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Reclaiming Silenced Mythological Voices: Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Affective Representation in Sudha Murty's *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*

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Abstract: *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology by Sudha Murty revisits lesser-known female figures from Indian mythology and reinterprets their experiences through contemporary narrative sensibilities. This study examines the text through the theoretical frameworks of trauma studies, memory studies, and affect theory to explore how mythological women's experiences of suffering, resilience, and emotional endurance are represented and re-signified. While traditional mythological narratives often marginalize female voices, Sudha Murty's retellings foreground the emotional landscapes and suppressed memories of women such as Parvati, Mandodari, and Ashokasundari. From the perspective of trauma studies, the stories highlight the silent suffering and psychological wounds endured by women within patriarchal mythological structures. Memory studies illuminate how these narratives function as cultural memory, recovering forgotten or marginalized stories of female agency and endurance. Sudha Murty's narrative strategy reconstructs myth as a site where collective memory preserves women's struggles and contributions across generations. Additionally, affect theory helps analyze how emotions such as grief, devotion, courage, and empathy circulate within the narratives, inviting readers to engage emotionally with these mythological women and reconsider their roles beyond conventional portrayals. By blending mythology with contemporary storytelling, Sudha Murty reclaims women's experiences and transforms mythological memory into a space of empathy and recognition. The text thus functions as a cultural intervention that challenges patriarchal interpretations of mythology and highlights women's resilience and emotional strength. Through the lens of trauma, memory, and affect, these narratives demonstrate how mythological storytelling can recover silenced histories and reshape the affective understanding of women's roles in cultural tradition.

Keywords: *Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, Affect Theory, Mythological Women, Cultural Memory, Feminist Retellings, Indian Mythology*

Introduction

Indian mythology is rich and complex. It has many stories about Gods, kings, sages, and warriors. These stories are passed from one generation to another. Many people learn them through epics, folk stories, and religious traditions. However, when we look closely, we notice something important. Most stories speak more about men than women. Male heroes receive praise and attention. Female characters often appear only as wives, mothers, or helpers. Their personal experiences remain in the background.

Murty noticed this difference when she began reading mythology deeply. She writes that the most famous women in mythology are Draupadi, Sita, and Parvati. Many stories exist about them. But when she looked for stories about other women, she found only a few. This made her feel disappointed. Because of this feeling, she began collecting lesser known stories of mythological women. Her book *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* brings together many such stories. Each story shows a different aspect of women's lives. Some stories show courage. Some show suffering. Others show wisdom and sacrifice. Through these narratives, the book gives importance to women's voices.

Trauma and Mythological Women

According to Cathy Caruth, “trauma is not merely a past event but an experience that continues to affect the survivor over time” (Caruth 4). This idea helps us understand the emotional suffering of mythological women whose stories reflect humiliation, loss, and dignity within cultural narratives.

Trauma studies examine how individuals respond to experiences of suffering, violence, or emotional shock. Although trauma theory originally emerged from psychological studies of war and historical tragedy, it can also be applied to literary narratives. Many mythological stories contain moments of humiliation, abandonment, loss, and sacrifice, and female characters often experience these events, though their emotional responses are not always explored deeply. In *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*, Murty gives greater attention to these emotional experiences through her retellings. For example, the story of Saraswati presents a different form of strength, where she uses intelligence and creativity rather than physical power to protect the sacred book of knowledge during a conflict between devas and asuras. Similarly, the story of Lakshmi reveals emotional pain that is rarely discussed in traditional narratives. “When the sage Bhrgu kicks the chest of Vishnu, Lakshmi feels deeply hurt because that space symbolizes her sacred home, and her decision to leave Vaikuntha reflects wounded dignity and emotional trauma” (Murty 12). This paper studies such stories through three important concepts: trauma studies, memory studies, and affect theory. Trauma studies focus on painful experiences and emotional wounds, as many mythological women endure loss, humiliation, or

loneliness. Memory studies help explain how societies remember or forget certain narratives, particularly how women's stories in mythology are often ignored or marginalized. Affect theory examines emotions and feelings, enabling us to understand how grief, anger, love, and devotion shape human experiences. By applying these ideas, Murty's work can be understood more deeply, revealing that mythological women were not weak but individuals who faced suffering while continuing to live with dignity and strength.

Women, Respect and Cultural Memory

Indian culture has long emphasized the idea that respect for women is closely connected with moral and spiritual well-being. A well-known traditional belief states that divinity resides in places where women are honored and valued. This idea appears in many religious teachings and cultural practices across India, suggesting that women occupy an important and respected place in society. However, when we examine mythological narratives more carefully, a complex picture emerges. While women are praised and symbolically revered in theory, their lived experiences within these stories often involve suffering, sacrifice, or emotional struggle. Many female figures in mythology endure humiliation, separation, or hardship despite their divine or respected status. This contradiction between idealized respect and lived pain becomes an important point of discussion when we analyze mythological narratives through modern critical perspectives.

In *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*, Sudha Murty brings attention to this contradiction by retelling lesser-known stories of women from Indian mythology. Her work does not merely repeat traditional narratives; instead, it explores the emotional depth and inner strength of mythological women. Murty's retellings highlight how these women possess wisdom, courage, and resilience while also experiencing emotional pain or injustice. Through this approach, she challenges the assumption that mythological women exist only as passive or secondary figures in grand narratives dominated by male heroes and gods. Her stories reveal that these women play crucial roles in shaping events and preserving moral values, even when their contributions are overlooked in traditional storytelling.

Saraswati and the Power of Wisdom

One powerful example in Murty's work is the story of Saraswati. In Hindu mythology, Saraswati is widely known as the goddess of knowledge, wisdom, speech, and artistic expression. She is often depicted holding a veena and sacred texts, symbolizing learning and creativity. According to mythological tradition, Saraswati emerges from the words of Brahma, the creator of the universe.

Because she arises from divine speech and sound, she becomes closely associated with language, music, and intellectual clarity. She is also known by other names such as

Vagdevi and Vani, both of which emphasize her connection with speech and expression. Saraswati's presence represents the power of knowledge and the importance of wisdom in maintaining cosmic order (Murty 3).

The narrative describes how Saraswati and Brahma begin their work together in Brahmaloka, the celestial realm associated with creation and knowledge. During this period, an important conflict arises between the devas (divine beings) and the asuras (forces often depicted as adversaries of the gods). The source of this conflict is not simply power or territory, but the sacred book of knowledge. This book symbolizes wisdom, learning, and the intellectual foundation of the universe. Whoever controls this sacred text gains access to immense knowledge and influence. The struggle over the book therefore represents a deeper battle over the preservation of wisdom and the rightful use of knowledge.

Saraswati's greatest strength was not physical power but intelligence and wisdom. As Sudha Murty explains, "Upon reaching earth, Saraswati realized that unlike other goddesses, she wasn't a warrior and didn't possess any weapons. So, the goddess of knowledge and learning decided to use her expertise" (Murty 4). This shows that Saraswati relied on knowledge rather than violence to overcome challenges. In many mythological stories, conflicts between devas and asuras are resolved through physical battles or acts of divine warfare. Gods often use powerful weapons or supernatural abilities to defeat their enemies. However, the story of Saraswati presents a different type of strength. Saraswati is not portrayed as a warrior goddess who fights with weapons or destructive power. Instead, her strength lies in intelligence, creativity, and calm judgment. Rather than engaging in direct violence, she finds an innovative way to protect the sacred book of knowledge.

According to the story, Saraswati creates a powerful river to defend the sacred text from the asuras. The river flows with tremendous force, sweeping away the attackers and carrying the book of knowledge safely away from danger. Through this act, Saraswati successfully protects wisdom without resorting to violent confrontation. Her solution reflects a form of power based on intellect and creativity rather than aggression. This moment reveals an important dimension of her character: she embodies strategic thinking and emotional balance even in moments of crisis. The narrative further explains that this divine river later joins the famous rivers Ganga and Yamuna at Prayag, one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in India. The meeting of these rivers symbolizes spiritual unity and sacred memory. By linking Saraswati's action with this important geographical and spiritual location, the story connects mythological events with cultural traditions that continue to shape religious practices even today. From the perspective of affect theory, Saraswati's story demonstrates a powerful form of emotional intelligence. Affect theory focuses on the ways emotions and feelings influence human actions and social relationships. In many narratives, moments of conflict are driven by anger, revenge,

or aggression. Saraswati, however, responds with calm reasoning rather than emotional impulsiveness. Her actions reveal inner stability and thoughtful judgment. She does not act out of rage or fear; instead, she uses wisdom to find a creative solution to a difficult problem. This emotional balance becomes a significant source of strength. It shows that power can be expressed through intelligence and compassion rather than violence.

Memory studies also provide valuable insight into this story. Memory studies examine how societies remember, preserve, and sometimes forget certain narratives over time. In cultural memory, Saraswati is widely remembered as the goddess of learning and education. Students pray to her before examinations, and festivals celebrate her role as the patron of knowledge and the arts. However, her role as a protector of knowledge and a strategic problem-solver is not always emphasized in popular retellings. Many simplified versions of mythology focus primarily on her symbolic association with education, leaving aside stories that highlight her active role in safeguarding wisdom. This selective memory reflects a broader pattern in the representation of mythological women. Female figures are often remembered for their virtues, beauty, or supportive roles rather than for their decisive actions or intellectual contributions. As a result, many important stories about women become less visible in mainstream narratives. Sudha Murty's retelling seeks to restore these forgotten or overlooked aspects of mythological memory. By bringing attention to Saraswati's clever strategy and protective role, Sudha Murty encourages readers to reconsider how knowledge and power are represented in mythological traditions.

Murty's interpretation also invites readers to reflect on the broader theme of women's agency in mythology. Saraswati's actions demonstrate that strength does not always appear in dramatic battles or heroic confrontations. Sometimes strength appears in quiet acts of wisdom and thoughtful decision-making. By presenting Saraswati as a figure who uses creativity and intelligence to solve a crisis, Murty highlights a model of leadership that values knowledge, patience, and strategic thinking. Ultimately, this story contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural memory and gender representation in mythology. It shows that mythological women are not merely symbolic figures but active participants in shaping cosmic order and preserving knowledge. Through the lens of trauma studies, memory studies, and affect theory, Saraswati's narrative reveals a layered portrayal of emotional resilience, intellectual strength, and cultural significance. Sudha Murty's retelling reminds readers that many powerful stories about women remain hidden within traditional narratives, waiting to be rediscovered and appreciated in new ways.

Cultural Memory and Forgotten Women

According to Jan Assmann, Cultural memory “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (Assmann 37). Memory studies examine how societies remember, interpret, and transmit the past through stories, traditions, and cultural practices. Collective memory is not simply a neutral record of historical or mythological events. Instead, it is shaped by social power structures, cultural priorities, and dominant value systems that determine which narratives are preserved and which are gradually forgotten. Cultural memory often highlights figures who represent power, heroism, and authority, while marginal voices may remain hidden or only partially remembered. In many mythological traditions, this selective remembrance becomes particularly visible in the way male heroes occupy the center of narratives, while the experiences and perspectives of women remain less visible. In the vast body of Indian mythological literature, stories about kings, warriors, sages, and divine heroes are widely circulated and celebrated. These male figures often symbolize strength, bravery, and moral leadership. However, the lives of many women who played crucial roles in these narratives are frequently mentioned only briefly or are overshadowed by the achievements of male characters. As a result, the emotional struggles, moral dilemmas, and personal sacrifices of these women receive limited attention in traditional retellings. Memory studies help scholars examine how such omissions occur and how cultural memory can be reshaped to include voices that were previously marginalized.

In this context, Sudha Murty’s book *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* plays an important role in recovering forgotten or underrepresented women from Indian mythology. Sudha Murty attempts to re-examine well-known mythological narratives from a different perspective by bringing attention to female characters who have often been overlooked in mainstream storytelling. Through thoughtful retellings, she reintroduces these women into cultural memory and encourages readers to reconsider their roles, emotions, and experiences. By doing so, Murty contributes to a broader effort to reinterpret mythology in a way that acknowledges both male and female perspectives. One significant example is the character of Mandodari, the queen of Ravana in the epic Ramayana. Mandodari is portrayed as a wise and morally aware woman who repeatedly advises Ravana to return Sita to Rama and avoid the catastrophic war that ultimately destroys the kingdom of Lanka.

As Murty states “Her advice reflects her sense of justice, foresight, and ethical responsibility. However, Ravana disregards her warnings even though she is deeply concerned about the kingdom” (67). This highlights Ravana’s pride and unwillingness to accept wise counsel. Mandodari’s story highlights the tragic experience of witnessing impending disaster while having little authority to change the course of events. Her character embodies the emotional burden of wisdom that goes

unheeded, illustrating how women in mythology often possess insight but lack the social power to influence decisions dominated by male authority. Another compelling figure discussed in Murty's retellings is Surpanakha, a character traditionally remembered in negative terms within the Ramayana narrative. Surpanakha is often portrayed as aggressive, manipulative, or immoral, and her encounter with Rama and his brother Lakshmana leads to the violent episode in which her nose is cut off. In many conventional versions of the story, this incident is treated as a moment of humor or punishment for inappropriate behavior. However, Murty's retelling invites readers to reconsider this interpretation. By focusing on Surpanakha's emotions and motivations, the narrative reveals themes of humiliation, rejection, and gendered violence. Her story raises questions about how women who challenge social norms are judged and remembered within cultural traditions. Through such reinterpretations, Murty's work demonstrates how mythological narratives can be revisited to highlight the complex inner lives of female characters. By bringing figures like Mandodari and Surpanakha into greater focus, she challenges the selective nature of cultural memory and encourages readers to recognize the emotional depth and moral significance of women's experiences in mythology. In this way, the book not only recovers forgotten voices but also reshapes the way mythological stories are understood and remembered in contemporary cultural discourse.

Affect Theory and Emotional Experience

Affect theory examines how emotions operate within narratives and how stories create emotional connections between characters and readers. Rather than focusing only on plot or moral lessons, affect theory explores how feelings such as grief, compassion, anger, love, hope, and empathy shape the reader's experience of a text. In mythological storytelling, emotional engagement is especially important because these stories often carry moral and cultural meanings. When readers emotionally connect with characters, they begin to understand their struggles, motivations, and inner conflicts in a deeper way. Affect theory therefore helps scholars analyze how narratives evoke emotional responses and how these emotions influence the interpretation of cultural stories.

In this context, the storytelling approach of Murty in *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* provides a powerful example of emotional narration. Sudha Murty's style is simple, clear, and accessible, which allows readers of different backgrounds to engage easily with the stories. Instead of using highly dramatic or complex language, she presents events in a calm and straightforward manner. However, this simplicity does not reduce the emotional depth of the narratives. On the contrary, Murty allows the emotional intensity of the characters' experiences to emerge naturally through their actions, choices, and struggles. This technique makes the stories more relatable and encourages readers to empathize with the characters.

As Sara Ahmed explains, “emotions do not simply belong to individuals but circulate within social relations, shaping identities and experiences” (Ahmed 8). This idea helps us understand the emotional responses of mythological women in *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree*, where feelings of dignity, hurt, and devotion influence their actions. Several stories in the book illustrate how emotional themes are woven into mythological narratives. For example, the story of Ashoka Sundari, the daughter of Parvati and Shiva, highlights the theme of patience and faith. Ashoka Sundari is destined to marry the noble king Nahusha, yet her life is filled with obstacles and long periods of waiting before this destiny is fulfilled. Through her story, Murty portrays emotional resilience and the quiet strength required to endure hardship. The narrative emphasizes that patience and hope are powerful emotional forces that help individuals overcome difficulties.

Similarly, the story of Ganga explores themes of sacrifice and responsibility. In many mythological traditions, Ganga is worshipped as a sacred river and a divine mother figure. However, Murty’s retelling highlights the emotional complexity of her role. Ganga must perform difficult actions that appear painful or misunderstood, particularly in relation to her children and her responsibilities to the cosmic order. Through this narrative, readers are encouraged to reflect on the emotional burdens that accompany duty and sacrifice. The story therefore reveals how divine figures also experience emotional struggles similar to those faced by human beings. Another emotionally significant narrative is the story of Sanjana and Chaya, which explores themes of identity, motherhood, and personal transformation.

Sanjana, the wife of Surya, struggles to endure the unbearable radiance of the sun god. As Murty explains, “she creates Chaya, her shadow, to take her place while she seeks relief” (138). This action reflects Sanjana’s emotional and physical suffering as well as her desire to escape overwhelming circumstances. This story presents a complex emotional situation involving maternal love, personal limitations, and questions of identity. Chaya develops her own relationships and responsibilities, leading to emotional tensions between the two maternal figures and their children. Murty’s narration highlights how motherhood can involve sacrifice, misunderstanding, and emotional conflict. Through these narratives, Murty creates strong emotional bridges between mythological characters and modern readers. By emphasizing universal human emotions such as love, patience, sorrow, and hope, she transforms ancient mythological stories into experiences that feel relevant to contemporary life. Readers begin to see these mythological women not only as distant legendary figures but also as individuals with feelings, struggles, and emotional depth. In this way, the stories move beyond being purely religious or mythological narratives and become reflections of shared human emotions and experiences across time.

Feminine Power and Mythological Balance

Another significant theme explored in *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* is the idea of feminine power and divine energy. In many Indian mythological traditions, the concept of feminine power is closely connected with the idea of Shakti. Shakti represents the dynamic and creative force of the universe. According to Hindu philosophy, this energy is the source of creation, protection, and transformation. While male deities often symbolize stability or authority, Shakti represents the active energy that enables the universe to function and evolve. Through this concept, mythology recognizes that feminine power is not passive but deeply influential in maintaining cosmic balance.

The character's arrogance is revealed in his belief that "it is impossible for any woman to overpower a man of my strength" (44). Such thinking represents the traditional mythological assumption that strength belongs primarily to men. Yet the narrative later subverts this idea by demonstrating that feminine power operates through knowledge, creativity, and emotional resilience rather than physical dominance. In the retellings presented by Murty, the idea of Shakti becomes visible through stories that highlight the strength, wisdom, and protective power of female deities. One such narrative involves the demon Andhaka, whose destructive ambitions threaten the balance of the universe. In mythological tradition, demons often symbolize forces of chaos and imbalance that challenge cosmic harmony. The appearance of such forces requires divine intervention to restore order. In Murty's narrative, this restoration occurs through the emergence of powerful feminine energies. The divine powers of three major goddesses—Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali—combine to defeat Andhaka and reestablish balance in the universe. Each of these goddesses represents a different aspect of feminine strength and cosmic responsibility. Saraswati symbolizes wisdom, knowledge, and intellectual clarity. As the goddess of learning, music, and the arts, she represents the power of understanding and insight. Through Saraswati, mythology emphasizes that knowledge itself can be a powerful force capable of overcoming ignorance and disorder.

Lakshmi, on the other hand, represents prosperity, abundance, and well-being. She symbolizes not only material wealth but also spiritual and emotional harmony within the universe. Her presence reflects the idea that balance requires stability and nourishment. Prosperity in mythology is not limited to material riches; it also includes moral balance, generosity, and the well-being of communities. Lakshmi's role therefore highlights how feminine energy contributes to sustaining life and maintaining social harmony.

The third goddess, Kali, represents a more intense and protective form of feminine power. Kali is often depicted as fierce and powerful, symbolizing the force that destroys evil and protects the righteous. Her role demonstrates that feminine energy is not only nurturing but also capable of

confronting injustice and defending cosmic order. Kali's fierce form reminds readers that protection and transformation sometimes require strength and courage.

Together, the powers of Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali illustrate the many dimensions of Shakti. Their combined energy restores balance and harmony when destructive forces threaten the universe. This idea reinforces the belief that the divine feminine is essential for sustaining cosmic order. The cultural celebration of Navaratri reflects this deep reverence for feminine power. During this festival, devotees worship different forms of the goddess over nine nights, honoring the various aspects of Shakti. The festival celebrates wisdom, prosperity, courage, and protection, all of which are associated with the divine feminine. Through these narratives, Murty reminds readers that feminine energy occupies a central place in mythological thought. Her retellings highlight how female deities are not merely supporting figures but powerful forces responsible for maintaining balance, justice, and harmony in the universe. By presenting these stories in a clear and accessible manner, Murty encourages modern readers to recognize the enduring significance of the divine feminine in cultural and spiritual traditions.

Conclusion

The Daughter from a Wishing Tree presents a thoughtful and meaningful reinterpretation of Indian mythological traditions. Mythological stories have long played an important role in shaping cultural imagination, moral values, and social beliefs in Indian society. However, many of these narratives have traditionally focused on the achievements of male heroes, kings, and sages, while the voices and experiences of women have often received limited attention. By shifting the narrative focus toward female characters, Murty attempts to bring forward stories that have remained partially hidden or underrepresented within the larger mythological tradition. Through her retellings, Murty highlights the emotional journeys, struggles, and resilience of several mythological women. Instead of presenting them merely as secondary figures in the lives of male heroes, she portrays them as individuals with their own perspectives, intelligence, and emotional depth. This shift in narrative perspective allows readers to see these characters in a more nuanced and humanized manner. Women who were previously mentioned briefly in epic or Puranic narratives are given space to express their experiences, dilemmas, and inner strength.

The analytical framework used in this study drawing from trauma studies, memory studies, and affect theory helps illuminate the deeper meanings within Murty's retellings. Trauma studies allow us to examine how many mythological women endure emotional suffering, social injustice, or personal loss. Their stories reveal experiences of abandonment, humiliation, sacrifice, and endurance, which reflect the psychological struggles that are often overlooked in traditional interpretations. By

examining these narratives through the lens of trauma, readers gain a deeper understanding of the emotional complexity present within mythological storytelling.

Memory studies further help explain how certain stories become central to cultural memory while others fade into the background. Cultural memory is shaped by social priorities and historical power structures that determine which narratives are remembered and celebrated. In many cases, the achievements of male figures are preserved in greater detail, while women's experiences remain marginal or fragmented. Murty's book attempts to address this imbalance by restoring forgotten female characters to the collective memory of mythological tradition. By retelling their stories in an accessible and engaging way, she ensures that these women are remembered not only as supporting characters but as significant figures in their own right.

Affect theory also plays an important role in understanding the emotional impact of Murty's storytelling. Her simple and direct narrative style allows the emotional experiences of the characters to emerge naturally, encouraging readers to empathize with their struggles and aspirations. The stories evoke feelings of compassion, admiration, and reflection, enabling modern readers to connect emotionally with mythological figures who lived in distant narrative worlds. Through these emotional connections, mythology becomes more than a set of ancient stories; it becomes a reflection of universal human experiences.

Sudha Murty's retellings ultimately encourage readers to reconsider mythology from a more inclusive and balanced perspective. The book demonstrates that mythological women are not merely symbolic representations of virtue or devotion but complex individuals who possess intelligence, courage, emotional strength, and moral insight. Their experiences reveal the diverse ways in which women contribute to the moral and cultural fabric of mythological narratives.

By restoring these forgotten voices, *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree* enriches our understanding of mythological traditions and broadens the scope of cultural storytelling. Murty's work invites readers to recognize the importance of women's experiences within mythology and encourages a more inclusive approach to interpreting these timeless narratives. In doing so, the book not only revisits the past but also opens new possibilities for understanding gender, memory, and emotional experience within mythological literature.

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