



Relevance of Storytelling: A Study of Sudha Murty's Book *Grandparents' Bag of Stories*

Storytelling has been a long standing tradition of nurturing young minds. It is not to be confused with story reading. It involves telling a story from memory without the help of any book or script. Some narrators memorize their stories, characters, events and freely keep changing and evolving them with each telling. "Storytelling is an activity to pass the information from person to person and from one generation to the next generation (McDrury & Alterio, 2003)." Storytelling is simple and practical because stories, which are used as the media, are easily obtained (Wajnryb, 2003). Hence, the use of storytelling as a teaching tool has been conducted in the areas of teacher education, higher education, early childhood education, and nursing education.

'A Person who had never listened to nor read a tale or myth or parable or a story, would remain ignorant of his own emotional and spiritual heights and depths, would not know quite fully what it is to be human'.
(Ursula K. Le Guin)

Storytelling can be a great method of teaching the indigenous culture and function as a great educational method of values, virtue, culture and history with the use of myths, legends and folktales. Her stories relates with old myths legends and folktales which give a new insight to the children who now have rather become habitual of listening to them through books, comics or virtual mediums. The ancestral and traditional stories passed on from generation to generation and voiced by grandparents to their grandchildren is a great means of creating a bond in the family and directs children to possess or demonstrate moral virtues towards others. By narrating her stories with the use of age old myths, legends and fables Sudha Murty intends to create stories that are thought provoking, entertaining and also teach interesting life lessons.

Storytelling helps humans dive into creativity, explore intelligence, and develop innovation. Our minds use storytelling as stimuli, allowing cognitive exercise and training. Brian Boyd, author of *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2009), believes that stories are tools. Boyd writes that storytelling brings together the critical elements of alliance-making, pattern-seeking, intelligence, cooperation, and an

understanding that other beings have their own beliefs. For example, there are countless religions practiced around the world; each studied and passed along widely through storytelling.

Performing research in children's literature provides a deep look not only into the cultural side of our lives, but also the psychological, ethical, religious, social and many more. Present research studies the influence of myths, legends, fables and folktales on Sudha Murty's book *Grandparent's Bag of Stories*. This collection of tales is in continuation to her previous bestselling book *Grandmother's Bag of stories*. The book is a collection of nineteen short stories narrated by grandparents to their children. It is a fresh take on the culture of oral story telling followed in earlier times which with the advent of technology and various sources of entertainment slithered to the background. While spending time with their grandparents and elders, children get to bond more with them and at the same time the gathering also become a mode of sharing the cultural heritage associated with the stories.

"If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent then read them more fairy tales." Albert Einstein

A collection of nineteen short stories, this book is about two grandparents, Ajji and Ajja, telling their grandchildren stories they have never heard before during the difficult days of quarantine. Centered on the contemporary situation of living amidst a pandemic, Sudha Murty takes the readers to Shiggaon where her main characters, Ajji and Ajja try to make the lockdown as stress-free and productive as possible for their grandchildren. Between doing simple household chores and making arrangements for the people who have been adversely affected by the lockdown, the elders keep the children entranced with their never-ending stories. Through these tales, we revisit age old myths and legends passed down to us through many generations. The myriad stories told by their grandparents become the biggest source of joy, making the children compassionate, worldly-wise and more resilient than ever.

One of the happiest childhood memories for most of us is during holidays when we used to visit our grandparents. Our grandmother used to tell us all kinds of magical stories and the warmth of a grandparent spinning tales held us captivated. Sudha Murty reminds us of this memory and everything in it. Sudha Murty's story telling is quite charming and nostalgic. Through her varied tales, we get to revisit gods, kings, animals, demons, prince and princesses, and saintly men who manage to impart some essential tidbit of everyday wisdom. Lockdown brought a lot of uncertainty in our lives, and kids were equally affected. Ajju and Ajji (grandparents) tried to make these difficult times a bit easier for their grandchildren by taking them to a magical world of stories.

The book begins with Grandparent Ajja and Ajji watching television and listening to the news about spread of corona virus during early March in 2020. The news of self-quarantine and national lockdown make them worried about their children and grandchildren living in city of Mumbai and Bangalore. To keep the kids

safe parents decide to send them to their grandparents a village named Shiggaon. Grandparents Ajja and Ajji are more than happy to have all the grandchildren. They will be staying with them for a while till situation becomes normal during the Pandemic where corona virus is spreading like a wildfire. Although the story starts in the backdrop of pandemic but the time spend together by grandchildren and grandparents become memorable one for all of them. Meanwhile Ajji's sister Kamlu and her granddaughter Aditi has already arrived at Shiggaon. All the children Raghu, Meenu, Krishna and Anoushka are so happy to get the opportunity to stay together at grandparent's house for there will be no school, no homework and freedom to play.

The day they arrive, they demand Ajji to tell them a story before sleep as she always used to do whenever they visited Shiggaon. "A story a day keeps all difficulties away..."(9 Murthy) Ajji agreed smilingly and she starts narrating the story about rice. Rice is part of our daily diet and we can't imagine living without rice or wheat. The children began listening to the story earnestly, just as the quarantine period was formally declared by Prime Minister of India. 'Let us all listen to the story of how rice came to earth,' said Ajji.(10)

Ajji informs the kids about the journey of rice coming from heaven to the earth. The story witnesses the mingling of myths and legends about heaven, gods and goddesses. Rice according to Ajji was the food of Gods and it was one mortal named Madhav who stole four seeds of rice from heaven. It's a story of the times when "humans could walk on clouds and wander freely in heaven. (10) This deed of Madhav infuriated Annapurna, the Goddess of grains. Madhav clarifies that his intentions were good and he wanted to help his people have the taste of such delicious food. "This is so much better than what we eat and it makes us energetic too. Wouldn't you like your children to have this? Please I request you to pardon me." (14) Annapurna forgives him but she adds that from now on "no mortal will be allowed to come freely to heaven any more. They will be allowed to do so only after they discard their body at death." (14)

Who can resist a good story, especially when it's told by grandparents? With the end of this first story about rice all kids are amazed that they never knew how rice came to earth. Sudha Murty in footnotes to the book mentions the tradition of offering the first produce of rice to Goddess Annapurna and other gods. These grains of rice are used during auspicious occasions to be offered to Gods.

The undeniable truth of the matter is that storytelling, even in the case of faith, makes humans stronger. Boyd believed that "a story is a thing that does instead of a thing that is. Storytelling, as a tool, is measured through its utility rather than its aesthetic representation." So, here's what makes Sudha Murty a great storyteller. She uses the art of grabbing attention of the reader. She with her introductory story about rice coming to the earth she grabs the attention of all the kids while creating a connection with the present situation. All her stories are satisfyingly able to cultivate in children the life values while entertaining them.

Through her simple yet gripping stories Murty has been successful in making the kids be acquainted with the cultural traditions which have been followed for long and are the part of cultural heritage. By narrating a story grandparents here are able make the kids entertained and children also get to know about the legends and myths related to the origin of all their favorite festivals.

Mesmerized by the first story told by Ajji kids want to listen one more story before going to sleep. Now it's turn of Kamlu Ajji (sister of Ajja) to tell the story about wheat. In this story Ajji introduces serpent King and his kingdom terrified by the menace of Eagle. A young boy named Arun helps the Serpent King in killing the eagle and in return as a token of gratitude the serpent king offers him 'bags of gold nuggets, diamonds and emeralds.' (22) However, Arun politely refused the gift. He said, 'I don't need these expensive stones or metals. If you really want to give me something, please give me a handful of wheat seeds that I can plant and help my fellow men enjoy it too!' In this manner wheat came from the serpent kingdom to the land of human beings. Through the story of serpent kingdom and offering wheat seeds to Arun as a gift Kamlu Ajji teaches a lesson to kids about gratitude. 'Gratitude is the highest representation of civilization.'(22) By sharing their favourite food with the person who helped them become free from the terror of a giant eagle that always used to terrify them Serpent kingdom showed their gratitude by sharing their secret and to remember the timely help by Arun to them.

It's important that younger generations should know about the past and their roots. There is no denying the fact that the stories about the Gods and Goddesses, magic, fairy tales and fables have deep rooted archetypal motifs which serves a purpose in the growth and progress of a civilization in some significant way.

Ajja and Ajji ensure that kids during lockdown shouldn't sit idle and divides them duties to help in the household chores. They decide to help the needy people by making masks and food packets. When children see the grownups engaged in helping others in one or other ways they also feel motivated to help the others. They also learn the importance of kindness, empathy and being helpful. Kids feel proud that for their grandparents "helping others is more important than other things' (27). The children are excited and felt happy about lending a hand. As a reward for the great work they had done Ajji tells them a story about the beanstalk and magical bean seeds. Through the story kids learn about not to be greedy and earning through hard work.

Next story is told by Ajja about "The Goddess of Luck". Ajja makes clear to kids "I am only telling you this story so you realize how important it is to lend a hand. When we help others, things happen the way they should- almost as if someone is helping you too!' In the story the Goddess of luck rewards with her benevolence a man named Mahesh for not asking "anything for himself, but for others." In return the Goddess of Luck rewards him by gifting him two boxes full of diamonds and gold for being a virtuous and pure hearted man.

To get to know about so many festivals and celebrations can be quite overwhelming and confusing for any non native but for the Indians it's the way of life. No matter where you live throughout globe the memories of all the celebrations and festivities is quite nostalgic which the elders in return love to pass to their kids and grandkids. These story telling sessions moreover help to strengthen the bond in the family.

Grandfather, Ajja while teaching his grandkids always introduced topics and tied them to a story. He explains the idea behind doing it to Raghu, one of the grandkids. Ajja says:

‘A long, long time ago, stories were used to teach various subjects and life skills. The thought was that children will find things easier to understand if concepts are explained through interesting stories or anecdotes...That is the origin of the Panchatantra.’

The book *Grandparent's Bag of Stories* features captivating tales and engaging characters that also inculcates values such as sharing, resilience and empathy in children. Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. (147) In the Indian context, there are plenty of stories based on myths which are famous from the ancient times, as we see stories of Panchtantra, Jataka, Kathayen, Betal Pachchisi, Vikram Betal, and many other such stories. Panchtantra which was written in Sanskrit in 200 B.C. is still popular. Although the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are epics but their stories are most popular among children.

In India, there has always been a trend of telling stories based on Indian myths & legends to the children by their parents. This is prevalent in the contemporary scenario also but now it has developed into many forms. With the advancement of information technology now lots of mythical stories have been adapted into animated films for the children.

Next story in Sudha Murty's book is about sibling love. For this she takes the myth of Naga Panchami to show how “the two days in rainy season are dedicated to the worship of snakes. This festival is known as Naga Panchami, and it is a custom for sisters to visit their brothers' homes during this time.” (58)

“A Handful of grains” is the story about helping the small creatures like a mouse. “Four grains of rice can change the world?” A handful of rice can help a small mouse sustain a mouse to live upto a week. “The Mouse that became a Mouse” tells the story of a sage and a mouse. The mouse in his urge to become more and more powerful keeps going to the Sage and becomes cat-dog-lion-ant-snake-man-mouse. The sage finally makes the mouse understand the meaning of life. “Life is an experience. We all face challenges on this journey. Accept what has been given to you.”

“A Word of Honour” tells the story of a king who abides his words given to a poor man who lived in a small hut where the King was building his new palace. The king for the sake of his word of honour let him keep his hut.

Each generation passes on to the next, a legacy of knowledge, lessons, habits, and traditions with pride. We use history as a communal knowledge pool, studying how the decisions of our ancestors would create long term effects. Doing so helps shed light on the problems we face today, an advantage not experienced by other species walking the earth. Through storytelling, we transfer knowledge, making it one of the most important traditions to the survival of the human species.

Folklores and tales present deep insights into the dimension of human learning, socialization in community, and the role of story in the transfer of cultural knowledge and values. Eder, D with Holyan R (2010) opines that: “The deep psychological mechanisms associated with myths, stories, and storytelling facilitates the development of not only self-knowledge but also social and communal knowledge on the part of children”. There is a need to reflect on and develop insights into how stories are internalized and passed on through personal relationships which develop as a result of both peer and intergenerational mentoring. Children’s psychology and social development are enhanced through the telling and processing of stories. Donna Eder (2010) in her book, *Life Lessons through Storytelling*, illustrates how stories act to affect children’s sense of ethics and how this knowledge can be applied to the development of more enlightened curricula that help develop children’s ethical character. (Cajete, Gregory A.)

Stories and the art of storytelling is a vehicle for meaningful learning, and teaching is, after all is said and done, essentially a communicative art form based on the ancient tribal craft of storying (Eder, 2010). Story is a primary structure through which humans think, relate, and communicate. We make stories, tell stories, and live stories because it is such an integral part of the way of being human. Myths, legends, and folk tales have been a cornerstone of teaching in every culture. These forms of “story” teach us about the nature of human life in all its dimensions and manifestations. They teach us how to live fully through reflection on, or participation in, the uniquely human cultural expressions of community, art, religion, and adaptation to a natural environment. The myths we live by actively shape and integrate our life experience. They inform us, as well as form us, through our interaction with their symbols, images, and meanings (Vecsey, 1991: 13–14).

Finally, stories live or die through people. They as a human creation, are messages—as well as a way of conscious reflection—which live through the people who share them through the breath of their thoughts, words, and actions. . **The way** that we learn lessons from those who are not with us, that humanity has built on itself, progressed, made knowledge incremental rather than something that has to be relearned, over and over. There are tales that are older than most countries, tales that have long outlasted the cultures, and the buildings in which they were first told.

There are so many funny and yet wonderful stories in the book that are sure to amaze children. This book stands out in the collection of Murthy's books for children for its entertaining nature while educating the young readers with life lessons. Each story is beautifully narrated with a lesson for life. People still read myths and legends today because they often convey timeless and universal themes, which are relevant both in the art of storytelling and in portraying the human experience. Myths and legends also give insight into the values and perspectives of long gone cultures. Their stories offer clues to how these people lived and what kind of societies they inhabited. For this reason, myths and legends can also show what was different about human life when these stories originated and what has stayed the same.

Sudha Murty is the simplest yet beautiful author. Her stories make us smile even in the hardest of times. Her writing style is straightforward and admirable. The book *Grandparents Bag of Stories* teaches us the value of family ties and to stay close to our dear one, to lend a helping hand whenever possible, and to rejuvenate the close tie between grandparents and grandkids and rekindle the tradition of storytelling by grandparents. It reminds us that difficult situations can be dealt better if we have someone to get it through with. Her stories are thought provoking, entertaining and also teach interesting lessons. All the stories in the book offer different values apart from the entertainment. Her stories enable grandchildren to empathize with people and unfamiliar situations, offer insights into different traditions and values and universal life experiences.

- Help children consider new ideas.
- Reveal differences and commonalities of cultures around the world.
- Promote a feeling of well-being, fun and relaxation.
- Increase children's willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings.
- Encourage active participation.
- Encourage use of imagination and creativity.
- Enhance listening skills.

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