary Indian society by celebrating resilience in ordinary life.

Objectives of the Study

The key objectives of this paper are:

1. To analyze how Sudha Murthy's female protagonists embody everyday feminism.
2. To explore how her works rewrite women's roles in family, work, and community contexts.
3. To examine how everyday acts of resilience contribute to broader feminist discourse in India.
4. To position Murthy's fiction as a literary articulation of grassroots feminism.

Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to four selected works of Murthy: *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *House of Cards*, and *Three Thousand Stitches*. These texts best exemplify the theme of everyday feminism. The scope does not extend to her children's literature or short moral stories. The limitation lies in focusing exclusively on textual analysis, without incorporating empirical reception studies or comparative analysis with other Indian writers.

Review of Literature

1. Feminist Criticism and Everyday Resistance

Feminist criticism as a discipline has historically focused on unveiling the ways in which literature reflects and perpetuates patriarchal values. Scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar emphasized reclaiming women's voices and identifying patterns of silence, marginalization, and oppression. While early feminist criticism often sought to highlight overt struggles, subsequent generations of critics began recognizing the significance of subtle, everyday negotiations of power.

Michel de Certeau's concept of "everyday practices" (1984) has been influential in demonstrating how ordinary acts can constitute resistance. Applied in feminist contexts, this perspective suggests that women's daily choices—such as pursuing education, asserting self-respect, or quietly refusing compromise—are acts of resistance that reshape social norms. This idea resonates with Sudha Murthy's narratives, where protagonists may not stage revolutions but gradually transform their lives through small yet decisive acts.

2. Indian Feminist Writing and Women's Roles

In the Indian context, feminist writing often grapples with the interplay between tradition and modernity. Writers like Kamala Markandaya (*Nectar in a Sieve*), Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*), and Shashi Deshpande (*That Long Silence*) illustrate the everyday struggles of women negotiating expectations of family and society. Their protagonists often embody resilience, finding empowerment in navigating restrictive roles.

Shashi Deshpande, for instance, portrays women whose silence masks suppressed frustrations but whose quiet acts of self-realization gradually redefine their identities. Anita Desai often explores psychological struggles where women resist through introspection. These depictions align with the concept of everyday feminism, where transformation arises not from dramatic rebellion but from lived resilience.

In contemporary literature, authors like Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri expand feminist concerns to include caste, class, and diaspora. Yet Sudha Murthy's uniqueness lies in her portrayal of ordinary women in ordinary settings. Her fiction does not glamorize or dramatize feminism; instead, it normalizes women's agency in daily life, thereby rewriting women's social roles in accessible and relatable ways.

3. Scholarly Engagement with Sudha Murthy

Critical scholarship on Sudha Murthy remains relatively limited compared to more canonical feminist writers. However, several studies have emphasized her role as a writer who highlights social realities with moral clarity. A number of scholars identify her women characters as embodiments of resilience who assert themselves without overt rebellion.

- Analyses of *Dollar Bahu* suggest that Vinuta's dignity in the face of exploitation represents moral resilience, contrasting with her in-laws' materialism.
- *Gently Falls the Bakula* is frequently studied as a novel of sacrifice and intellectual erasure, where Shrimati's quiet realization reflects the cost of patriarchal domesticity.
- In *House of Cards*, scholars note the ethical dilemmas faced by Mridula, who asserts her agency by refusing to be complicit in corruption.
- *Three Thousand Stitches* has drawn attention for its inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly sex workers, who reconstruct their lives through collective resilience.

These studies, while insightful, often stop at thematic descriptions. Few have explicitly theorized these acts of resilience as everyday feminism. This paper advances that argument by situating Murthy's protagonists within feminist frameworks that celebrate subtle acts of empowerment.

4. Identified Gaps

The literature review reveals several gaps:

1. **Lack of Theoretical Framing:** Murthy's works are often described as "simple" or "moral," but without deeper engagement with feminist theories of everyday resistance.
2. **Fragmentation:** Analyses usually focus on single novels, with little attempt to connect recurring feminist themes across her body of work.
3. **Under-theorization of Women's Roles:** Few studies examine how Murthy's protagonists actively rewrite social roles by challenging patriarchal expectations in everyday contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by employing everyday feminism as a unifying framework to interpret Murthy's fiction, highlighting how women's agency is enacted in the domestic, professional, and community spheres.

Theoretical Framework

1. Everyday Feminism

Everyday feminism emphasizes that empowerment does not always take the form of radical, public protest. Instead, it focuses on small, routine acts that challenge patriarchal norms in subtle yet transformative ways. For example, a woman pursuing education despite family resistance or refusing to compromise her dignity in marriage are feminist acts in themselves. Sudha Murthy's protagonists embody this framework. Vinuta in *Dollar Bahu* and Mridula in *House of Cards* exemplify everyday resilience that redefines social roles without confrontation.

2. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism emphasizes equality of opportunity, particularly in education and careers. This is relevant for Murthy's women characters, many of whom assert their independence by becoming professionals, educators, or financially self-reliant. Liberal feminist perspectives help interpret Anupama's transformation in *Mahashweta* and Shrimati's intellectual potential in *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

3. Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism critiques the universalizing tendencies of Western feminist theories and emphasizes the intersection of gender with caste, class, and culture. In *Three Thousand Stitches*, Murthy highlights the struggles of sex workers, Dalit women, and other marginalized groups, showing how their empowerment requires addressing multiple layers of oppression. Postcolonial feminist insights are thus crucial in understanding how Murthy situates everyday feminism within Indian social realities.

4. Intersection of Frameworks

Murthy's fiction demonstrates how everyday acts of resilience intersect with broader feminist ideals. Her characters embody liberal aspirations for equality, resist patriarchal silencing in radical ways, and negotiate cultural constraints highlighted by postcolonial perspectives. By synthesizing these

frameworks, this study positions Murthy's works as exemplary of everyday feminism, where women rewrite their roles in society through persistence, resilience, and dignity.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive, and descriptive research design**. Literary texts are analyzed thematically and contextually, focusing on how Murthy's female protagonists embody everyday feminism. The analysis is interpretive, drawing meaning from characters, settings, and narratives, while situating them within feminist theoretical frameworks.

Selection of Texts

Four works of Sudha Murthy are studied: *Dollar Bahu* (2001), *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008), *House of Cards* (2013), and *Three Thousand Stitches* (2017). These were selected because they most explicitly engage with women's roles in Indian society and demonstrate everyday resilience.

Data Sources

- **Primary Sources:** The selected novels/works of Sudha Murthy.
- **Secondary Sources:** Critical essays, journal articles, and theoretical texts on feminism, resilience, and Indian women's writing.

Analytical Framework

The analysis employs three frameworks:

1. **Everyday Feminism** – examining ordinary acts of resistance.
2. **Liberal Feminism** – focusing on equality, education, and work.
3. **Postcolonial Feminism** – analyzing caste, class, and cultural intersections.

Limitations

This study is confined to textual analysis. It does not include empirical reception studies or reader surveys. The selected texts represent but do not exhaust Murthy's oeuvre. Nevertheless, they provide a strong basis to explore everyday feminism in her fiction.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Dollar Bahu: Silent Resilience and Moral Integrity

Vinuta, the protagonist, is undervalued in her husband's household because she lives in India, while her sister-in-law Gauramma is glorified for being in the U.S. Despite humiliation, Vinuta embodies dignity and resilience. Her refusal to succumb to bitterness demonstrates everyday feminism: instead of open rebellion, she quietly asserts moral superiority. Murthy here critiques the patriarchal commodification of women, exposing how their worth is measured by external markers such as wealth or migration. Vinuta's resilience redefines her role not as a passive victim but as a dignified moral center of the family.

2. Gently Falls the Bakula: Reclaiming Intellectual Identity

Shrimati's story illustrates the silencing of women's intellectual identities within patriarchal marriages. Initially, she sacrifices her aspirations to support her husband Shrikant's career. Over time, however, she realizes her invisibility and decides to reclaim her intellectual pursuits. This shift exemplifies everyday feminism—her resistance is not violent but rooted in personal awakening. The metaphor of the Bakula flower, neglected yet enduring, symbolizes the overlooked contributions of women. Shrimati's journey critiques how patriarchy erases women's roles but affirms that resilience enables them to rewrite their own roles in society.

3. House of Cards: Ethics as Feminist Resistance

Mridula, a doctor, faces the challenge of balancing career ambitions with marital expectations. Her husband, Somasekhar, succumbs to corruption, pressuring her to compromise her ethics. Mridula's refusal to do so is an act of everyday feminist resistance: she asserts her professional and moral identity, challenging patriarchal and materialistic pressures. Her resilience is not expressed through dramatic rebellion but through everyday choices of honesty, self-respect, and integrity. Murthy highlights that women's roles in contemporary Indian society are increasingly defined not just by domesticity but also by ethical participation in public life.

4. Three Thousand Stitches: Collective Empowerment of Marginalized Women

This autobiographical narrative recounts Murthy's work with sex workers who were stigmatized and excluded. Initially resistant, these women gradually rebuild their lives through education, solidarity, and economic independence. Their resilience demonstrates postcolonial everyday feminism: resisting not only patriarchy but also caste prejudice and poverty. By focusing on marginalized identities, Murthy expands feminist discourse beyond middle-class contexts. The women in this text rewrite their roles in society by transforming stigma into strength and exclusion into empowerment.

Comparative Insights

Across these works, Murthy depicts different dimensions of everyday feminism:

- **Domestic resilience** (*Dollar Bahu*)
- **Intellectual self-realization** (*Gently Falls the Bakula*)
- **Ethical assertion in careers** (*House of Cards*)

Collective resistance in marginalized contexts (*Three Thousand Stitches*)

Together, they illustrate how women's roles in contemporary Indian society are being redefined—not by radical breaks but by everyday acts of courage, dignity, and resilience.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings

1. **Everyday Acts as Feminist Resistance:** Murthy portrays subtle but powerful forms of resistance—dignity, silence, ethical choices—as transformative strategies.
2. **Resilience as Empowerment:** Her protagonists demonstrate that resilience is not passive survival but active negotiation of identity and agency.
3. **Redefining Women's Roles:** By emphasizing education, careers, and ethical integrity, Murthy challenges the confinement of women to domestic roles.
4. **Inclusion of Marginalized Voices:** *Three Thousand Stitches* expands feminist discourse by highlighting marginalized women's empowerment.
5. **Accessible Feminist Narrative:** Through simple language and relatable characters, Murthy brings feminist concerns into everyday discourse, making them accessible to broad audiences.

Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's fiction embodies everyday feminism, illustrating how women in contemporary Indian society challenge patriarchal roles through resilience and quiet assertion. Her protagonists are not rebels in the traditional sense but women who transform their lives through education, dignity, and integrity. By highlighting everyday struggles as sites of empowerment, Murthy redefines women's roles in family, work, and community. Her narratives thus contribute to feminist literature by showing that the ordinary can be extraordinary—that everyday resilience is itself a powerful feminist act.

References

- Certeau, M. de. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.
- Desai, A. (1980). *Clear light of day*. Harper & Row.
- Deshpande, S. (1988). *That long silence*. Penguin.
- Lahiri, J. (2003). *The namesake*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Markandaya, K. (1954). *Nectar in a sieve*. Putnam.
- Murthy, S. (2001). *Dollar bahu*. Penguin Books.
- Murthy, S. (2008). *Gently falls the Bakula*. Penguin Books.
- Murthy, S. (2013). *House of cards*. Penguin Books.
- Murthy, S. (2017). *Three thousand stitches: Ordinary people, extraordinary lives*. Penguin Books.
- Roy, A. (1997). *The God of small things*. IndiaInk.
- Showalter, E. (1985). *The new feminist criticism: Essays on women, literature, and theory*. Pantheon.