

Wisdom from Elsewhere: A Compendium of Stark Realities of Life in Sudha Murty's *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*

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Abstract

It wouldn't be hyperbolic, if we refer to her as the incarnation of determination and benevolence. Endowed with an academic prowess and great mental agility, she has to her credit a multifarious personality, an exemplary professional esteem and an extraordinary literary identity. These and many more words fall short when we talk of the philanthropist, the educationist, the Engineer, the motivator, the inspiration and so much more but chiefly the prolific writer, Sudha Murty. Murty is known for her great works of fiction and non-fiction. Her works are her meticulous observations of life penned down with great precision. *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life* is her interaction with crude and real life where she has shared her experiences completely unfiltered and raw. This book is not simply an assemblage of incidents but an opportunity to observe real life through her lenses. This paper features her efforts in enlightening people organically through her book, *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*, where her amalgamation of experience and prudence opens a gateway for others to comprehend the coarse life and learn some many important and overlooked principles. The book is her endeavour to represent the undisguised life and this paper aims at delineating some of her many efforts to project the stark realities of life which in turn enable the readers to attain wisdom from her experiences.

Key Words: Experience, Encounter, Stark Realities, Wisdom

Sudha Murty, the Chairperson of Infosys Foundation, a member of the Gates Foundation an educator, a philanthropist and an author is a magnate and an inspiration to the world. She was awarded with the Padma Shri in 2006. Murty began her professional career as a Computer Science engineer and was the first female engineer to be hired in TELCO. Her journey to pursue engineering and thereby to work as a professional engineer called for many challenges. She wrote to the chairman of TELCO about the gender biasness in appointments and was called for the interview. The flabbergasted panel immediately noticed the potential she bore and appointed her. She always sustained an instinct of awareness which fortified her and kept her unique at all stages in life. Her bent towards philanthropy evidently keeps her engaged in several welfare programmes whether related to orphanages or rural development

programmes or facilitating schools with computer labs or libraries. She has helped set up number of libraries and established The Murty Classical Library of India at Harvard University. Her dedication in contributing towards the upliftment of society keeps her deeply involved in many social activities. Apart from her contribution in equipping educational institutions, she has rendered her support to many rural development and welfare activities. ‘She works hard for the betterment of underprivileged people in society. She has taken many initiatives in building hospitals, schools, orphanages, rehabilitation centres, etc. for the underprivileged people through Infosys foundation. She works tirelessly in empowering many sex workers to lead a normal life.’ (Arputhamalar, 24-25)

Murty has authored several books in Kannada and English. She has written travelogues, novels, memoirs and several other technical books. If we talk about her writings as a novelist or a story writer or we observe that her character depiction has been from a different perspective whether fictional or real. Even her non fictional works delve deep in human behavioural concepts emerging out of certain mental or psychological temperaments. ‘Her works reflect a rare combination of philanthropic attitude and logical thoughts. Her writings take us deep into the human mind with all its complexities.’ (Lunawat, 2) She goes deep in portraying human psyche, human mind and philosophy so authentically that readers connect with her characters naturally. Her representation evolves from the real life. Her canvas is the real world and the real people whom we often come across in our lives. Her writings are more or less many of our experiences through her pen. Shaik Mohimood and S. K. Rafi write about Sudha Murty “Her work exudes simple realism and empathy. All the little things in life that go a long way are highlighted”. (5)

Murty has not written about female plight singularly. Although her novels discuss women issues yet she avoids polarising blames for the same. She is one of the dauntless authors who blatantly writes about women being equally responsible for their own and for other women’s predicaments along with men. Some of her novels include, *Dollar Bahu*, *Mahasweta*, *The Mother I Never Knew*, *House of Cards*, *Gently Falls The Bakula*, etc.

Her themes are the day to day problems or issues cropping up with changing socio-economic conditions. Most importantly she writes what she observes. Her writings whether fiction, stories or penned personal experiences, all are very relatable. Her involvement in several welfare programmes brings her face to face with the heterogeneous life experiences. She has anchored several welfare programmes working for the betterment of children, orphans, widows, poor and underprivileged and her rendezvous with different people brings her in close proximity with several unique, pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Being a prolific writer and a keen observer she is able to discern well about the conditioning of people depending upon their environment, education or values. She observes that many a times the attitudinal reflections of people speak more for them than they themselves and she silently authors many of such amassed priceless experiences in her book *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*.

Experience has always been a great teacher. It works well when obtained directly but it has an additive advantage when it comes through someone else. When it makes its course through someone it reaches out to a larger number of people. In life there are situations in

which we may not participate directly because they may not be a part of our life patterns. We get to know about them only through someone who has an access to such experiences. As it is well said, 'Life is too short to learn everything through personal experience' (Warren) therefore we must avail all possible opportunities to learn from experience direct or indirect. Murty's *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life* is a collection of some of the most treasured experiences she has earned in her life while working at various capacities, as a philanthropist, an employee, a boss, a friend, a mother, a chairperson, an educationist and so much more. Her compendium comes as a source of knowledge to us. Every story narrated by the author enriches the readers with some of the most valuable lessons. As said earlier, knowledge, whether direct or through someone, is equally significant in formulating the principles of ethical living for all. This book by Murty is an on board trip of life in its most naked and raw form. It reteaches us several pre conversant while many absolutely new lessons of life which probably we would not get to learn so effortlessly elsewhere. *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life* is an assemblage of varied situations not only Murty but anyone one can fall in. It is a guide in what must be done and what must be avoided in life in order to be morally uplifted. Any lesson learnt in life never goes astray whether learnt directly or through someone. Every incident has a lot to teach. This paper is an effort to understand the basic tenet of life, that is, wisdom whether attained directly or through someone else remains to be highly beneficial. This book is an unfiltered representation of Murty's first hand experiences with different people in quite diverse situations and advantageously this non fictional text of hers is a school of life which subtly instructs about some very essential aspects of crude life.

Life is a journey of varied experiences, some worth remembering while some repellent and most desirable to be forgotten and some others which naturally diminish in our memories but one thing which determines our memory quotient is the magnitude of impact they have on us. It is this magnitude which is eventually responsible for any memory to become short or long lived and also worthwhile or worthless. Additionally humans also have a tendency to obliterate or establish memories according to the degree of knowledge they impart. Any incident which has high perceptibility is more receptive of a good memory whether it is self experienced or unfolded by someone.

The purpose of unfurling any individual story of life has manifold purpose. Firstly it is the significance the author perceives in it. Secondly it is a means of self expression, thirdly it illumines the world with its knowledgeable insight and fourthly it speaks about the sapience of the author meant to benefit the readers.

Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life is a compendium of many stories the author has come across in life. As mentioned earlier, Murty has served a large variety of society, the underprivileged, the deprived, the socially downtrodden, the students, and so many more. Her profile, her personal, social and professional life all call for interaction with vast circle of people of all social standings. Being one of the most influential people, she is seen in conversation with all sections of society and this attribute privileges her with meticulous observations of all her associations. She comes across some striking realities of people and life which put her in awe. She narrates several stories which comprise of an enriched course of human life and its ways. A book review states 'All the stories are the true stories that will

surprise and shock us. As readers, we are bound to be amazed by the minute observation of the writer. The observation about the daily routines of rich, poor, educated, uneducated, powerful and many others.’ (Prashanth) We all may not have enough opportunities to enrich our lives and souls with first hand experience of different situations but we have brain enough to keep ourselves well equipped with stories of others which are worth our cognizance.

There are in all fifty one anecdotes in the book. Each of them has so much to absorb and to be fascinated by. Her encounters are with people of different age, different social strata, financial divergences but most importantly, her stories are about the difference in the mental rationality or irrationality which is attained with age, time, situations, money, power, influences, guidance etc. Usually how we behave is a reflection of what we think or we are taught and how we have conditioned ourselves.

The first story, ‘Honesty Comes From Heart’ is about a coolie’s son Hanumanthappa of Rampura who excelled in the field of education in his Secondary School. His picture and his interview published in the newspaper stole Murty’s attention so much that she offered to sponsor his higher studies. The boy gave her the exact details of the expenses which would be incurred in the process (including hostel charges) and Murty sent him Rs 1800 as the total financial cover for six months. She sent him another draft of Rs.1800 for the next six months and received an acknowledgement along with currency notes of Rs 300. He thanked her and wrote, ‘...But I was not in Bellary for the last two months. ...My expenditure during these months was less than Rs. 300 per month. Therefore, I am sending you the Rs. 300 that I have not used for the last two months. ...’(4) Murty mentions here how she was astonished to discover the poor boy’s honesty. She writes, ‘Experience has taught me that honesty is not the mark of any particular class nor is it related to education or wealth. It cannot be taught at any university. In most people it naturally springs from heart.’(5) A very simple reminiscence of a very important lesson of life is the nucleus of the story. The poor little boy, whom we have not met, does not fail to impress us and teach us his definition of honesty.

Another incident takes place in, ‘In Sahyadri Hills, A Lesson in Humility’, where Murty describes her meeting with one of the Thandappa (the headman of the tribal groups) in Sahyadri hills, in densely forested region in Karnataka during the rainy season. She went to one of the school where she was told about the problem of dresses not drying during rains. She carried some dress material for the children the next time she visited the place and gave it to the Thandappa of that village who agreed to accept it only if she accepted their gift in return. On her polite refusal, he said, ‘Unless you take our gift, we cannot take the things you have brought for us.’ (16) Murty felt, ‘shocked, embarrassed and humbled.’(16) she teaches us in turn to accept only when you give when she pens down her lesson, ‘Here in Sahyadri forest was an old man, a tribal with no schooling, practising a highly principled philosophy of life—give when you take; do not take without giving.’ (16) Thandappa’s final remark was a maxim for her when he said, ‘There is a grace in accepting also.’ (16) Thandappa, taught us through Murty that acceptance is as benevolent as charity.

Yet another story describes her guilt of not visiting the neighbours after a causality had befallen them versus their reaction when she eventually paid her customary attendance. She describes how she was shocked to see the close ones of the demised old lady much more than

normal. When she expressed her condolences, the daughter in law of the house filed so many complaints about her without expressing any regret or showing any sign of loss. The son concluded, 'Death solved the problem for all of us. My mother was finally relieved from all her suffering.'(22) This story compels all of us to reflect about the degeneration in our values, emotional attachments and materialism such that we fail to recognise and recapitulate the sacrifices our elders had made for us. All what matters is that life must be easy at any cost. Grief stops accompanying a human loss.

There is a very pertinent incident she mentions under the title, 'Power Politicians and Unsung Donors' where she tells us about the annexe the Infosys Foundation had built to some government hospital. The inauguration function was planned such that arrangements were made without paying any heed to the request the sponsor (she herself) had made and moreover the entire credit was pompously transferred to the politician who was called for the inauguration. This one event is a testimony to the fact that power overshadows genuineness. Power easily robs away hard work and this depressed Murty but her dispiritedness was revitalized soon when an old lady thanked her and said, ' Amma ...we are very grateful to you. Many people like us never get admission in the main hospital because of lack of space. But you have given us a common space, with no special wards. Special rooms will always be used by people with connections. For people like us, common halls are better.'(95) The incident impels us to think back to all those times where we had to surrender before power. It exasperates us to bend before unwanted situations but the thought of people like the old lady soothes us.

There is another anecdote mentioning a shop owner Sheikh Mohammed and his widowed sister Zubeida who lives with him. Zubeida is diagnosed with cancer but the self respect of Sheikh did not allow him to take any help from Murty whom he knew very well and from whom he could easily procure financial aid. Yet Murty who knew the state of affairs so very deeply offered him a help of fifty thousand rupees. After a few days later, after Zubeida's sad demise, Sheikh turned up to return the unused three thousand rupees and quoted Zubeida, 'Don't waste this money on me. Tell madam to give it to some other sick person'. Like Hanumanthappa, the brother sister duo stirred Murty who was left with no words on the largeness of their heart. Murty says, ' Her story was a lesson in compassion. She wanted to thank me, and when she knew she would not make it she sent her daughter ... she was perhaps passing on her positive attitude to the child.(104) So much observation and such a lesson for life, what can be more virtuous than endowments both women made.

There is a very peculiar incident where a man meets Murty (thinking her to be a staff) to sell his books but falsely claims to have her known since childhood. He even displays his audacity by stooping down in saying that he had mediated in her marriage with Mr. Murty. His insolence goes unchecked until Murty discloses her truth. This story very aptly titled, ' A Man Too Clever By Half' is a lesson for all those who believe in ruling their lives with any level of dishonesty.

'A Lesson in Life from a Beggar' is a tale of learning from the most penurious people in life. Murty's friend Meena who had been a cynic and a pessimist all her life changed altogether in her approach when she noticed a beggar and his granddaughter enjoy rain irrespective of their

discomfort and hunger. They relished the sweet joys of life in whatever circumstances they were. Meena was forced to reflect what she had done to her life in spite of all the luxuries she was bestowed with. 'Once this realization dawned,' she acknowledged, 'it took her almost two years to put the change into effect.' (61) Meena is a representation of so many of us who forget to thank God for all what they have and instead brood over everything that happens otherwise.

People like Parvati, who are the educated narcissists have to pay the price of their insolence and jealousy. A contrast between Vasant and Girija, the woman burnt for dowry, the mop count, the distressed life of the educated Nalini and the contended life of the uneducated Yellama, and so many other stories, all are accounts of Murty's personal and scrupulous observations of human beings. Every new chapter has so much to school. Indian tradition has always been known for its ethical guidance. Besides knowledge our mythological texts and scriptures have always led the way to the righteous principles and values. We never met the characters we have read about in them neither have we come across the allegorised characters in the fables etc. but they all continue to drive us to morality. Similarly many of the literary pieces we come across are written to be shared so that the readers be benefitted from them. *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*: is not meant to profess anything yet it continues to inspire its readers to come in close contact with the different angles of life. It is an ultra fine description of the real people in this world. It inspires, motivates, guides us to follow and unfollow what is essential or erroneous respectively. Her canvas of representing the human foibles along with the strength in character illustrates the reality of life. She leaves it for the readers to analyse, opt, adapt and discard whatever they wish to so that the principles of virtuousness be balanced in all. We may not have opportunities enough or intellect of the required degree to deal the way she has done. Her tackling of different situations is itself imperative of her maturity and sensibility.

The purpose of the book seems manifold. It entertains, it allures, it guides what to follow and what to refrain from, what to espouse and what to reject and most importantly it helps us learn how to address the various issues of life with an insight, empathy and discernment. To conclude, *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*: is indeed wisdom procured for all and another philanthropic deed accomplished by Murty.

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