

Review Article

**EDUCATING WOMEN FOR EMANCIPATION AND CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF SUDHA MURTY'S THREE THOUSAND STITCHES**

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**Abstract:**

Sudha Murty is a prolific Indian women writer and eminent philanthropist whose writings are purposed with creating awareness of social struggles undergone by the destitute, which are accustomed to being overlooked by the self-centered world, and remind the duty of charity to fellow needy. Sudha Murty writes both in English and Kannada. The present story "Three Thousand Stitches" is centered around the miserable lives of women struck in the practice of a social evil called *devadasi* system and prostitution. The short story further throws light on how education would be a key instrument in the life of those devadasi women which amplified for their liberation and empowerment.

**Key Words:** Social evils, devadasi system, education, women empowerment.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The present paper presents the pitiable conditions of women in India. Sudha Murty, one of the contemporary Indian English short story writers in her *Three Thousand Stitches* reveals how the women of the marginalized sections suffer due to male chauvinism. The present short story "Three Thousand Stitches" is taken from *Here, There and Everywhere: Best Loved Stories of Sudha Murty* (2018).

There are many prominent personalities who fought for the liberty and equality of women in India. Savitribai Phule is the seminal figure who brought a

groundbreaking change in the egregious scenario of Indian woman, which has been perpetuating since ages in the name of tradition and culture in our male-centered society. She fought for the empowerment of women of all sections - oppressed in name of caste, religious minorities, tribal and destitute. She believed education is the right remedy to break the shackles of subjugation. She started the first school for women in 1848. As quoted by Jill Sperandio in his book *Pioneering Education For Girls Across The Globe: Advocates And Entrepreneurs, 1742-1910*, Savitribai Phule in one of her poems recites the role of education in making one self-reliant and impact it can have in attaining social reform:

Go, Get Education

Be self-reliant, be industrious

Work, gather wisdom and riches,

All gets lost without knowledge

We become animal without wisdom,

Sit idle no more, go, get education

End misery of the oppressed and forsaken, [1]

Another prominent woman Mahaswetha Devi is considered the propagator of torch lit by Savitribai Phule in women empowerment in Indian scenario. She is a writer and social activist whose one of the main encompassing subjects is the atrocities against women in the male dominated society of India. Particularly, she is a crusader for the exposure of inhumane violence against the tribal women who are multi-marginalized through the layers of caste, class and gender. "Through the compelling interplay of politics and history, Devi exposes the

irony of the patriarchal hegemonistic societies that eulogize the idea of protecting a woman's honor at all cost but given a chance, violates her without having any qualm" [2]. Her writings project lack of education as one of the factors preventing woman to be treated substandard, to have unequal rights and in rising equal to dignity and value equal to men.

Hemalatha Lavanam is another social activist who hailed from the state of Andhra Pradesh who worked for the upliftment of marginalized and oppressed. She along with her husband Lavanam strived for the welfare of socially and culturally marginalized people. They contributed tremendously in the projects of criminal rehabilitation and particularly elimination of Jogini system, where women are sexually exploited in the name of god and tradition. They founded an organization named "Samskar" to free woman from this Jogini system and clean off the evil practice. It runs in more than 100 villages in Nizamabad district of Telangana state supporting, liberating and empowering women struck in the clutches of this evil practice. Speaking to New Indian Express, journalist and author Shanti Prabodha tells about the organization - "The idea was to show them all the available options. From education, available scholarships, job opportunities for children, providing them with lands for agriculture and so on" for their liberation and empowerment [3].

Sudha Murty, a contemporary woman writer hailing from Karnataka in India, also raises her voice for the oppressed and underprivileged women through her writings to create awareness among the readers about their dire condition in India. Several of her novels and short stories are centered around the subjugation and substandard position of women in our country, emphasizing more on how lack of education makes them helpless and dependent on others, making them vulnerable gender. The short story selected for the present paper "Three Thousand Stitches" also revolves around the devadasi system prevalent in India in which women, as a traditional practice are cut from their families and normal lives, sacrificed as chattel to the deities in temples and are sexually exploited by men in authority.

Sudha Murty's writings are the true reflection of "Art for life's sake". Her writings are her own real life anecdotes profused with

simple, destitute and oppressed people and their aspirations and plight in their daily lives. They create the consciousness of these exigencies, arouse compassion in the reader's heart and remind the duty of charity towards a fellow human. Though she ventured into the stories of fantasy, nature and romance like many other short story writers in early days of her writing, her experience of glimpse of a girl who was ill-treated for having Leucoderma, a non-contagious and not so harmful disease changed her perception towards the sufferings of people, and further changed her perspective of writing. "For the first time in my life, I thought of writing about this to create awareness" [4]. The present article too brings forth the effort of Sudha Murty's, through her short story "Three Thousand Stitches", to make the world aware of still prevailing social evil "Devadasi System" and prostitution, and the plight, exploitation, oppression of these helpless woman, and how education played a key role in liberation of all these women struck in mire of this evil practice. It portrays a brief sketch of the welfare and transformation achieved in twenty years of journey by these woman of Raichur district in North Karnataka, who were once devadasi, since Sudha Murty first visited them.

Sudha Murty, deciding to serve the society, joined Infosys foundation, a non-profit organization for the welfare of needy in 1996 and as a first project chose the project of liberating women struck in devadasi system. Accordingly she visited a group of devadasi women in a Sudha small village in Raichur district of North Karnataka. On her first visit, Sudha Murty was confronted in a very hostile manner. She tried to explain them the purpose of her visit to help them, but they were not ready believe Sudha Murty.

"Who are you? Did we invite you here?' 'Have you come to write about us? In that case, we don't want to talk to you.' 'Are you an officer? Or a minister? If we tell you our problems, how will you solve them?' " [5]. Their questioning Sudha Murty whether she is a bureaucrat or a political minister projects their distrust in people visiting them on the name of doing welfare. Often the government officials and ministers visit them as part of their duties in implementing the welfare schemes created for them. But they are not truly empathetic towards these women nor serious in doing their duties and not conscientious enough in implementation of the schemes to help these women in their complete liberation and full welfare. In another instance where Sudha Murty tried again to approach them, she was questioned whether she is a journalist, who they believe only come to earn money by writing about them, but not with a real intention of helping them. "She'll write about us and make money by exploiting us" [6]. They feel this an additional exploitation upon the already bearing one. Sudha Murty has to face confrontation of being hit by tomatoes and chappals. "But they threw chappals and tomatoes at me" [7].

Sudha Murty then chose artifice of education to gain their confidence. The big among the several reasons for most of the women joining sex work, or to continue to be in the same mire, even times when they want to leave, is the welfare of their children, and of which education is the most desired one. If they want to take care of their children by earning in a proper way, they are not given jobs or ill-treated for their earlier way of living. So they resort to sex work where they are assured income and also in less time. "Our greatest difficulty is supporting our children's education ..... Most of the time, we can't afford their school fees and then we have to go back to what we know to get quick money" [8]. This lead Sudha Murty and her team to think to facilitate education for their children. They are made aware of the scholarships and other welfare schemes provided by the state government and guided to avail them. They also started a project which sponsored the education of their children. But in return expected these women to come out of the devadasi system and sex work, and this idea of Sudha Murty worked:

'We will take care of all your children's educational expenses, irrespective of which class they are in. But that means that you must not continue being a devadasi, no matter what,' I replied firmly. The women agreed without hesitation.....Hundreds of children were enrolled in the project—some went on to do professional courses while others went on to complete their primary-, middle- or high-school classes [9].

Providing their children good education and supporting in building good career, preventing them from having a ruined life, made these women amenable to Sudha Murty and her team. This enabled them to start the real activities they intended for the welfare and empowerment of these women, which couldn't be taken off earlier due to their disinterested and docile nature. Night schools were started for these women. "we established small schools that offered night classes which the devadasis could attend" [10]. Awareness programs on superstitious beliefs regarding devadasi practices and health issues like AIDS and STDs took inception.

The perseverance in the work and genuine intention along with the benefits brought by schemes of Sudha Murty's team gradually built a trust for Sudha Murty in the hearts of those women. They gradually opened up to share how they had to step into this mire and their everyday ordeals and needs. They opening their hearts increased scope for Sudha Murty to take bigger steps for their welfare. To liberate and empower them, Sudha Murty thought the only way is "to unite them towards a common goal by helping them build their own organization" [11]. This led to the formation of an organization for the rehabilitation and welfare of women from devadasi community and prostitution. The awareness and new support from organization collectively enabled them to resign their earlier way of earning and started to earn income by utilizing the schemes provided by government and also started to rear cattle on their own. "Though the government supplemented their income, many also started rearing goats, cows and buffaloes" [12]. Their unity and transformed-firm-minds helped them stand firm during the times they faced adversities from rival parties. Three women were attacked by acid and the other woman supported them emotionally and the organization supported for plastic surgery.

Nurtured with the education and the confidence gained from the hardships in the path of their aspiration for liberation, they came up with a resolution to establish a bank, exclusively for devadasi and sex workers, which was a big leap in their empowerment. With the help of Sudha Murty and her team they established the bank which is completely operated by the community of devadasi women only. It's commendable achievement is not only to have provided financial support, "but its most important achievement was that almost 3000 women were out of the devadasi system" with the support of this bank's aid [13]. On the third anniversary of the bank, a gathering was held for which Sudha Murty was invited as chief guest. This meeting is the reflection of accomplishment of Sudha Murty and her team in their efforts to eliminate devadasi system and how far the liberation and empowerment is achieved. The women in their invitation letter calling Sudha Murty wrote - "Now, the bank is of sound financial health and none of us practise or make any money through the devadasi tradition.....Our money has been earned legally, ethically and morally" [14]. Some woman shared their transformation on stage - "Then another group came and described their experiences on their journey to independence. Their children, many of whom had become doctors, nurses, lawyers, clerks, government employees, teachers, railway employees and bank officers came and thanked the organization for supporting their education" [15].

These words spoken by the woman and their children declare that they already entered the main stream life, and the old generation of being exploited and oppressed came to end and a new

generation of freedom, equality and dignity took inception. It is the device of education used by Sudha Murty enabled to bring this hors concours transformation in the lives of these devadasi woman and other sex workers. Sudha Murty's team providing education to their children at first hand created a delightful vision of their children with bright futures for these women, ultimately gaining trust for Sudha Murty's team in these women's hearts. This led Sudha Murty's team to start their real intended programs for them among which education for the devadasis is one of the programs. These educated minds came up with the idea of bank which resulted in transformation and liberation of 3000 devadasis, sex workers and their families.

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