

**Modernity in Modesty: The Politics of Clothing and Choice in the Works of Sudha Murthy**

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**Abstract:**

The things Sudha Murty writes about occasionally reverse an efficacious transformation of cloth into dignity, resistance, and cultural continuity. This paper attempts to analyze how her female protagonists in Mahashweta confront social realities with respect to modesty as embodied in attire: remnants of inherited value but also signs of emerging new agency. As seen in the works of Three Thousand Stitches, Wise and Otherwise, and Dollar Bahu, Murty seems to re-interpret modesty not as submission, but rather as a conscious choice worthy of consideration-clothing in itself becomes an expression of silent dissent, multiple identities, and emotional resilience in a rapidly metamorphosing India.

**Keywords:**

Sudha Murty, Mahashweta, modesty, tradition, modernity, cultural identity, Indian literature, feminist ethics, clothing symbolism, narrative agency.

**Introduction:**

Traditionally, clothing has served as a metaphor for identity, morality, and the social sphere in Indian literature. Sudha Murty's narratives grow out of experiences with life and culture. Simple adornment in her portrayals does not stand for custom, but for a living art of choice and continuity.

The protagonists in her novels--especially the character Shveta in Mahashweta--wear their values as visibly as they wear their clothes, refusing to accept that modernity must be loud or rebellious. This paper examines how the different characters in Murty's written world use clothing as a means of asserting their various forms of independence and maintaining dignity while negotiating between tradition and changing modern-day realities.

#### Section I: Modesty as Assertion in Mahashweta

Shveta's sarees become more than just clothes; they are a metaphor for inner dignity and soul possession. Proudly, though quietly, Shveta continues to wear her traditional attire despite social ostracism. Her style, in short, is resistance born fleetingly of culture, more cultural resistance than outright confrontation.

It was a form of empowerment to reject going Western and to shy away from public view. It had stopped being holding on to tradition recklessly and had begun evolving into a new definition of strength, one that accepts. In one scene, she is seen moving into Bombay, securing a job, and continuing to wear plain sarees-witnessing how modernity will not negate one's origins.

“She dressed simply in cotton sarees, her face calm, her eyes sharp. She looked like someone who had suffered—but come out on the other side with a strange light in her.”

— Mahashweta, Sudha Murty

With the way she carries herself, Shveta asserts a philosophy that professes professionalism does not set the boundaries of cultural modesty. Her attire acts as a quiet shield, speaking the language of survival interlaced with grace in a world that tried to shame her.

Refusing to betray her sartorial identity, Shveta is the testimony that modesty can exist in the modern world and that defiance can wear silence as its cloak.

#### Section II: Clothing and Cultural Continuity in Three Thousand Stitches

In the title story, Sudha Murty tells of her dealings with former devadasis, many of whom would have worn the traditional saree not merely for cover but for courage. This attire

contained subtle codes for survival—woven symbols of a culture that tried to shame cleverly at them but could never remove their grace.

"Each woman came in a cotton saree, her hair neatly oiled, eyes lowered but shining. They had no voice in history books, but they knew how to go walking with dignity."

The bedspread with three thousand stitches, given to Murty with love, becomes a poignant metaphor. Each stitch names a personal story of endurance and transformation—soft rebellion stitched with hope and memory.

Murty tells two experiences from her own life that resonate with this theme. She was put down for flying economy and wearing simple clothes, labeled as 'cattle class.' Murty did not even react with anger. Instead, she carved an identity for herself in modesty, something real instead of an artificial show for approval.

"My clothes may be simple," she writes, "but my intentions are honest. I don't need brands to prove who I am."

The innocence reflected in the stories is not naivety but a complete consciousness. Murty celebrates a kind of cultural continuity held in cotton folds, quiet acts of giving, and stitched-together solidarities. In her world, modest clothing is not about the need to hide; it is an active way of remembering who one is and where one comes .

"Every woman entered in a cotton saree. Oiled hair, eyes lowered, and yet shining. These women had no voice in history books, but they do know how to walk with dignity.

This bed cover with three thousand stitches, a loving gift to Murty, becomes a travelling metaphor. Each stitch tells a story of endurance and transformation—a muted rebellion laced with hope and memory.

Now, the experiences of Murty herself run parallel to this theme. When she was mocked for flying economy class in simple clothes, being dismissed as from 'cattle class,' she did not respond with anger. Instead, Murty reclaimed modesty as an identity; something real rather than something to be approved.

"My clothes may be simple," she writes, "but my intentions are honest. I don't need brands to prove who I am."

The innocence in these narratives is not an intelligent acceptance of things. Instead, it is a purposeful clarity. Murty celebrates that kind of cultural continuity that lives in the folds of

cotton, the quiet acts of giving, and stitched-together solidarities. In her understanding, modesty in dressing is not about hiding; on the contrary, it is about remembering who you are and where you come.

### Section III: The Ethical Language of Clothing in Wise and Otherwise

Murty paints a picture wherein a tribal leader insists upon reciprocity in the matter of gifting—even in clothes—as a sign of mutual respect. And, to him, a shawl is not just a piece of cloth; it is a guarantee of shared dignity.

In another story, the widow resists any effort to dress her in how-shiny-they-are apparel. Her very simplicity becomes a philosophy: quiet, resolute, and principled. The choice is not out of grief but rather for integrity.

Murty brings out the idea of clothing as a moralization rather than mere aesthetic.

In those reflections by Murty, especially when his stories are set in rural India, a thought strikes: clothing has always been a visible symbol of ideology. Wherever silence thunders louder than spectacle, modesty in dress becomes a language of ethics—an etiquette of humility, respect, and empathy.

"In villages, people notice not what you wear, but how you wear it. Your clothes can tell if you've come to show off-or to listen."

In *Wise and Otherwise*, Murty essentially weaves the pattern of moral intent into the clothing. The characters of Murty do not simply wear clothes; they wear context, ethics, and lived truths. Thus, in her stories, simplicity becomes an alternative kind of sophistication.

### Section IV: Dollar Bahu and the Illusion of Modern Glamour

Gouramma, initially dazzled by her American daughter-in-law's Western clothes and wealth, later realizes that Vinuta's modest sarees carry a deeper emotional and cultural weight.

The change in Gouramma—from worshipping dollars to acknowledging dignity—also becomes mirrored in how she herself looks at clothes. What once seemed plain now tells stories of patience, resilience, and grace.

Murty veiledly speaks against the glamorization of Western fashion, implying that style isn't sewn into brand names but into belonging. Through Vinuta, Murty makes a contentious statement that Indian clothes are not merely traditional but are dignified..

#### Section V: Reimagining Femininity through Attire

The women of Murty are not rebels in jeans—they are reformers in sarees.

Dress becomes a canvas for layered identity: tradition, professionalism, emotional resilience. Her characters redefine modernity by not disowning their heritage but by proudly carrying it..

#### Conclusion:

Sudha Murty's literary wardrobe is stitched with grace, grit, and generational wisdom. Giving us examples of modesty through \*Mahashweta\* and her other works, she conveys that modesty is not a limitation: rather, it is another form of strength, a way of survival, and a way to celebrate continuity. Comparing visibility with modernity yet breaking this definition, her characters tell us power is in those subtler textures—in values worn like silk.

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