SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

Humanism and Narrative Structure in Sudha Murty's Works

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Article Received: 03/10/2026
Article Accepted:01/11/2026
Published Online:02/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.10

Abstract:

Narratology' is the systematic study of literary works and their narrative structure and style. Critics often described it as an "anatomy of storytelling". This does not just look at the storytelling but focuses on how a story is constructed, told and received by audience deeply. Narratology is a major branch of 'literary criticism'. This includes many different literary lenses like Feminist, Marxist, and Structural criticisms as its inalienable branches. The theory of literary criticism is based on the larger movement of humanism, which grew out of the Renaissance as a reaction against the dominance of religious and medieval scholastic thinking. Humanism is based on the idea that each person is valuable and has the power to make their own decisions. It focusses on individual experience, reason, and self-expression. The human experience is at the centre of this theory. It says that literature deals with and comments on basic human issues like love, pain, identity, morality, and the search for meaning. Narratology, which examines the structure and function of storytelling, reveals how the author employs non-linear narratives, fragmented perspectives, and shifting focal points to explore the complexities of identity and memory, reflecting the instability of personal and collective histories. This offers insight into how the author's novels challenge conventional portrayals of womanhood, emphasizing the shifting and fluid nature of gender roles in contemporary India. Sudha Murty's writings are widely recognized as feminist narratives with everyday humanism in contemporary India.

Keywords: Society, Feminism, self-respect, Pain, Struggle, Relationships, Equality, Education, Empowerment, etc.

Introduction

Sudha Murty, a popular Indian English author, has carved a niche for herself by addressing the socio-cultural realities of contemporary India through her storytelling. Her novels often revolve around ordinary lives, shedding light on issues such as gender inequality, economic disparity, migration, and the evolving dynamics of familial relationships. This study focuses on the humanistic analysis of selected novels with a special

reference to feminism in her *Dollar Bahu, Mahashweta, Gently Falls the Bakula, House of Cards*, and *The Mother I Never Knew* to uncover the intersection of tradition, modernity, and gender roles. The research will utilize majorly postfeminist frameworks, with a focus on narratology, to analyse how the author's narratives involve with themes of fragmented identities, individual involvement, and the quest for self-realization, reflecting the complexities of contemporary Indian society.

Humanism and Narratology

This study aims to explore how the author's selected novels articulate the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, in handling the tensions between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. It seeks to examine how the characters grapple with societal norms and personal choices, addressing themes such as migration, marital discord, economic disparities, and familial conflicts. By situating these narratives within the selected theories, the study will analyse the representation of fragmented identities and shifting cultural paradigms. Additionally, the research will investigate how the author's female protagonists assert their involvement and autonomy while negotiating patriarchal structures. The analysis will also focus on the author's narrative style, including her realistic portrayal of middle-class Indian life, her emphasis on ethical dilemmas, and her ability to weave complex social themes into accessible storytelling.

Feminist literary criticism gained prominence in the late 20th century, advocating for the representation of women's experiences and challenging patriarchal structures in literature. Early feminists like Virginia Woolf emphasized the need for women's literary traditions, while later theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Helene Cixous explored the intersections of gender, language, and power. Theorists highlighted issues of gendered language, the male gaze, and the construction of female identity.

Postcolonial theory, led by scholars like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, critiques colonialism and its impact on literature and culture. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) examined how Western literature and culture constructed the East as an exotic and inferior "Other," emphasizing the power dynamics inherent in such representations (3). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994) introduced the concept of subalternity, addressing the silenced voices of colonized peoples and critiquing how dominant narratives marginalize these perspectives (24). Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and mimicry explored the complexities of identity and cultural negotiation in postcolonial contexts.

When it comes to literary criticism, narrative theory is the study of story structure and how stories are told. The different parts of a story are looked at, like plot, character, point of view, time, and scene, and how they affect the meaning and impact of the story. The main goal of narratology is to figure out how stories work, both within specific works of literature and across countries and genres. This study looks into how stories work and how different

techniques and frameworks affect how the reader experiences and understands the text. Narratologists study how the parts of a story work together, how time and viewpoint affect meaning, and how the way a story is told can either support or contradict its themes.

The idea of narrative levels is one of the most important ideas in narratology. These levels separate the "story" (what happens in the narrative) from the "discourse" (how the story is told). A story may not tell events in a straight line, use faulty narrators, or change points of view in complicated ways, all of which affect how well the reader understands and interacts with the text. Point of view is another important part of narratology. The narrator may use first-person, third-person, or omniscient and can change the meaning of a story in a big way. A good storyteller tells the story in a clear way, while an unreliable one might change or leave out important details, adding a level of complexity that begs for further study. Through narratological analysis, one can uncover the strategies authors use to destabilize dominant colonial narratives, such as non-linear storytelling, the inclusion of multiple perspectives, and the use of indigenous symbols and language. These techniques often serve to subvert colonial discourses and reclaim cultural identity. The interplay of form and content in such works reveals the intricate layers of meaning and the ways in which authors resist and reframe historical narratives. Narratological research also focusses on time and how it works. Time shifting, like flashbacks, flash-forwards, or events that don't happen in a straight line, is a big part of how a story is told and how it is understood. It's not just the events that happen; narrative time also includes how the story goes through them, which affects the pace, tension, and development of the theme. The importance of narratology in literary criticism lies in its ability to break down the story-telling process and find the deeper meanings in a work. Narratologists study how stories are put together and how different forms of storytelling affect how the readers understand, feel, and analyse them. This way of reading literature supports a more analytical and organised reading, which helps find hidden patterns, structures, and thematic concerns that might not be obvious at first glance when one reads at a higher level.

Narratology is not only used in literature, but it has also had a big effect on film theory, psychology, and cultural studies, where the rules of narrative structure are used to study media, storytelling practices, and how people think. Researchers can look into the bigger cultural and social effects of how stories are told and how they affect people by bringing narratology to different types of stories. Narratology is also a great way to learn about different types of literature. There are certain rules for telling stories in different types of literature, like epic, drama, and short stories. By knowing these rules, critics can see how authors follow or break the rules of the genre and how these choices affect the meaning and effect of the works they write. Thus, narratology is an important part of literary criticism because it helps us understand the complicated processes of how stories are put together. Its focus on structure, viewpoint, and time makes it possible to read texts in a deeper and more

nuanced way. The theory promotes a critical and methodical way of reading, which makes it an important tool for scholars who want to study and figure out how stories work in literature. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* utilizes stream-of-consciousness narration, which allows readers to directly access the inner thoughts of characters. This technique, central to Woolf's writing, offers insight into the psychological complexities of the characters, particularly Clarissa Dalloway. "The fluid narrative structure, moving between past and present, demonstrates how time and memory are manipulated within a text, making it a key example of narratological principles at work" (Woolf 89).

The humanistic theory of literary criticism tries to figure out how a piece of writing deals with the complicated issues of human life. The theory supports the idea that writing shows how society and personal experiences are similar and different, giving us a glimpse into the basic things that make us human. One important part of the humanistic theory is that it looks at how people change and grow. People often read books to learn more about the characters' inner struggles, their connections with others, and their ability to change. When a humanistic critic reads a work, they look at how the characters struggle with moral decisions and personal conflict, and how these things show bigger truths about what it means to be human. According to the humanistic theory, these personal trips are not just fun or a way to escape reality; they are important moral and philosophical questions. Humanistic critics say that books can make people feel empathy, think about themselves, and think critically. When people read, they are encouraged to think about and feel about their own feelings and thoughts. This helps them understand themselves and the world around them better. For the humanistic theory to work, this emotional connection between books and real life is essential.

Humanistic theory in literature criticism can also be based on ideas from philosophy, psychology, history, and other fields. Philosophically, humanistic reviewers might talk about ideas, about how people are, how to learn, or existential questions about life and death. Using ideas of personality, development, and moral thinking, they may look at characters' inner conflicts and motivations from a psychological point of view. In the past, humanistic theory often looked at how literature reflects the social and cultural values of its time. It did this by looking at how writings dealt with issues like identity, power, and gender.

Humanistic theory has a very positive view of how literature shapes and shows the human situation. It believes that writing has the power to uplift the human spirit, promote moral reasoning, and lead to personal and public enlightenment. In this way, humanistic literary criticism supports literature not only as a way to express oneself artistically, but also as a way to find out basic truths about being human. In literature criticism, the humanistic theory is characterised by its focus on the unique experiences, emotions, and moral reflections of each person. It makes literature seem like a strong way to understand and get

through life's difficulties, and it urges readers to get deeply involved with both the work and their own lives.

Humanistic theory focuses on the capacity of literature to foster empathy, understanding, and the exploration of shared values. Through this lens, narratives can highlight the resilience and involvement of individuals, even in the face of systemic oppression. By examining characters' struggles, moral dilemmas, and transformative journeys, humanistic theory highlights the intrinsic worth of all individuals and their potential for growth and self-actualization. In postcolonial literature, this perspective amplifies the human cost of colonial domination and the ethical necessary to address historical and ongoing injustices.

Humanism in literature often centres on the human condition, exploring themes such as personal growth, moral dilemmas, and the universal emotions of joy, suffering, and love. A classic example of humanism in literature is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this play, Hamlet grapples with existential questions regarding the nature of life and death, providing a window into human doubts and moral conflicts. His soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," offers a profound reflection on existence, emphasizing the human struggle to find meaning in a chaotic world (Shakespeare 25). The play showcases the Renaissance humanist ideal of individual agency. Hamlet strives to reconcile his internal conflicts with the duties imposed on him by his role in the court. Similarly, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* explores the human potential for reason and moral choice. The epic poem focuses on Adam and Eve's fall from grace, reflecting humanism's interest in free will and personal responsibility. Milton's portrayal of Satan, as a complex character with his own tragic flaw of ambition, presents a humanist reflection on human motives and the consequences of defiance (Milton 78). The poem delves deeply into moral and philosophical dilemmas, emphasizing the human capacity for both reason and error. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* also exhibits humanist principles, as it explores the development of personal virtues and moral choices. Elizabeth Bennet, the novel's protagonist, experiences a transformation, confronting her prejudices and learning the value of humility and understanding. The novel is a strong illustration of the humanistic notion that "individuals can grow intellectually and emotionally, gaining deeper insights into themselves and others" (Austen 112).

Humanistic theory emphasizes the shared aspirations for justice and dignity, while narratology provides tools to analyze how these aspirations are articulated within the text. Together, they offer a multidimensional approach to understanding the themes of oppression, resilience, and the quest for autonomy. These theoretical perspectives encourage a deeper involvement with the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the narratives, shedding light on the complex interplay of power and identity. By focusing on the universality of human experiences and the craft of storytelling, they provide valuable insights into the transformative potential of literature in addressing historical and contemporary injustices.

The intersection of humanism and narratology is evident when literature explores both the human experience and the structural elements that shape its portrayal. George Orwell's *1984* provides an excellent example of this intersection. The novel reflects humanist concerns about individual freedom and autonomy in the face of an oppressive regime. Orwell's use of an omniscient third-person narrative allows readers to understand Winston Smith's internal struggles, highlighting the conflict between individual consciousness and state control. At the same time, the novel's manipulation of time, moving back and forth between Winston's past and present emphasizes how personal memory can be manipulated and controlled, tying narratology and humanism together in a critique of totalitarianism (Orwell 234).

Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* blends humanism and narratology in its portrayal of post-slavery trauma and the search for identity. The novel's non-linear narrative structure and frequent shifts between the past and present reflect the fractured lives of the characters, particularly Sethe. Morrison uses these narrative techniques to emphasize the deep psychological scars left by slavery, making the novel both a profound humanist exploration of memory and identity and a study in how narrative affects perception (Morrison 302).

The author's writings encompass a wide array of insights, moral considerations, and ethical reflections. Her writings primarily address the issues faced by contemporary women. She astutely observes the transformations within contemporary society and adapts her writing to emphasize the significance of individual identity. The challenges encountered in human existence, coupled with the significance of contemporary human values and the decline of societal morality amidst globalization and commercialization, are vividly expressed in her writing. The protagonist's experiences of abuse and suffering, often overlooked in the context of their social and financial identities, resonate through the unique expression found in her writing. Upon recognizing that education serves as the sole instrument for their redemption, considerable efforts are being made to fulfil their needs and facilitate learning. Her life journey and her effort to rescue numerous individuals are eloquently conveyed through her writing. Her novels and children's fiction stories have been translated into numerous languages, including English. Her novel, *Dollar Bahu*, was adapted into a television serial titled *Dollar Sose* in 2000, airing on the Zee Tamil channel.
The author's journey and achievements present a fertile ground for her creative writing, reflecting her concerns. This analysis probes into her quest for identity, illustrating the struggles of her protagonist as they navigate the complexities of self-fulfilment and self-realization amidst challenging circumstances.

Humanistic theory emphasizes the value of the individual and the universality of human experience. It stresses the dignity of individuals and their capacity for moral choice and growth despite the constraints imposed by society. In the author's *Dollar Bahu*, the protagonist, Vinuta, struggles with her sense of worth and identity in the face of economic

disparity. Her journey, marked by the clash between her self-worth and the materialism around her, resonates with the humanistic idea of individual involvement against external pressures. The novel's portrayal of Vinuta's search for meaning beyond the social and economic constraints imposed upon her reflects the humanistic emphasis on self-actualization, moral integrity, and the dignity of individual experience in a world that often reduces people to their material value. The novel critiques the social inequities prevalent in postcolonial Indian society, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll such systems have on individuals, especially women. Through the lens of humanism, Vinuta's moral struggle is emblematic of the universal desire for respect and self-worth, irrespective of external circumstances.

Similarly, the novel *Mahasweta* explores the concept of identity through the struggles of a woman, Mahasweta, who faces both societal oppression and personal conflicts. The novel presents a woman trapped between her ancestral heritage and modern life, navigating societal expectations and the harsh realities of poverty and exploitation. Humanistic theory allows us to see *Mahasweta*'s internal battle as not just a fight for survival, but also a quest for dignity, morality, and personal involvement in the face of relentless social forces. The novel critiques the marginalization of women, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and explores their pliability in the face of systemic exploitation. Mahasweta's strength lies in her capacity to maintain her humanity despite the dehumanizing circumstances, making the story a powerful statement on the endurance of individual integrity and human dignity.

In the novel, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the author probes into the emotional and psychological aspects of marital life, ambition, and the sacrifices women make. The protagonist, Shrimati, is torn between her ambitions and her relationship with her husband, the man she loves. The novel examines the tensions between personal aspirations and social expectations, particularly the way women are often expected to subordinate their desires to the needs of others. Through a humanistic lens, Shrimati's story is a poignant exploration of her quest for balance, freedom, and fulfilment. Her internal conflict and her ultimate decision to reclaim her sense of self exemplify the humanistic ideals of personal growth and moral autonomy, asserting that individuals should have the involvement to define their own lives, regardless of societal constraints.

In the novel, *House of Cards*, the characters are caught in the web of ambition, greed, and familial conflict. The novel critiques the socio-political structures that contribute to the breakdown of familial bonds and the corruption of moral values. The author uses this narrative to explore the human tendency to compromise ethics for material gain, portraying the destructive impact of such choices on individuals and their relationships. From a humanistic perspective, the novel highlights the inner turmoil and moral decline of characters who lose sight of their values in the pursuit of power and wealth. The novel emphasizes the

importance of integrity and human connection, suggesting that the pursuit of self-interest, unchecked by morality, ultimately leads to personal and familial destruction.

The novel *The Mother I Never Knew* touches upon the themes of maternal love, loss, and the quest for identity. The protagonist searching for his biological mother embarks on a journey that reveals deep emotional and psychological truths about herself. Humanistic theory enables a deeper understanding of the protagonist's journey as a search for self-identity and the reclamation of lost connections. The novel highlights the importance of personal history and emotional bonds, highlighting the universal human need for connection, love, and understanding. It portrays the human struggle to reconcile one's sense of identity with the complexities of familial relationships, illustrating the emotional and moral growth that comes from understanding one's origins and connections.

Narratology, on the other hand, focuses on the structures of narrative, such as point of view, plot development, and character development, and how these elements contribute to meaning. The author's narrative techniques play a significant role in communicating the postcolonial themes in her novels. In *Dollar Bahu*, for instance, the author's use of multiple narrative perspectives, those of the protagonist Vinuta, her family, and her husband reveals the social dynamics and tensions within the family unit. The narrative structure gives voice to different characters, allowing readers to understand their motivations, desires, and internal conflicts. The shifting points of view offer insights into the power imbalances within relationships and provide a broader critique of the societal norms that govern the characters' lives. Narratologically, the story is a delicate balance between individual subjectivity and social reality, where the personal struggles of the characters are framed within the larger socio-economic structures that shape their lives.

In *Mahasweta*, the author employs a linear narrative interspersed with flashbacks to trace the protagonist's evolving identity and the generational conflict within her family. This narrative technique allows the author to explore the tension between tradition and modernity, and how the protagonist's identity is shaped by her struggle between these two worlds. The structure of the narrative also emphasizes the cyclical nature of exploitation and resistance. The non-linear approach reflects the fractured and multifaceted experiences of the characters, allowing the reader to understand the complexities of the personal and collective histories at play.

The novel *Gently Falls the Bakula* uses a more introspective narrative style, focusing on the internal struggles of the protagonist. The novel is largely told from Shrimati's point of view, giving the reader direct access to her thoughts and emotions. This first-person narration is an effective tool for exploring her inner conflict and the emotional complexities of her relationships. The plot develops through her changing perceptions of herself and her desires, with the narrative highlighting the tension between personal aspirations and societal

expectations. The use of internal monologue emphasizes the personal nature of the story, making Shrimati's journey one of self-discovery and moral decision-making.

The novel *House of Cards* employs a more fragmented narrative, with multiple characters and perspectives contributing to the overall story. The shifting viewpoints highlight the different motivations and desires of the characters, where individuals are often at odds with each other due to competing interests. The complex narrative structure mirrors the breakdown of traditional moral values and the consequences of living in a society driven by greed and power. The author's use of this narrative style allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the characters' internal struggles and the social forces that shape their actions.

In the novel, *The Mother I Never Knew*, the use of a reflective narrative structure emphasizes the protagonist's search for identity. The nonlinear storytelling, which alternates between the protagonist's present-day experiences and his flashbacks to the past, creates a sense of emotional layering. This narrative technique reflects the process of personal discovery and the uncovering of hidden truths. Through this structure, the novel explores the protagonist's evolving, understanding of his identity and the emotional healing that comes from reconnecting with his roots.

Conclusion

In all five novels, the author's use of humanistic themes and narrative techniques serves to highlight the complex social realities of India. Through her characters' struggles with identity, social constraints, and personal transformation, she paints a vivid picture of the ongoing legacies of colonialism and the ways in which individuals navigate these challenges. Humanistic theory allows readers to connect with the characters on an emotional level, while narratology helps to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the narrative structures, offering a deeper understanding of the postcolonial experience in the author's works.

Simultaneously the author's novels, when examined through the lenses of post-feminism and postmodernism, reveal a complex interplay of gender, identity, and societal expectations. Post-feminism, with its focus on the idea that gender equality has been largely achieved and the need to move beyond traditional feminist frameworks, is evident in the way the author's characters negotiate their individual identities and social roles. In the novel *Dollar Bahu*, for example, the protagonist Vinuta's struggle with societal expectations and her own aspirations reflects postfeminist concerns about the pressures on women to conform to established norms, while also challenging those norms to seek personal fulfilment. Similarly, in the novel *Mahasweta*, the character's struggles with familial duty versus personal ambition exemplify postfeminist themes of individual identity and self-empowerment within the boundaries of societal constraints. The author's portrayal of women navigating complex, sometimes contradictory roles, indicates a postfeminist exploration of how women redefine their identities in contemporary society.

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