

BREAKING CHAINS: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN SUDHA MURTY'S THREE THOUSAND STITCHES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the feminist dimensions in Three Thousand Stitches by Sudha Murty. The work is a collection of autobiographical narratives that portray the struggles, suffering, and transformation of women in Indian society. Through these stories, Murty exposes issues such as patriarchy, caste discrimination, poverty, illiteracy, and social stigma that continue to affect women's lives.

From a feminist perspective, the text highlights the ways in which women are restricted by rigid social customs and unequal power structures. Many female characters in the narratives experience marginalization, economic dependence, and denial of dignity. However, Murty also presents the possibility of change through education, self-reliance, and social support. The stories emphasize that empowerment is achieved not merely through protest, but through opportunities that help women rebuild their confidence and identity.

The book particularly focuses on the rehabilitation of Devadasi women, revealing the harmful impact of oppressive traditions on women's bodies and freedom. At the same time, it celebrates women's resilience, solidarity, and determination to create better lives for themselves. Murty's humanitarian approach to feminism stresses compassion, practical action, and sustainable social reform.

Overall, Three Thousand Stitches reflects important feminist concerns such as gender inequality, women's empowerment, and social justice. The work presents women not simply as victims of oppression, but as individuals capable of resistance, recovery, and transformation.

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Introduction

Sudha Murty is a well-known Indian writer, philanthropist, engineer, and social reformer. Her literary works are deeply connected to ordinary human experiences and social realities. *Three Thousand Stitches: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (2017) is a collection of autobiographical essays that combine personal memories with her experiences as a social worker. The book reflects Murty's concern for marginalized communities, especially women who suffer under oppressive social systems.

The title story, "Three Thousand Stitches," is based on Murty's efforts to rehabilitate Devadasi women in Karnataka. The Devadasi system forced young girls into a life of exploitation in the name of religious tradition. Murty's interaction with these women reveals the harsh realities of gender discrimination and social exclusion. The embroidered quilt gifted to her by the rehabilitated women symbolizes gratitude, unity, and freedom from oppression. Thus, the title itself becomes a metaphor for breaking the chains of exploitation and rebuilding life with dignity.

Murty's feminism is practical, humanitarian, and reform-oriented rather than radical. She focuses on empathy, education, self-reliance, and social responsibility. Her writing reflects a grounded form of Indian feminism that addresses the lived experiences of women within conservative social structures. Instead of presenting theoretical arguments, she narrates real stories of suffering, courage, and transformation.

From a feminist perspective, *Three Thousand Stitches* can be interpreted as a narrative of oppression, resistance, and empowerment. The work highlights how patriarchal systems restrict women's freedom while also demonstrating how education, financial independence, and collective support can help women regain agency over their lives.

Feminist Perspective in *Three Thousand Stitches*

1. Critique of Patriarchal Practices

One of the major feminist concerns in the text is the criticism of the Devadasi system. Young girls are dedicated to temples and later pushed into exploitation under the guise of religious custom. Murty exposes how tradition becomes a tool for controlling women's bodies and denying them freedom. The narrative questions the morality of a society that normalizes such practices while ignoring women's suffering. The feminist perspective here lies in revealing how patriarchy operates through social and religious

institutions. Women become victims of systems created and maintained by male-dominated power structures.

2. Women's Exploitation and Social Stigma

The Devadasi women in the narrative are not only economically oppressed but also socially isolated. Society labels and rejects them instead of recognizing them as victims of injustice. They are denied respect, identity, and equal treatment. Murty highlights the hypocrisy of society, which condemns women while remaining silent about the structures responsible for their exploitation. This reflects a feminist critique of the double standards imposed upon women.

3. Women's Collective Strength and Solidarity

Another important feminist aspect of the text is the idea of collective empowerment. The "three thousand stitches" quilt symbolizes unity, gratitude, and emotional healing among women who have shared similar experiences of oppression. The rehabilitation process demonstrates that women can support and strengthen one another through cooperation and solidarity. Murty presents empowerment not only as an individual struggle but also as a collective movement toward dignity and self-respect.

4. Education and Economic Independence

The book strongly emphasizes education and vocational training as tools of liberation. Murty believes that women can overcome social and economic dependency through knowledge and employment opportunities. The rehabilitated women learn tailoring, embroidery, and other vocational skills that enable them to become financially independent. Feminist theory often identifies economic independence as essential for women's freedom, and Murty's work clearly reflects this idea. Murty's own life also reflects this struggle against gender barriers. As a woman entering engineering and professional spaces traditionally dominated by men, she challenges conventional gender roles and stereotypes.

5. Giving Voice to Marginalized Women

Murty's narratives bring visibility to women who are often ignored in mainstream discourse. The stories of Devadasi women become important testimonies of suffering, resilience, and survival. From a feminist perspective, literature becomes a medium for representing silenced voices. Murty gives marginalized women a platform to express their experiences and reclaim their dignity through storytelling.

6. Compassionate and Reform-Oriented Feminism

Murty's feminism is practical and reformist rather than confrontational. Her focus is on rehabilitation, awareness, and restoring

dignity to women who have been marginalized. Instead of emphasizing conflict between men and women, she advocates social responsibility, empathy, and constructive change. Her approach suggests that meaningful feminism must address real social problems such as poverty, lack of education, and social exclusion.

Rehabilitation and Empowerment of Devadasi Women

Murty's contribution to the rehabilitation of Devadasi women demonstrates feminism in action. She first visited Devadasi colonies and listened carefully to the women's experiences. Rather than judging them, she recognized them as victims of an unjust social system. She worked to restore their dignity by treating them with respect and encouraging them to believe in their self-worth. Economic empowerment became an important step in rebuilding their lives. Through vocational training programs, women learned practical skills that enabled them to become financially independent.

Murty also supported educational initiatives for their children and encouraged long-term social change instead of temporary charity. Her efforts show that empowerment involves both material support and emotional healing. By helping women gain confidence and independence, she enabled them to break free from cycles of exploitation and social stigma.

Feminist Interpretation of "Breaking Chains"

The phrase "breaking chains" functions as both a literal and symbolic idea in the text. Literally, it refers to freeing women from exploitative systems such as the Devadasi tradition. Symbolically, it represents liberation from fear, shame, dependency, and patriarchal control. Murty portrays women not merely as helpless victims but as individuals capable of rebuilding their identities. Through education, employment, and emotional support, the women move from silence and suffering toward confidence and self-respect. The text therefore reflects a feminist vision centered on transformation, agency, and dignity. It suggests that true liberation comes from enabling women to make decisions about their own lives and futures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Three Thousand Stitches* presents a powerful yet compassionate feminist perspective rooted in social reform, dignity, and empowerment. Through her real-life experiences with Devadasi women, Sudha Murty exposes the harmful effects of patriarchal traditions that confine women to lives of exploitation and social exclusion.

However, the text does not portray women only as victims. Instead,

it emphasizes their resilience, determination, and ability to transform their lives through education, economic independence, and collective support. The metaphor of “breaking chains” represents liberation from social, emotional, and cultural restrictions imposed upon women.

Murty’s feminism is practical and humanitarian, focusing on sustainable empowerment rather than ideological confrontation. Her work demonstrates that meaningful social change is possible when compassion is combined with awareness and action. Thus, *Three Thousand Stitches* becomes an inspiring narrative of women’s struggle, resistance, and eventual empowerment, making it highly significant for feminist literary studies and discussions on gender equality in contemporary India.

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