

Traversing beyond Age Boundaries: Rethinking Adult Education in Sudha Murty's *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read*

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ABSTRACT:

This article endeavors to interpret the short story *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* (2004) by the popular social worker and author Sudha Murty from the perspective of Adult Education. Adult Education which is also known as *Andragogy* has been a matter of much concern since it was first introduced by the German high school teacher Alexander Kapp in his book entitled *Platon's Erziehungslehre* (Plato's Educational Ideas) where he argues for the lifelong necessity to learn. The article offers a fresh look into Sudha Murty's fictional oeuvre to formulate a coherent understanding of andragogical practices as described by the author, especially from the viewpoint of female literacy and education in India. My scope is however, limited to Murty's *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* to analyze the lamentable conditions of women in India with respect to female education and literacy.

KEY WORDS: Andragogy, female literacy, learner, Private sphere, individual identity, will.

Andragogy which refers to the art and science of helping adults learn is etymologically derived from the Greek words *aner* meaning 'adult' and *agogus* meaning "helping learners learn". In fact, as opposed to *Pedagogy* (*Peda* meaning 'child' and *agogus* meaning 'leader of') which reflects upon the art of teaching or training the child, *andragogy* is a way of distinguishing the different needs of adults, as opposed to children. The term *andragogy* was first coined by the German teacher named Alexander Kapp in 1833 in his book entitled *Platon's Erziehungslehre* (Plato's Educational Ideas) and according to Malcolm Knowles: *andragogy* labels a specific theoretical and practical approach, based on a humanistic conception of self-directed and autonomous learners and teachers as facilitators. (McCulloch and Crook 23)

Adult Education is mostly self-motivated, goal oriented and aims at achieving personal goal. It's a continuous process of learning and can take place at any point of life irrespective of the learners' age, gender and socio-economic background. An important aspect of Adult Education is perhaps achieving personal desires and goals. As Adult Education is significantly different from the conventional educational system, it can suffice itself within both non-formal and informal environment. With recent changes in the educational scenario in India and across continents, the concept of Adult Learning has changed radically. With the aid of different government schemes and policies initiated by the Ministry of Human Resources and Development, Government of India the emphasis on adult education has been on the forefront

especially covering the rural population of India and the marginalized communities of the urban population. In this article, my endeavor is to conceptualize the issue of Adult Education in the short story *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* by the popular social worker and author Sudha Murty, who was the recipient of the R.K.Narayan Award for Literature and Padma Shri in the year 2006 by the Government of India.

Sudha Murty's *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* is one of the most engaging short stories which emphasized the significance of Adult Learning in a much homely environment delineating the concept through the discourse of a grandmother and granddaughter belonging to Kannada background. Though unnamed, the narrator of this story is a twelve-year old girl who shares every bit of her now and then life with her grandmother Krishtaka. The young narrator calls her grandmother *Avva* which is colloquially used to refer to mother in Kannada spoken in North Karnataka. *Krishtaka* is an admirer of Triveni, a fictitious popular writer in the Kannada language. As the narrator proclaim:"She was a wonderful writer. Her style was easy to read and very convincing. Her stories usually dealt with complex psychological problems in the lives of ordinary people and were always very interesting" (Murty 01-02).

Krishtakka's acquaintance with Triveni's literary world started with the weekly magazine *karmaveera* that used to arrive one day late in the village due to poor transportation system. She used to wait eagerly for the weekly serial *Kashi yatre* by Triveni which was then appearing as a serial in *Karmaveera* and it was the duty of her granddaughter to reveal all the whereabouts from the serial as Krishtakka herself was illiterate. In fact, Krishtakka, a grandmother of sixty-two was denied of any formal education. Her childhood was spent in the loss of motherly affection as her mother died when she was a young girl and there was nobody to look after her. Her father married again and later she was tied in conjugal bonds. As of now, we often talk about women empowerment and Feminism but in the olden days, women were supposed to perform two duties perhaps: taking care of their household chores and procreating offspring. Such roles were common in Indian society. In fact, Virginia Woolf was one of the first female authors to address the problem of female community through her works. In *A Room of one's Own* she points out that:

Women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time...She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words and profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read; scarcely Spell; and was the property of her husband. (Wolf 64-66)

Sudha Murty's *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* delineates the courageous journey of a woman in her early sixties with zeal to learn from the basic level starting with learning the alphabets, pronouncing the words and later writing down the sentences with the aid of her twelve year granddaughter. Though this entire process of learning takes place outside the institutionalized and conventional educational system and nurtures within the domestic sphere with a more personal effort from a young learner who herself undertakes the tiresome task of educating her grandmother. Both the pupil and the teacher sets a deadline for completing this task and it was fixed that the upcoming *Dusserah* would be the day by which Krishtakka would be able to read herself without the help of her granddaughter. In fact, it was the inner realization

of Krishtakka which took place when her granddaughter went outside the village for attending a marriage ceremony of her relative and stayed there a week long. It became the most difficult phase of Krishtakka's life as she was unable to read her most favorite novel *Kashi Yaatre*. This novel describes a story of an old woman who saved everything she could for visiting the temple of Lord Vishweshwara at Kashi which is today known by the name of Varanasi. However, that old lady's desire was not fulfilled as she donated whatever she had to an orphan girl who was facing difficulties as she had no money for her wedding. The end of the story revealed a calm acceptance of fate by the old lady. Though her wish for pilgrimage was not fulfilled, however she was exalted at the thought of helping an orphan and believed that the happiness of this orphan girl was more important than worshipping Lord Vishweshwara at Kashi. Krishtakka was in tears as she was missing her partner who narrated Triveni's tale to her. It was in fact, a moment of utter disappointment. Being preoccupied with the chores of the domestic life and an early marriage set her life in a different tune all these years. However, it was the first time in sixty-two years that Krishtakka felt so helpless for being not able to attend school, for being illiterate. Her reminiscences: "I got married very young and had children. I became very busy. Later I had grandchildren and always felt so happiness in coking and feeding all of you. At times I used to regret not going to school, so I made sure that my children and grandchildren studied well" (Murty 05). In fact, she could now relate herself with the protagonist of the story as she too never went to Kashi. It was a moment of crisis for the old granny, her favorite serial was in her hands but she was unable to decipher the meanings of the alphabets. She tried her best to read the serial but everything appeared incoherent to her, the pictures accompanying the story of *Kashi Yaatre* could not reveal the progression of the story. Krishtakka even tried rubbing her hands over the pages wishing that she would understand the story but everything went in vain. She even thought of visiting her granddaughter but rejected the idea and then thought of asking help from somebody in the village but that was quite embarrassing for her. Utterly disappointed, she felt for the first time in her life the utility of education and its importance.

Sudha Murty delicately touches the heart of her readers when she portrays the enthusiasm of a twelve-year-old girl who endeavors to educate her grandmother by making her literate by the time of *Dusserah*. Further, sixty-two years old Krishtakka also performs her duty religiously by being a disciplined learner. As the narrator points out, "The amount of homework she did was amazing. She would read, repeat, write and recite" (Murty 07). In fact, it seems pertinent to apply Malcolm Knowles' principle of "Motivators" in this context. According to Knowles, the most potent motivators or internal pressures like Self-esteem, Quality of life factors etc. motivates an adult learner to learn effectively (Knowles et al. 68). In this instance, *Avva's* urge for learning the alphabets so that she could effectively read the pages of *Kashi Yatre* by herself acted as a motivator. The narrator later on also adds that little did she knew then that one day she would really become a teacher in Computer Science and teach hundreds of students. It is relevant to mention that Sudha Murty herself was formerly an engineer in Computer Science and later became a teacher of Computer Science. She is also credited for introducing computer and library facilities in all schools in Karnataka.

The climax of the story finally arrives when the Dassara festival came. The narrator of this story by then had secretly bought a copy of *Kashi yatre* for *Avva*. However, the first gift

came from Avva as she presented a beautiful piece of frock material to her granddaughter. Quite astonishingly, the twelve-year old girl was taken aback when her feet was touched suddenly by Avva as a mark of respect for being her mentor and guide. This was indeed, something unusual as according to the Gurukul tradition, students generally touches the feet of their ‘gurus’ or teachers for showing gratitude and respect towards them. Although, Avva explains it logically that, “It is my duty to respect a teacher. Is it not written in our scriptures that a teacher should be respected, irrespective of gender and age?” (Murty 08). Finally, it is seen that the young teacher reciprocated the same sort of respect by offering a ‘namaskara’ to her adult learner and by being able to read the name of the author and publisher of *Kashi Yatre*, Avva for the first time in her entire life proved herself as an able and disciplined learner transcending such categories as age, gender, time, and space. Lindeman is one of those critical thinkers who emphasized this very notion of adult education that separates itself from the constraints of institutions. He believed that “Adult learners are those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning” (Lindeman 19).

Though written in a lucid language and simple narrative structure, Murty’s *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* delves deep into the dynamics of private sphere where ascertaining an individual identity especially for an old-lady was quite challenging. This short story may be seen from a variety of aspects and adult education may be one of its significant facets. This narrative not only subverts the conventional thinking about education but also equally signifies a private domain where individual will brings a significant change in reshaping the imperfections of life. As a social worker, Murty’s conceptualization of the andragogical practices beyond the fixities of institutions is a much promising endeavor that reshapes the entire narrative of this short story.

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