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# The Relational Antidote: Sudha Murty's Children's Fiction as a Catalyst for Intergenerational Mentorship

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**Abstract** - In an era characterised by an unprecedented saturation of information, modern education faces a growing "Wisdom Deficit." As the younger generation navigates a world of increasingly mediated communication, the resulting social isolation often hampers the development of profound empathy and ethical character. This paper examines the children's fiction of Sudha Murty—with a specific focus on *Grandma's Bag of Stories* and *The Gopi Diaries*—as a deliberate pedagogical intervention aimed at restoring the primacy of human relationships in learning. Drawing upon the principles of Relational Pedagogy, this paper argues that Murty's narratives function as a contemporary extension of the *Gurukul* ethos, transitioning the learner from mere *Shiksha* (instructional data) to *Vidya* (transformative wisdom). Through a qualitative analysis of the "Grandparent-Mentor" figure, the paper demonstrates how Murty facilitates a "Living Bridge" of intergenerational dialogue. It explores her use of dialectic inquiry and experiential ethics to counter the emotional flattening often associated with modern educational environments.

The paper aligns Murty's storytelling with the ethical and cultural mandates of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, suggesting that her work offers a blueprint for integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into the modern curriculum. Ultimately, the research posits that Sudha Murty's fiction is not merely a nostalgic retreat, but a vital educational strategy that prioritises the "soul of the classroom." By fostering a profound connection between the seeker and the mentor, Murty's work offers a path toward resilience, communal belonging, and holistic character-building.

**Keywords**--Sudha Murty, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Narrative Ethics, Intergenerational Learning, Character Education, Vidya vs. Shiksha.

In the traditional Indian pedagogical framework, the transmission of knowledge was never a solitary or purely academic endeavour; it was an act of 'Sannidhya'—the transformative power of being in the presence of a mentor. Sudha Murty's children's fiction revitalises this ancient concept by positioning the grandparent not merely as a storyteller, but as the Architect of Value. In works like *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, the grandmother figure serves as the primary bearer of the legacy, connecting the child's immediate, often fragmented reality to a broader landscape of ethical continuity.

Unlike the modern educational environment, which often prioritises standardised metrics, Murty's Grandparent-Mentor operates through relational validation. This relational pedagogy ensures that the child is seen and heard, breaking the anonymity that frequently characterises mediated digital interactions. By sitting at the feet of the grandmother, the protagonist (and, by extension, the reader) enters a shared presence in which the social isolation is effectively deactivated.

Murty utilises the grandparent to facilitate dialogue. The stories are rarely monologues; they are punctuated by the children's questions, reflections, and moral dilemmas. This mirrors the *Upasana* tradition—sitting near the teacher—where the mentor's role is to spark *Viveka* (discrimination) rather than just provide information. In this model, the grandparent acts as the Guide on the Side, fostering a disciplined interest (*Shraddha*) in the subject matter by anchoring abstract virtues in relatable experiences. Ultimately, Murty demonstrates that while technology may provide the vessel for modern life, it is the intergenerational relationship that provides the nectar of true wisdom.

In *Grandma's Bag of Stories*, the grandmother's physical presence serves as a primary facilitator of affirmative recognition. The stories are structured as a dialogic inquiry, where the grandmother uses Experiential Ethics to address the grandchildren's real-world dilemmas. In *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, Murty illustrates the democratisation of knowledge, showing that while the child offers 'shiksha' (literacy), the elder provides the 'vidya' (contextual wisdom) that makes the skill meaningful. In works such as *The Hidden Pool* and *Grandfather's Private Zoo*, Ruskin Bond utilises 'forest pedagogy' to counteract the sensory deprivation of modern, urbanised living. The elderly figures in Bond's narratives often act as guides who foster 'shraddha' (disciplined interest) in the natural world, teaching children that nature is a source of profound emotional connection. These stories suggest that the human-nature bond is a necessary component of intergenerational mentorship, grounding the child in a reality that exists beyond the screen. Roopa Pai's *The Gita for Children* and *The Vedas and Upanishads for Children* function as a digital 'ashram', translating ancient Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into a format accessible to the alpha generation.



Aligning with NEP 2020, Pai uses narrative to translate abstract philosophical concepts such as ‘dharma’ and ‘seva’ into actionable life lessons. Her work proves that ancient wisdom is not a static relic but a dynamic tool for navigating contemporary social isolation. In *A Flag, A Song, and a Pinch of Salt*, Subhadra Sen Gupta uses historical fiction to build a bridge of shared identity. By narrating the sacrifices of the past, the elder characters provide a sense of communal belonging that counters the emotional flattening of modern mediated communication. The child protagonists learn that their personal stories are part of a larger, intergenerational tapestry, fostering resilience through historical awareness.

Sudha Murty’s children’s fiction serves as a profound repository of moral, ethical, and humanitarian values, meticulously woven into accessible narratives. Her work transcends simple storytelling to become a deliberate pedagogical tool that emphasises compassion, integrity, and resilience, aiming to move the reader from mere instruction to transformative wisdom. Murty’s characters navigate complex social landscapes to learn the primacy of treating others with dignity, serving as a counter-narrative to the isolation of the digital age. In texts such as *How the Onion Got Its Layers* and *Grandma’s Bag of Stories*, honesty is portrayed not as a rigid rule but as a vital component of character-building and intergenerational trust. Through works such as *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, she translates her background in social work into a narrative that calls for generosity, encouraging children to recognise their role within a larger communal tapestry. Murty posits true fulfilment arises from dedication and a high-touch appreciation for a simple life, challenging the materialistic metrics of modern success. Her stories, rooted in rural Indian landscapes, harmonise ancient cultural wisdom with the practical demands of contemporary living. By highlighting the intellectual strength and resilience of female protagonists, she fosters an environment of gender equality consistent with the social mandates of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Ultimately, Murty’s storytelling functions as a sophisticated instrument for the ethical, emotional, and social development of the new generation, ensuring that the soul of the classroom remains anchored in humanistic values.

In the modern educational context, children are often overwhelmed by a deluge of unfiltered data, leading to a fragmented understanding of morality and social responsibility. Sudha Murty’s fiction addresses this by shifting the focus from abstract instruction to experiential ethics—a method where values are not taught as static rules but are witnessed through the characters’ lived experiences within specific communal settings.

By setting her stories in rural landscapes, traditional kitchens, and ancient temples, Murty crafts a communal learning space that starkly contrasts the isolation of modern, mediated environments.

A central theme in Murty’s work is the geography of connection. In stories like *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, the physical environment acts as a silent mentor, fostering a sense of disciplined interest and faith in the natural world and the community. This Forest Pedagogy aligns with the Indian scriptural tradition of the ‘gurukul,’ where the student’s proximity to nature and the mentor was essential for cultivating discrimination. For today’s child, these settings provide a human connection balm against digital sensory overload, swapping passive screen time for vibrant, empathetic bonds with others.

Murty’s narrative ethics highlight ‘seva’ (service) as the practical expression of ‘vidya’. From aiding neighbours to safeguarding local monuments, her characters show wisdom shines through deeds, not words alone. This hands-on method mirrors NEP 2020’s push to weave Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into holistic, values-driven education. By rooting ethics in everyday human encounters, Murty draws children from the anonymity of screens into the warmth of communal duty.

In *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, Noonni’s journey from the city to her grandparents’ village serves as a physical and psychological shift from instruction to wisdom. The adventure of discovering the ancient stepwell is not merely an archaeological feat; it is a lesson in the community’s collective responsibility. Murty captures this realisation through Noonni’s internal reflection: “The stepwell belonged to the village, and its water was for everyone. Noonni realized that some things are more precious than gold because they bring people together across generations.” (Murty, 2017) This quote serves as the definitive evidence for philanthropy and the ethics of ‘seva’. It demonstrates that true education occurs when a child recognises their role within a historical and communal tapestry, effectively deactivating the modern social isolation.

In *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, the **intergenerational link** shines through the reversal of traditional ‘guru-shishya’ roles. When the twelve-year-old narrator teaches her grandmother, Krishtakka, to read, the elder acknowledges the sanctity of the relationship through a gesture of profound respect. The grandmother explains her motivation: “I am not touching your feet because you are my granddaughter... I am touching the feet of a teacher who taught me with so much affection and made me independent.” (Murty, 2004) This moment highlights the democratisation of knowledge.



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It proves that the relational antidote is a two-way street: while the youth provide technical literacy, the elders validate the teacher's effort with a deep, emotional acknowledgement that transcends biological hierarchy.

In the Gopi Diaries, Murty expands the definition of the mentor by introducing a nonhuman perspective through Gopi, a pet dog. This series encourages children to move beyond digital narcissism and recognise the Other as a source of emotional insight. Gopi's simple, honest observations of human behaviour provide a unique form of 'vivek' (discrimination), teaching children to value loyalty and unconditional presence over transactional relationships. In *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, the reciprocal guru-shishya Bond challenges the rigid hierarchy of traditional instruction. When the child becomes the teacher, the guru-shishya relationship is revealed as a two-way street built on mutual respect and Shraddha (disciplined interest). The story emphasises that while the child possesses technical skill, the grandmother possesses life wisdom, creating a perfect synthesis of generational strengths.

The research presented in this paper underscores that the current wisdom deficit in modern education is not a failure of technology, but a crisis of connection. Sudha Murty's children's fiction serves as a relational antidote, proving that the 'Mute Button' of social isolation can be deactivated by deliberately restoring the intergenerational bridge. By centring the grandparent-mentor as the architect of value, her narratives move beyond the transactional nature of 'shiksha' (technical instruction) to achieve the transformative depth of 'vidya' (wisdom). Ultimately, the classroom's heart lies not in digital tools, but in affirming presence and mutual recognition. Murty's work proves intergenerational dialogue drives cultural and ethical transmission. Narrative Ethics allows children to internalise values like 'dharma' and 'seva' through experiential witness rather than rote memorisation. Relational Pedagogy provides the emotional resilience needed to navigate a mediated world. As we align our pedagogical strategies with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Sudha Murty's literature provides a practical blueprint for embedding Indian Knowledge Systems in the alpha generation's lives—enhancing high-tech tools by prioritising high-touch human bonds rooted in timeless wisdom.

#### TERMS

Visible Acknowledgement - refers to the mentor's active, affirming recognition of the learner's presence, emotions, and individuality in Sudha Murty's children's fiction.

This term captures the grandmother's (or mentor's) deliberate "seeing" and "hearing" of the child, countering the effects of digital anonymity. It draws on relational pedagogy, in which physical proximity—such as sitting at the grandmother's feet in *Grandma's Bag of Stories*—validates the child's experiences, fostering empathy and ethical growth. This acknowledgement breaks social isolation by creating "Shared Presence," echoing Gurukul traditions of *Sannidhya* (transformative nearness). Unlike passive online interactions, it ensures the learner feels valued, sparking Shraddha (disciplined interest) and Viveka (discrimination) through dialogic storytelling. In modern terms, it aligns with NEP 2020's holistic focus on emotional connections in Indian Knowledge Systems.

Socratic 'Samvada' - blends Socrates' questioning method with the Indian philosophical concept of 'Samvada', creating a dialogic tool for ethical inquiry in Sudha Murty's storytelling. The Socratic method involves probing questions to uncover truth and stimulate critical thinking, as seen in Plato's dialogues, where Socrates draws out ideas through back-and-forth exchange. 'Samvada' from Sanskrit, means dialogue or debate in Indian traditions like Upanishads (e.g., guru-shishya exchanges) and Jain texts, emphasising collaborative discourse for wisdom over monologue.

Forest pedagogy - refers to an outdoor, nature-based educational approach using forest or woodland settings to foster holistic learning, particularly in children. It emphasises hands-on, experiential learning in natural environments to build confidence, social skills, problem-solving, and environmental awareness, often through repeated visits to the same woodland site. Originating in Scandinavia, it promotes child-led exploration over structured classrooms, encouraging sensory engagement with nature to counter urban/digital isolation. It adapts this to Ruskin Bond's stories like *The Hidden Pool*, where elderly mentors guide children through natural settings ("Forest Pedagogy") to cultivate Shraddha (disciplined interest) and emotional bonds. This aligns with Gurukul traditions—proximity to nature aiding Viveka (discernment)—and serves as a "Relational Antidote" to modern sensory deprivation, integrating IKS via NEP 2020's value-based learning. It positions the forest as a "silent mentor" for ethical growth beyond screens.

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