

**Women of Myth: The Untold Narratives of Female Folklore in Sudha Murthy's
"The Daughter From A Wishing Tree" : Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology**

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Abstract

Myth is subjective, intuitive, cultural and faith-based truth (Pattanaik). When we talk about any culture, tradition we always relaying on the literature, the stories, rituals which are passed on by different generations of the people all over the years. In today's time mythology is used by different writers as a tool to reflect and reinterpret various epics for their personal and national narrative shaping. The stories and Folklore always open for interpretation but stagnant mindset has uprooted the essence of it which has become the subject of grilling in today's contemporary world. Gender biasedness and differences is always been the topic of the debate, which also seen in epic like Ramayana and Mahabharata where representation of popular women like Sita and Draupadi, their sacrifices is overshadowed by the male dominated supreme character. Perhaps this is because are society is traditionally been male dominated or because mythology mostly written by male. Through the ages representation of women in the society is seen through different perspectives made possible by different women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Despande and many more. one such contemporary writer is none other than Sudha Murthy. According to Murthy she was disheartened when she has decided to write a book on Supreme women in mythology as there was no or minimal literature only available which highlights the importance of female goddesses and their importance of role in maintaining the balance in the world. In this research paper we will delve into the female figures in the book *The Daughter From A Wishing Tree : Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology* and explore their identities, struggles, and importance in the realm of mythology and subvert traditional patriarchal expectation and role.

Keywords: Folklore, Mythology, Devi, Feminism, Gender, Identity, Culture, Representation, Contemporary, Interpretation.

Introduction

Yatra naryastu pujiyante

Ramante tatra Devata (Murty).

According to Manusmriti, this shloka has a very deep meaning.., and Sudha Murty incorporated in her work, and says God resides wherever women are respected. But if we look around us women are subjected to various subjugation, it doesn't matter if you are a woman or goddess. Mythology and different folklore stories are cultural narratives that pass on the values, beliefs and societal rules across generations, offering insights to humans problem but these traditional stories are subjected to gender biases, marginalizing female characters or casting them in typical stereotypical roles. In the book *The Daughter From A Wishing Tree : Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology*, Sudha Murty tries to bring back and reconstruct the image of women by giving voice to unheard stories, struggles, sacrifices by various female goddesses in the Hindu Mythology bringing Parvati to Ashokasundari and from Bhamati to Mandodari, featuring enchanting and fearless women who frequently led wars on behalf of the god and at a same time supporter and backbone of their families.

According to Urmi Bhattacheryya the characters like Damayanti, Satyabhama, Urvashi and Shurpanakha all collectively suffered the brute force of a patriarchal pen and were relegated to oblivion. In Murty's book, however, the women whether in hell, heaven or earth, in Indian mythology are the centre of the story and that is where they will stay. Thus it is rich and empowered offering of many women, many goddesses, many warriors and many queens, all coming together to tell you one thing, that they're makers of their own destinies.

In the book Murty, give the introduction and sets the stage for a collection of mesmerizing stories that explore the themes of hope, dreams and the power of wishes. And at a same time emphasizes on the importance of values, relationships and lessons learned through the experiences of different characters in the stories. It led readers understand and reflect on their own wishes, choices and impact of their actions in a life and creating a sense of wonder and curiosity in the mind of the reader. She introduces to us Trinity of Gods - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and their consorts Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati. Here she is not giving much emphasis on male god but lensing out on the iconography of goddess Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati. Murty says goddess Saraswati, wife of Brahma has very smiling face and she is very peaceful and calm, swan is her vehicle, she is mostly seen sitting on a white lotus and wears white clothes, in her four hands, she holds a book, a beads and a pot of water and a Veena. Thus she is devi of knowledge, music, art and wisdom and devi of intellectual growth and creativity. whereas when she talks about goddess or Devi Lakshmi she says short-tempered consort of Vishnu, Murty talks about her various forms especially her two forms- Sridevi (associated with money and prosperity) and Bhudevi (earthly form) where Sridevi is seated at the right side of the Vishnu and Bhudevi is seated at left side of the Vishnu. Devi Lakshmi is very disciplined and meticulous in her nature. Here she is also touching the story of Lord Vishnu ten avatars and associated it with Devi Lakshmi (Bhu devi, Sita and Rukmini) avatar which she took in different course of period. And finally Murty introduces us to Devi Parvati consort of Lord Shiva, she is the mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya. Devi Parvati known by multiple names- Durga, Shakti and Sharvani and many more. The 'a' in word Shiv 'a' stands for her, without her Shiva is a Shava. Devi known for her strength and often called upon for protection and benevolence. Murty quote that devi Parvati represented riding a tiger or lion but actually fact is devi parvati vahan is always a lion not a tiger. And lastly, Murty says that any couple dancing well is often referred to as Shiva and Parvati.

Saraswati Bhagawati:

In Hindu mythology Saraswati Bhagawati is associated with knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom and learning. Under this heading Murty starts narrating her first story which is -The Source of Knowledge, she also placed beautiful iconography of Devi Saraswati. Here she is describing the tale of God Brahma(the creator) who is finds himself in chaos as he tries to craft the world, he needs someone to complete it as it lacked form and organization and thus he was supported by devi Saraswati, the embodiment of wisdom. This is one story whereas in some other interpretation we also learned that Lord Brahma is father of Goddess Saraswati, wherein he was driven by an incestuous need after seeing her. Furious with Brahma's open show of untamed affection, Saraswati cast a strong curse upon him and this is because like Brahma never be adored or venerated on earth like Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva.

Later in the story we also see how asuras steal Saraswati Book of Knowledge, she transforms into river and recovers it and also she provides a part of her essence to become a river that joins Yamuna and Ganga river and get the name Triveni Sangam and also according to Murty its their sangam known as Prayag Raj (not Allahbad). This is one part of the story but other interpretation it says the three rivers were actually in competition for claiming supremacy and to resolve it Lord Brahma decreed their waters which converge at one point creating holy sangam. Also we can see Ganga and Yamuna but Saraswati is believed to be underground (Guptagmini according to Murty) but Saraswati disappearance is linked to tectonic shifts that altered course of river. In this chapter Murty also introduced Andhaka, an asura who desires the Parijata tree. From the Trinity of gods, a goddess is born to oppose him. These goddesses are worshipped during Navratri, symbolizing the reverence for knowledge and wisdom in Indian culture. But according to Shiva Purana, Andhaka was born from the sweat of Parvati and Shiva, he was initially blind and was given to the demon king Hiranyaksha and later became a powerful warrior and king himself after Hiranyaksha died. He was driven by lust, he desired Parvati, Shiva angered by Andhaka's action and confronted him, during their clash Goddess Kali has emerged as Andhaka blood created more asuras like him, she consumed the blood and helped Shiva to slay him.

Narayani Namostute :

In coming sections of the book, Murty divided and named the sections in the name of famous keerthana and lyrics goes like "Sarva Mangala Mangalye, Shive Sarvartha Sadhike, Sharanye Tryambake Gauri, Narayani Namostute". This mantra is Sanskrit hymn specifically part of the Devi Mahatmyam, which itself a section of the Markandeya Purana. Under this section, there are two chapters both are dedicated to Goddess Lakshmi. Also there is beautiful iconography of Goddess Lakshmi sitting on elephant (which also known as Mahalaxmi). Talking about her eight forms- Adi Lakshmi, Dhanya Lakshmi, Dhairya Lakshmi, Gaja Lakshmi, Santana Lakshmi, Vijaya Lakshmi, Vidya Lakshmi and Aishwarya Lakshmi. She is the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity, these eight forms represent different aspects of life and prosperity. Her these forms emerged from the churning of the cosmic ocean (Samudra Manthan) as described in Vishnu Purana. During churning of ocean she seated on a lotus emerged from the sea, all Devas, Asuras and Gods were hoping that the beautiful Goddess would choose them, but she choose dark God Vishnu with his wonderful sparkling eyes and a mischievous grin caught her attention. And this is how their union happened and they become consort and their union is celebrated in various festivals like Lakshmi Puja and

Vaikuntha Ekadashi. In this chapter Murty talks about how Lakshmi and Vishnu happiness tested by Sage Bhrigu. where Bhrigu visting Vishnu abode and Vishnu unable to greet him and Bhrigu got offend and kicked Vishnu in his chest. Lakshmi, offended by this disrespect, curses the Brahmins to be devoid of wealth. Vishnu, however apologizes to Bhrigu.,with humility which leads Bhrigu declares him the greatest. Lakshmi still upset, leaves Vishnu Vaikuntha for Karvirapura (modern-day Kolhapur), which made Vishnu descends to earth to seek her. This chapter also introduced Alakshmi, the shadow of Lakshmi, symbolizing negativity and misfortune.

The second chapter under Narayani Namostute is dedicated to Hayagriva, an avatar of Vishnu, depicted a human body and a horse's head. And according to Matsya Purana, a demon who steals the vedas and Vishnu's subsequently incarnation as Hayagriva to retrieve them. There are variation of the story but it generally centres around the importance of knowledge and the divine intervention to restore it. whereas Murty story depicts or revolve around how Shakti actually beheads a horse and fixes it on Vishnu so that he can slay the demon.

Shive Sarvaartha Saadhike:

This section holds the divine energy of goddess Parvati and her different forms. Here Murty narrated six stories, starting with, The Power of Faith, where she illustrates how Sudarshana's faith in Devi empowers him to overcome adversity, which convince the readers to reconsider, how personal belief influences success. By drawing strength from your faith, you too can forge your path through chaos to success. Second chapter talks about Devi Shakambhari, also known as Shatakshi, the name Shaka (vegetables) and Ambhari(bearer) known for her role in providing nourishment and sustenance during a time of severe famine. She is largely associated with Durga, she appeared with countless eyes(shatakshi), and nourish all by producing fruits, vegetables in abundance, ending drought by slaying demon named Durgamasura. In return, she also gained name Durga, the Goddess who ended hardship. This leads reader to think that by respecting and nurturing the environment, we are active participant in a cycle of life that sustains us and others around us., reflecting on the essence of balance in our life. Talking about her next chapters where in she brings well known characters of Mahabharata like Kunti, Pandavas(especially Arjuna), Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, sage Narada, Indra and his elephant named Airavata, Goddess Parvati and others. Here she is talking about importance of Gaja Gowri Pooja, which particularly happened in Karnataka and Maharashtra observed by mothers for the well-being of their children. Basically its a story of Gandhari and Kunti, where Gandhari, after being advised by Narada Maharshi, made an elephant from mud and performed the puja. But Kunti was not invited in her pooja so Arjuna brought Airavata(Indra's elephant) from devaloka. In another exciting story Murty brings in two asuras named Shumbha & Nishumbha who has got boon from Lord Brahma that they can't be killed by any male. They also been joined by another fierce and cruel demon Chanda and Munda which amplifies their wrath on innocent people, they conquer the heavens and force the gods to flee. At last it was Goddess Durga who killed them at last, she is ultimate protector for everyone and restores balance to the universe. In another captivating chapter, Murty brings to us a very famous story of Mahishasura., where he after getting boon from Brahma showcases a profound underestimation of feminine power. Durga boldly confronts him and engages in a fierce battle that happened on Chamundi Hill in Mysore or Mysuru in Karnataka. Thus after slaying him, Parvati is honoured as Mahishasura Mardini or Chamundi. This tales depict profound cultural and spiritual significance and Durga's triumph symbolizes

the power of the feminine divine and her various forms like Vaishnavi, Kali, Durga are celebrated during Navratri, across the Indian Subcontinent. In the last story of this section named as The Daughter from a Wishing Tree which is also a book name, Murty brings the unknown tale of Parvati's daughter named Ashoka Sundari, who is born out from a wish - fulfilling tree called Kalpavriksha. She also known by the name of Bala Tripura Sundari, Lavanya, Anvi, Viraja and many more. Her reference can be easily be found in Padma Purana, she was created to alleviate Parvati's loneliness as her husband deep in the meditation and her two sons engaged in their own pursuits. In puranas we can also find that she is destined to marry Nahusha, a Powerful lunar dynasty prince. Thus all these tales remind us of being humble, don't be arrogant and learn from the consequences of one's actions.

Yatra Naryaastu Pujjyante Ramante Tatra Devata:

This is the famous sloka taken from Manusmruthi, this is the same sloka which Murty used it in preface of the her book. Under this section there are fifteen different stories, starting with the tale of the sacred River Ganga and King Shantanu love story, which is also a key episode in the Mahabharata. After captivated by Ganga's beauty, king proposes marriage to her, but only on one condition that he should never question her actions. But he could not refrain himself from questioning Ganga, why she has drowning all their children?, causes her to leave him, fulfilling the sage Vasishta's prophecy. But she returned their eighth child Devavrata(Bhishma) when he becomes young and wise to Shantanu, who then learns of the curse and reason for Ganga's actions. Thus its highlighting themes of divine intervention, parental love and the complexities of fulfilling promises. Also there are many story related to River Ganga which can be easily found in Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Siva Purana and many other. According to Murty Ganga is represented in temples by a stone statue of a woman standing on crocodile and holding two pots of water. She is related to Trinity very closely, as she was born from Brahma's kamandalu, washed over Vishnu's feet and emerged from Siva's hair. In next tale we are meeting Shurpanakha, who is the core of the Ramayana epic, for without her the events that transpired would not have happened. According to the two versions of story, Surpanakha has two husbands one was Vidyutjihva, a Danava prince and other one was Dushtabuddhi from Kalakeya Danava clan both fallout of favor with Ravana and was killed by him.,or maybe killed in battle. After which she was roaming in the Dandaka forest, at Panchavati, where she saw Ram and fell for him but Ram rejected her and Lakshmana disfigured her. Later she took this opportunity also as an avenging tool and instigated her brother Ravana and provoked Sita's abduction. Her story can be found in the Ramayana, particularly in the Uttara kand, the seventh and final book of the Valmiki Ramayana. In next story Murty talks about Surpanakha bhabhi or sister-in-law Mandodari, who is the queen of Lanka, Ravana's wife, and the mother of Meghanada. Mandodari known for her beauty, wisdom and devotion. she actually tries to guide Ravana and take him away from evil, even pleading to release Sita. Also in some story she has been depicted in a more passive figure caught in the events. According to the story Mandodari was not originally human but transformed from a frog due to her good deeds, her frog tale is lesser known by the people. In some story she has been seen as the celestial nymph Madura displeases Parvati while trying to seduce Shiva, as punishment, Parvati curses her to become a frog. But Murty narrates her transformation from frog and after marrying Ravana how her life become sorrowful. Thus the chapter named, The Frog who Forgot Happiness. Also she has been referred as five great women or panchakanya in Hindu scriptures, it is mentioned that reciting panchakanya mantra will wash away all your sins. Next Murty narrating us story of Bahubali

and Bharata revolves around two brothers, sons of the first Jain Tirthankara, Rishabhanatha. Bharata, the elder, became the emperor of Ayodhya and sought to conquer the world. Bahubali, ruling Podanapura, initially resisted Bharata's claim, leading to a war. However, after winning three duels against Bharata, Bahubali renounced his kingdom and worldly life, choosing asceticism. These stories can be learned from Jain texts, particularly the *Adi Purana* by Jinasaena. The story also reveals the tale of Chamundaraya, the Ganga Dynasty minister, who commissioned the statue of Gommateshwara, Bahubali at Shravanabelagola, Karnataka. And he became so proud of its beauty but Goddess Yakshi made him learn vital lesson about humility and devotion.

Continuing with powerful women, the narrative transitions to the tale of King Sharyati and his daughter Sukanya, who has an accidental prick the eyes of an elderly Sage Chyavana, while in the forest. As repentance Sharyati offered Sukanya in marriage to Chyavana. Despite the age difference, Sukanya devoted herself to her husband. But at last Chyavana been rejuvenate by Ashvins by applying herbal paste which later known as Chyawanprash. Chyavana regained his youth and became a handsome young man. Chyavana stories can be found in *Mahabharata* and *Rigveda*. In next captivating chapter Murty talks about Prince Nala and Princess Damayanti love story, which is a popular romance from the epic *Mahabharata*. After getting married, Prince Nala under the influence of deity Kallee (embodiment of degradation) tricks Nala to lose his kingdom and wealth to his brother Pushkara. In subsequent story Nala was also known for his exceptional culinary skills, not just for his royal duties. He has authored a treatise on cooking called *Paka-Darpanam*, which details various recipes. This story of Nala is important part of the larger story of Nala and Damayanti, where Nala's cooking skills helps Damayanti to identify him during their separation. This tale is not just about love and loyalty but also about facing hardships and courage. Murty narrating many love stories from *Mahabharata* narrative, another romance is between Devayani (daughter of Sage Shukracharya) and Kacha (son of Sage Brihaspati) they both shared a complex bond of love, rejection and curses. Here narrator also talks about Sanjeevani Mantra (secret of reviving the dead). Later when Devayani married to Yayati (Chandravanshi King), but he was engaged in a secret affair with her attendant Sharmishtha (daughter of daitya King Vrishaparvan). It is also about how Yayati regains his youth and enjoys worldly pleasures for a thousand years.

Another Loveable couple is Sage Vashishta and Arundhati (daughter of Sage Medhatithi) they both were an ideal pair and often depicted as stars Mizar and Alcor in the Ursa Major constellation, symbolizing their enduring love and loyalty. In Hindu weddings, a ritual called Arundhati Darshan is performed as she known for her purity, chastity, and wifely devotion. In *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Mahabharata* we read the stories of two sages Nara and Narayana to whom God Indra sends Kamadeva (god of love) and the apsaras (celestial nymphs) as he was threatened by their intense devotion and meditation. However Indra's efforts failed, Narayana manifested Urvashi from his thigh to demonstrate divine power. But Urvashi surpassing the celestial nymphs in beauty, and in the end she was gifted to Indra. Also King Pururavas seek permission from Indra so that Urvashi can participate in a play *Vikramorvashiyam* where Pururavas is smitten with Urvashi and desires her presence in a performance. Murty talks about play known as *Lakshmi Swayamvara*, Bharat Muni does not explicitly mention a play in *Natyashastra*, however does describe the concept of *swayamvara* in the context of dramatic representation, particularly in relation to the *stree praksha* (all female drama) tradition. Kalidas in his play *Vikramorvashiya*, refers to this tradition, mentioning a play within a play *Lakshmi Swayamvara* composed by Saraswati and performed by Apsaras. Murty goes on talking about Urvashi its a long chapter so far in the book. She

has narrated romance between Pururavas and Urvashi, also she explains the curse that caused Urvashi to return to heaven. Also mentioning about Pushpaka Vimana which is a celestial chariot not directly related in Urvashi story but it is featured in a story involving Pururavas and Urvashi. Murty mentioned Sage Chyavana and his wife Sukanya from previous chapter, however Urvashi was never related to them, but our writer talks about them.

In another fascinating story of Murty narration, she takes the reader in the world of Surya(sun god), and his wife Sanjana also known as Sandhya. It has themes of heat, sacrifice and divine justice. Sanjana, unable to bear Surya's intense heat, leaves him and creates a shadow of herself named Chhaya as replacement. Murty called it The First Clone in the world. Together Surya and Chhaya have three children Savarni Manu, Shani, and Tapati. Shani born dark due to intense heat near Chhaya's womb. Thus Surya disappointed after seeing Shani's dark complexion. Leading to a conflict and Shani cursing Surya to experience an eclipse. In another amazing tale Murty takes us in world of Saptamatrikas, she brings to us a group of seven mother goddesses, each possessing immense power and representing different aspects of divine feminine energy. Each goddess is associated with a male deity for example Brahmani with Brahma, Maheshwari with Shiva, Kaumari with Kartikeya, Vaishnavi with Vishnu, Varahi with Varaha, Indrani with Indra and Chamunda with Kali. They all are associated with protection, destruction, and benevolence, and are often depicted with the same attributes (weapons, vehicles, etc.) as their corresponding male deities. The Saptamatrikas are believed to have originated in puranic period and are found in sculptures dating back to the Badami Chalukya period. While in next story Murty takes us to beautiful Parijata tree tale, it has several legends associated with it, in one of the tale it has shown that Parijata tree was brought to earth by Arjuna for his mother Kunti for worshipping Lord Shiva. While in some story it is referred, actually more prominent one that it is Krishna who has brought it to Earth for his wife Satyabhama, leading to conflict with Indra. Its a gift from the ocean's churning becomes the centre of a tale about love, jealousy, and the true meaning of devotion.

Murty also talks about Lord Jagannath in her book, where she brings the tale of Viswvasu and Lord Jagannath. Viswvasu secretly worshipped lord Jagannath in the form of Nila Madhava. Indradyumna was eager to see this deity so he sent Vidyapati to search. Vidyapati eventually discovers Viswvasu's secret worship and learns about the deity. However when Indradyumna arrived, the idol had disappeared. This lead to the construction of the Jagannath temple and the installation of wooden idol based on a divine log that appeared on the shore. In second last story Murty delves into romance, adventure political intrigue and power of music between King Udayana and Princess Vasavadatta. Udayana was skilled musician, particularly with the veena, and also known for his ability to tame elephants. Their story is a popular theme in ancient Indian literature, particularly in Sanskrit dramas. Bhasa's Svapnavasavadattam and Harsha's Ratnavali and Priyadarshika are notable works inspired by their love story. Last story in Murty's book is about Bhamati, true story of an ideal, beloved wife of Vacaspati. Bhamati is also the first and the most well known work of Vacaspati, based on his commentaries on Shankaracharya's Brahmasutra. He dedicated this work to his wife Bhamati for her selfless service to him during an estimated 7 years of his negligence towards her, as he was so immersed in writing commentaries. This chapter inspires everyone to take a moment to recognize the unseen efforts of those who supports you.

Conclusion:

All the stories in the book are definitely about women. But do they fully show the strong and powerful qualities you'd expect from stories featuring women warriors or magic users? Murty dealing with a long history of myths and the challenge of making those stories feel true and realistic to people today. She adds her own charm and fun dialogues to each story, she doesn't give the same freedom to the characters or their situations. Like we do feel sad for Satyabhama when she says things like, "I can't believe my husband (Krishna) gave that flower to Rukmini (another wife) instead of me", which shows frustration about sharing her husband. However, you realize that in the end, she will be the one who learns a lesson. In a same way Mandodari's by her past origin she was frog, she asked sages to reborn as a beautiful princess who marries an emperor. It's very disappointing that she doesn't ask for any powers for herself.

There are some moments in the original epics that shows how women can shine, like the story of goddess Parvati, who wanted a daughter to have a true companion. Murty adds a nice touch to this by saying that it shows how special a daughter is, something people can relate to today's world. We can read Murty's stories in two ways - as an adult who is reading them for the first time or as someone who already knows how the stories end but just reads it, also there is third perspectives also to enjoy these tales is read for a child or encourage them to read it themselves. In this way, they would discover the strong female characters and their important roles in these stories. They would see queens with their own thoughts and plans, which is much more than what we usually find in the original epics. By sharing these stories with the next generation, we would be helping to promote feminism and empower young readers with these Indian Mythology stories and culture.

Think about the minds that were shaped before we had Murty's stories to look up to. They grew up hearing tales passed down through generations, filled with obedient women and wise men, devoted wives, and powerful kings. These stories often favored men and pushed women into the background. As a result, people began to believe that men should always take the lead, while women were sidelined. In many families, fathers made the big decisions and earned the money, while mothers were often overlooked. This has led to a situation where many families still prefer having sons over daughters, which is very different from Parvati's wish for her daughter Ashokasundari.

Maybe Wishing Tree can help change this narrative a little. Perhaps literature can inspire a sense of fairness and equality. It's definitely time for that change. Thus written in simple and easy language along with beautiful illustrations, this book had little pieces of information that connected the story with today's world and times.

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