



# Silent Strength: The Portrayal of Indian Womanhood in Something Happened on the Way to Heaven

(Edited by Dr. Sudha Murty)

**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the nuanced representation of Indian womanhood in Sudha Murty's "Something Happened on the Way to Heaven," with a central focus on the motif of silent strength. The collection, composed of true-life narratives, brings to light the resilience, dignity, and quiet perseverance of Indian women as they confront varied societal expectations, personal challenges, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Rather than dramatizing rebellion, Murty's women draw upon inner reserves of patience, self-respect, and compassion to navigate conflicts between tradition and modernity, family duty and self-actualization. Their journeys underscore the transformational power of silent endurance—whether in the face of domestic strife, professional setbacks, or social marginalization. By portraying characters who resist simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation, Murty highlights the courage embedded in everyday negotiations, affirming that feminist agency in India is often articulated through subtle, steadfast acts rather than overt defiance. This research positions Murty's stories as significant contributions to discourses on gender, individuality, and empowerment in contemporary Indian literature, illustrating how the silent strength of Indian women reshapes both their personal destinies and the broader social fabric.

**Keywords:** Indian womanhood, silent strength, resilience, gender roles, tradition, modernity, empowerment, patriarchy, compassion, agency, family, self-identity, endurance, societal expectations.

## Introduction

Sudha Murty's "Something Happened on the Way to Heaven" is a collection of twenty unforgettable true-life stories, each offering a unique lens into the lives and experiences of Indian women. Selected through a nationwide contest, these narratives reflect the social, emotional, and psychological landscapes that define womanhood in contemporary India. Central to the collection is the theme of 'silent strength,' which Murty explores through her portrayal of women who endure, adapt, and persevere in the face of adversity. In stories such as the gripping account of a woman surviving an acid attack, the tale of a single mother overcoming a near-fatal building fire, and the story of a young woman bravely defending herself during a train attack, Murty demonstrates how strength is often expressed not through confrontation, but in unwavering dignity and resilience. These women navigate social prejudice, familial tensions, and personal trauma with a quiet determination, embodying silent courage that defies both pity and societal expectations.

Her writing is clear and simple, communicates her ideas clearly. She is a prolific writer in English and Kannada and her novels focuses on Karnataka villages and the people. She advocates feminism and gives power to her females to strike the adverse situations of their lives. She demands the women to give credit to them and liberate the stupendous power of them to accomplish their discernments. She is full of humility and modesty and uses her wealth for the less fortunate people. She acknowledges to the cry and requirement of the impoverished, the destitute and the marginalized portion of the society. She writes in the backdrop of Indian English Literature. The main protagonists are portrayed as well educated women with the inherent inner power who were ready to face the challenges under any circumstances and emerge successfully by carving a place for them in the society within the parameter of the Indian tradition.

Other stories in the collection illuminate the everyday struggles and triumphs of women negotiating generational differences, such as the tension-filled relationship between Rama and her mother-in-law Savitri during the Pongal festival. Here, patience, empathy, and self-restraint become tools with which women assert agency, resolve conflict, and maintain familial harmony. She is a real philanthropist as is her empathy towards the poor of the society says it all that,

*"A few of us are trying to ensure that the poor slum orphans do not suffer the same fate as us. We take them under our wing, give them food and shelter and protect them. But we do not have the means to do this on a long term basis. We need a steady income and begging is not enough."*

The narrative of Santoshi, a transgender woman seeking dignified acceptance in the household, expands the representation of womanhood, revealing intersectional layers of perseverance and grace. By chronicling a broad spectrum of female experiences—from the sacrifice of a young girl to the moral awakening of a wife dissatisfied with her husband's compromises—Murty's collection not only highlights the capacity of Indian women to find hope and meaning in hardship, but also prompts readers to recognize the transformative potential of silent endurance. In Murty's hands, the concept of 'silent strength' emerges as an alternative and culturally resonant mode of empowerment, one that shapes individual destinies and subtly impacts the fabric of society.

## The Unsung Voices of Everyday Women

The women of Sudha Murty have suffered because they go overboard thinking about others, sacrifice their wishes for the sake of family, husband or children to the extent of extinction of their individuality. They have always done what is expected out of them irrespective of whether that makes them happy or not. As we see in acceptance when after the death of Mr. Vellu,

*"Savitri was left behind to fend for herself and jostle for space within her son's world which was rapidly moving away from her- first with his marriage and then with the arrival of his child."*

These women need to realize that they must also take care of themselves, they need to set aside the expectations of the society, do that which will make them happy and what they think is right even if it goes against the norms of the society, because, no matter the number of sacrifices they offer, the society is not going to fall back on them.

This volume is a tribute to women who live through struggles not marked by grand gestures but by quiet endurance and compassion, their stories attesting to the profound impact of the everyday heroine. Murty's collection brings to the forefront these unsung voices, illuminating how subtle acts of courage and kindness shape families and communities. As in the story Dhaka Girl we see that the character Meera, in spite of her own life hardships, offer her share of rice to the old man saying that,

*"I pulled out the bundle of fish from my arms and offered it to him,*

*"This is my share of rice.*

*I know that this cannot help your entire family, but it should be enough for Sakina.*

*Please Kaku my Eidi would be incomplete without this."*

In many stories, the strength of women is portrayed through their ability to navigate complex social and familial dynamics with patience and dignity. For instance, the story of Rama and her mother-in-law Savitri reflects intergenerational tensions but also reveals how empathy and compromise are crucial to sustaining relationships. Their interactions highlight how everyday women, despite conflicts, maintain the delicate balance between tradition and change. Similarly, the narrative of Santoshi, a transgender woman seeking acceptance, broadens the notion of Indian womanhood, illustrating how marginalized voices call for dignity and recognition. As she says that,

*"Thank you, Amma. Someone has asked for my name after a long time. My name is Santoshi."*

Amma held Rama by the hand and dragged her inside. *"Are you insane? Why are you talking to that creature for so long when there is so much work to be done? We have to complete the preparations for the puja too. Ashoke, please drive some sense into her!"*

*"No, Pati," said Santoshi to Amma "I am not a witch. I was born as a boy to a poor family."*

These examples demonstrate that the unsung strength of women often manifests in negotiated coexistence, where understanding and resilience silently transform social realities.

Compassion emerges as another prominent theme defining the lives of these women. Murty's stories capture moments where women's selflessness and empathy ripple far beyond personal boundaries. The tale of a young girl sharing her meal with a hungry stranger, or a mother silently bearing sacrifices for her family's well-being, showcases how acts of care often go unrecognized yet remain vital to social cohesion. This compassion, expressed in the most ordinary settings, reveals the moral fiber and unwavering spirit of women who shoulder emotional and physical labor out of love rather than obligation.

Furthermore, the collection underscores that the strength of everyday women is not about loud rebellion but quiet perseverance. Many characters face trauma, societal exclusion, or personal loss, yet their response is grounded in dignity and unflinching hope. The women in Murty's stories do not seek pity or grand accolades; instead, they embody incremental change through daily acts of endurance and quiet defiance against injustice. This conceptualization challenges dominant narratives of empowerment by valuing perseverance and inner strength, highlighting how these unsung voices are pivotal agents of social transformation.

In sum, "The Unsung Voices of Everyday Women" captures the essence of Sudha Murty's storytelling, shedding light on the nuanced, resilient, and compassionate experiences of Indian women. These narratives collectively argue that the silent strength and quiet courage of everyday women are essential to the fabric of Indian society, deserving recognition, respect, and celebration in both literature and life.

## Spectrum of Female Experiences in the Collection

Sudha Murty's edited anthology *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven* presents a wide and nuanced spectrum of female experiences in contemporary India, foregrounding women and girls across age, class, and social locations. The volume comprises twenty real-life stories selected from a contest run by Penguin, each narrating moments of crisis, choice, and ethical self-discovery that reveal women as agents rather than mere victims of circumstance. Collectively, these narratives trace how women negotiate structural constraints—patriarchy, poverty, violence, and social stigma—while simultaneously asserting moral courage, emotional resilience, and an often understated but powerful agency.

One major axis of this spectrum is childhood and early girlhood, where innocence is juxtaposed with acute moral clarity. In "The Dhaka Girl," a young refugee child during Partition, herself facing deprivation, instinctively shares food with a starving stranger, dramatizing how compassion and ethical recognition can arise from the most precarious conditions. Such stories frame girl children not as passive recipients of adult protection but as ethical subjects whose small gestures contest the hardness of the world and model an alternative, humane sociality. Similarly, in stories like "Aagneya," school-going girls confronted with humiliation and moral policing refuse to internalize shame, articulating instead a nascent feminist assertion of self-respect and bodily autonomy. As Aagi says that,

*"Today, there was no one to help me so I just tried to protect myself. When that boy pulled my dress, my underwear was showing. Everyone in the classroom was looking at me and some were even laughing. This boy had done the same thing earlier to my classmate Roshni too. Why should I allow him to insult me? If I allow him to pull my dress today, he will tear someone else's tomorrow. I didn't want to hurt him, but at the same time, I didn't want to get hurt either. When I defended myself, I had a pencil in my hand-and it simply hit him on the eyebrow. I feel bad for him, Daddy, but it was not my mistake. He started it all."*

Another crucial strand is the representation of women who survive overt, gendered violence and trauma, most starkly seen in narratives about acid attacks and life-threatening accidents. In "Acid," a young woman disfigured by an acid attack chooses not to retreat into invisibility but to pursue legal redress and a meaningful life, thereby rejecting the reduction of her identity to her scars. Likewise, accounts such as the story of a woman who survives a catastrophic fire, loses her voice, and yet later reclaims public space through a commemorative performance, foreground how survival is not merely physiological but also symbolic—a reoccupation of voice, body, and city. These narratives expose the brutality of misogynistic violence while simultaneously showcasing women's insistence on dignity, legal justice, and self-definition.

The anthology also foregrounds working-class and marginalized women whose everyday labor and emotional investments sustain families and communities. Stories like "Savita's Story" (about a domestic worker who sacrifices to educate her daughter and then redirects that care toward another child after a personal tragedy) illuminate women's roles as economic and affective anchors in contexts of precarity. Similarly, "Acceptance," which features a eunuch (trans/feminized) domestic worker, interrogates the intersection of gender nonconformity and social marginalization, showing how patient care and competence slowly unsettle an employer's prejudice and secure a measure of respect. In these narratives, femininity at the margins is marked by double vulnerability—class and gender—but also by an ethical surplus that quietly re-educates the middle-class gaze.

A further dimension of the spectrum concerns women's negotiation and contestation of patriarchal norms around marriage, motherhood, and respectability. In stories such as "A New Beginning," a woman's decision to adopt a child on her own, in defiance of familial and social expectations, foregrounds female autonomy in matters of kinship and care, even when her life trajectory is marked by tragedy. Elsewhere, young widows or single women resist exploitation and voyeuristic objectification, asserting boundaries that reframe them not as pitiable figures but as subjects who can name and refuse violations. These narratives problematize normative scripts of "good womanhood," showing how ethical and affective choices by women collide with, and sometimes reconfigure, conservative social imaginaries.

Across these varied narrative strands, a consistent thematic emphasis falls on women as catalysts of ethical and social change rather than as mere symbols of suffering. Critical commentary on the anthology notes that the stories highlight hope, faith, kindness, and moral choice in "ordinary" lives, making women central to this everyday ethics. Murty's framing of the collection underscores that contemporary women do not primarily seek pity or charity but a transformation in social attitudes and in the implementation of just laws, while also suggesting that women themselves are the primary drivers of this long-overdue change. In this sense, the female figures in *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven* collectively constitute a mosaic of Indian womanhood that is plural, complex, and dynamic: from refugee child to domestic worker, acid-attack survivor to single adoptive mother, each narrative enlarges the representational field of the "Indian woman" beyond victimhood toward courage, moral agency, and quiet, persistent resistance.



## Resilience and Moral Strength

In *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven*, resilience appears as women's quiet perseverance through extreme adversity like acid attacks, fires, and social violence, while moral strength manifests in their ethical choices, compassion, and dignity that transform personal suffering into broader social impact.

Acid attack survivors refuse victimhood by pursuing legal justice and reclaiming public life, turning physical scars into symbols of defiance against misogynistic violence. A single mother survives a building fire, loses her voice, yet reclaims agency through public performance, showing survival as both physical endurance and symbolic reoccupation of space. Young women defending against train attacks or moral policing embody nascent self-respect, rejecting shame to assert bodily autonomy amid immediate threats.

Women navigate familial tensions, like Rama and her mother-in-law Savitri during Pongal, using patience and empathy to balance tradition with change, maintaining harmony without confrontation. Transgender Santoshi earns household acceptance through competent care, quietly unsettling prejudice via consistent moral action rather than demands. A "Dhaka Girl" refugee shares food despite her own deprivation, modeling ethical clarity and humane sociality from childhood innocence.

Working-class figures like Savita sacrifice for education then redirect care after tragedy, anchoring families through economic precarity with unwavering emotional labor. Single adopters in "A New Beginning" defy kinship norms, choosing autonomy and care amid loss, redefining "good womanhood" through principled boundary-setting. These stories frame resilience and moral strength as subtle feminist agency—endurance without rebellion—that reshapes societal attitudes toward gender, class, and marginalization.

## Conclusion: The Power of the Silent and the Strong

Sudha Murty's anthology *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven* ultimately stands as a powerful testament to the silent strength of Indian womanhood, foregrounding forms of resilience and agency that are often overlooked in dominant feminist and literary discourses. Across the twenty true-life narratives, women do not simply endure suffering; they reinterpret, negotiate, and subtly transform the very conditions that constrain them. Whether as acid-attack survivors who step into courts and public spaces, single mothers rebuilding lives after catastrophic loss, young girls asserting bodily autonomy against moral policing, or widows and domestic workers navigating class and gender hierarchies, these figures collectively displace the stereotype of the Indian woman as passive victim. Murty's women exhibit a quiet, steady courage that is rooted in ethical clarity, compassion, and self-respect rather than in dramatic revolt, thereby articulating a distinctively Indian, culturally embedded mode of feminist agency.

The anthology's insistence on every day, unspectacular heroism is particularly significant. Stories of intergenerational conflict, such as the tense yet ultimately conciliatory relationship between Rama and her mother-in-law Savitri, emphasize negotiation over rupture, empathy over estrangement. Here, women hold families together not by blindly submitting to tradition, but by reinterpreting it through patience, dialogue, and emotional intelligence. Similarly, working-class and marginalized women like Savita and Santoshi refashion entrenched social prejudices from within: their labor, reliability, and affective investments quietly challenge middle-class biases around caste, class, gender, and sexuality. In each case, transformation occurs not through loud confrontation but through an accumulative process of living otherwise—persistently, decently, and with an inner sense of dignity.

Murty's narrative choices also broaden the very category of "Indian womanhood." By including figures such as the "Dhaka Girl" refugee child and the transgender woman Santoshi, the collection refuses a singular, monolithic image of the Indian woman. Instead, it presents a mosaic that stretches across age, region, class, and gender identity. Girl children emerge as ethical subjects, capable of moral decisions that expose the cruelty and indifference of the adult world. Trans and feminized bodies, long stigmatized and pushed to the margins, appear here as caregivers and moral anchors within the domestic sphere, demanding not sympathy but recognition and respect. Such representations dismantle narrow notions of respectability and purity, suggesting that womanhood is not a fixed biological or social category but a lived, relational, and evolving experience.

At the thematic core of these narratives lies the intertwining of resilience and moral strength. Resilience in Murty's collection is not simply the capacity to "bear" suffering; it is the refusal to allow trauma, violence, or social stigma to define one's entire being. Acid-attack survivors who seek legal justice and visibility, women who reclaim public stages after physical and emotional devastation, and single women who choose adoption or independent living in defiance of social norms all demonstrate an active, self-conscious stance toward their circumstances. Moral strength, meanwhile, manifests in acts of compassion, fairness, and integrity: sharing food in the midst of hunger, caring for others despite personal grief, or extending acceptance to those whom society deems "other." These gestures, though small and often unacknowledged, become the ethical bedrock on which alternative social possibilities are imagined.

Crucially, Murty's women navigate a constant tension between tradition and modernity, family duty and self-assertion. The conclusion that emerges from the anthology is not that liberation lies in rejecting tradition wholesale, nor that obedience ensures fulfillment. Instead, the stories reveal that empowerment is frequently enacted within the very structures that appear to confine women. By redrawing boundaries, redefining kinship, and quietly resisting dehumanizing expectations, these women demonstrate that agency can coexist with care, that dissent can be expressed through restraint, and that selfhood can be forged without severing communal ties. This nuanced negotiation

complicates binary frameworks of oppression versus freedom, offering a more context-sensitive understanding of feminist praxis in India.

In literary terms, Murty's simple, lucid prose and her focus on "ordinary" lives contribute to a democratization of Indian English literature. She brings into the narrative fold those who are usually peripheral—the domestic worker, the refugee child, the transgender caregiver, the widowed mother—and affirms their experiences as worthy of serious attention and empathy. Her humility, philanthropic commitments, and rootedness in Kannada and Indian cultural contexts further inflect these stories with a grounded realism that resists both romanticization and sensationalism. The result is a body of work that is accessible yet thematically profound, making complex questions of gender, ethics, and social justice available to a wide readership.

Taken together, *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven* positions the silent strength of Indian women as a transformative force that quietly reshapes both personal destinies and the wider social fabric. The anthology suggests that while laws, institutions, and public discourses around gender are necessary, genuine change also depends on the cumulative impact of countless everyday acts—of endurance, kindness, refusal, and ethical choice—performed by women whose names may never enter official histories. By chronicling these unsung voices, Murty not only honors their struggles and achievements but also challenges readers to rethink what counts as heroism and who is allowed to be seen as an agent of change.

Ultimately, the conclusion that emerges from this study is that Murty's collection makes a significant contribution to contemporary Indian feminist writing by validating a quiet, culturally resonant model of empowerment: one that recognizes resilience as resistance, compassion as strength, and silent endurance as a deeply political form of agency. In centering these nuanced portrayals of Indian womanhood, the text invites a reimagining of gender roles and social relations, affirming that the future of a more just and humane society is already being patiently, silently crafted in the everyday lives of its women.

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