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Deconstructing the Maternal: Biological, Surrogate, and Nurturing Mothers in Sudha Murty's *The Mother I Never Knew*

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Abstract

Sudha Murty's The Mother I Never Knew (2014) utilizes a diptych of two thematically linked novellas to explore the multifaceted and often contested nature of maternal identity in contemporary India. This paper argues that Murty systematically deconstructs the monolithic, idealized archetype of the mother by dissecting it into distinct yet overlapping roles: the biological progenitor, the surrogate caregiver, and the lifelong nurturer. The novellas, "Venkatesh" and "Mukesh," follow two men on parallel quests to uncover truths about their origins, forcing them and the reader to confront the disjuncture between biological fact and emotional reality. Through a close reading of the text, this paper analyzes how Murty challenges the primacy of biological motherhood, which is often depicted as a source of tragedy and social vulnerability. It posits that the biological mother, the eponymous "mother I never knew," serves as a spectral presence whose absence is a catalyst for the protagonists' identity crises. In contrast, the paper examines the figure of the nurturing mother—personified by Sumati and, in a different capacity, Gauri—who exemplifies that true motherhood is an active, conscious, and often sacrificial choice of caregiving, independent of genetic connection. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the unique and liminal role of the surrogate mother, Rupinder Kaur, who acts as a critical bridge between the biological and nurturing realms. By contrasting these archetypes with figures of transactional or failed motherhood like Shanta and Champakka, Murty critiques patriarchal structures and offers a humanistic redefinition of the maternal, grounding it not in biological determinism but in the profound, enduring act of love and nurture. The paper concludes that The Mother I Never Knew is a significant literary intervention that advocates for a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of family, where the bonds of affection and responsibility ultimately constitute the most authentic form of kinship.

Keywords: motherhood, maternal identity, biological mother, nurturing mother, surrogacy, adoption, family dynamics, patriarchy, feminist literary criticism

Introduction

The concept of the "mother" occupies a sacrosanct and deeply ambivalent space within the global cultural imaginary, and particularly within the Indian context. It is an identity simultaneously deified as the ultimate source of selfless love and constrained by rigid social and patriarchal expectations. As Adrienne Rich articulated in her seminal work Of Woman Born, motherhood is experienced both as a profound, individual relationship ("mothering") and as a political and social institution that has historically been used to control women. In Indian literature, this duality is a recurring theme, with writers exploring the chasm between the idealized "Maa" of popular culture and the lived realities of women navigating the complexities of marriage, lineage, and societal honor.

Sudha Murty, a prolific writer known for her lucid prose and poignant exploration of human relationships, delves into this complex terrain in her

2014 work, The Mother I Never Knew. Comprising two distinct novellas, "Venkatesh" and "Mukesh," the book presents a powerful and sustained deconstruction of the maternal. Murty moves beyond a singular definition of motherhood, fracturing it into a spectrum of roles that challenge the culturally enshrined primacy of biological connection. The book's title is itself a masterstroke of ambiguity; the "mother" in question is not one but many, and the state of "never knowing" applies not just to a person but to the very essence of what it means to be a mother.

This research paper will argue that Sudha Murty, in The Mother I Never Knew, systematically dismantles the conventional, monolithic notion of the maternal by dissecting it into three primary, often overlapping, archetypes: the biological progenitor, the surrogate caregiver, and the lifelong nurturer. Through the parallel odysseys of Venkatesh and Mukesh, who are driven by the discovery of long-buried family secrets, the novellas collectively posit that true, enduring motherhood is not a biological default but an active, conscious, and profoundly sacrificial choice of nurturing. The biological link, while a catalyst for the narrative, is consistently shown to be secondary to the bonds forged through love, responsibility, and unwavering care.

To develop this argument, this paper will undertake a thematic analysis structured around these maternal archetypes. The first section will examine the figure of the biological mother—Bhagavva in "Venkatesh" and Nirmala in "Mukesh"—as a spectral presence, whose story of abandonment reveal the brutal impact of patriarchal judgment on female agency and honor. The second section will focus on the nurturing mother, epitomized by Sumati in "Mukesh," who embodies the thesis that motherhood is a performative act of love rather than a genetic inheritance. This will be contrasted with figures like Shanta, who represents a transactional form of motherhood devoid of genuine nurture. The third section will analyze the unique and crucial role of the surrogate mother, Rupinder Kaur, who acts as an unsung bridge between the biological and nurturing realms, highlighting a liminal form of maternal care. Finally, the paper will conclude by synthesizing these findings to assert that Murty's work offers a compassionate and humanistic redefinition of the maternal, celebrating chosen family and the primacy of love in a world still governed by the rigid codes of bloodline and tradition.

Discussion

In both novellas, the titular "mother I never knew" is the biological mother, a figure whose existence is a secret and whose story is one of profound tragedy. Murty uses these characters-Bhagavva (Bhagirathi) in "Venkatesh" and Nirmala Kumari in "Mukesh"—not to glorify the biological imperative but to critique the social structures that render it a source of vulnerability and suffering for women. These mothers are not defined by their act of giving birth but by the societal condemnation that forces them into a life of absence and silence. Their stories become haunting specters that destabilize the protagonists' sense of self and force a reckoning with the past.

In "Venkatesh," Bhagavva's story is a harrowing indictment of how gossip and patriarchal honor can destroy a woman's life. As a young, beautiful bride, she is unjustly accused of infidelity by her mother-in-law, Champakka, based on the malicious whispers of villagers and the misinterpretation of her pregnancy. The accusation is potent because it strikes at the heart of patriarchal control: the certainty of lineage. As Uma Chakravarti notes in Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens, a woman's sexuality is policed to ensure the purity of the bloodline, making her honor synonymous with that of her husband's family. Champakka's rejection of Bhagavva is swift and absolute, communicated through a cold, dismissive letter: "We don't want your niece. You can keep her. The baby is Hanuma's and not my son's. We will not take her back" (Murty 70). This declaration, made without any real evidence, seals Bhagavva's fate.

Her husband, Setu Rao (who later becomes Madhav Rao), is rendered powerless by his domineering mother. His subsequent attempts to find Bhagavva are futile, leading to the tragic irony of two lives lived in parallel desolation: Bhagavva lives as a widow while her husband is alive, and Setu/Madhav lives as a widower while his wife is alive. Bhagavva's transformation from a vibrant young woman into a shaven-headed widow who toils endlessly to raise her son, Shankar, symbolizes the death of female

potential under patriarchal oppression. She becomes a ghost in her own life, her identity erased. When Venkatesh finally meets her, he sees a woman "burdened with poverty, widowhood and a tough life" (Murty 61). Her maternal identity is not defined by the joy of childbirth but by a lifetime of sacrificial suffering, a reality that stands in stark contrast to the idealized image of motherhood.

Similarly, in "Mukesh," the biological mother, Nirmala Kumari, is a victim of both youthful ignorance and patriarchal wrath. A zamindar's daughter, she falls in love with a visiting student, Anand, and becomes pregnant. In a society where premarital pregnancy brings catastrophic shame, her father's reaction is violent and absolute. He beats her mercilessly and schemes to dispose of the child to salvage the family's honor and secure a strategic marriage for her. Nirmala's story highlights what feminist scholars like Nivedita Menon call the "bio-political" control over women's bodies, where reproduction is managed not by the woman herself but by the male head of the family to serve social and political ends.

Nirmala is forced to give up her child, an act born of complete powerlessness. When Mukesh, now a grown man, finally confronts her, he sees not a monster but a "middle-aged woman dressed in a silk sari with the pallu over her head," a figure of quiet subjugation (Murty 199). Her explanation for giving him up is steeped in the language of fate and helplessness: "Your father didn't even know that I was pregnant—and even if he did, my father would not have allowed us to get married" (Murty 202). She has been subsumed into the role of a minister's wife, her past a dangerous secret. Her motherhood is a historical fact, a biological event disconnected from a life of mothering. Like Bhagavva, she is a specter, a "what might have been," whose primary role in the narrative is to expose the fragility of female existence and to catalyze the protagonist's search for his true identity, which he ultimately finds not in biology but in nurture.

If the biological mother represents a tragic absence, the nurturing mother in Murty's novellas is the unwavering, life-affirming presence who proves that motherhood is an act, not a fact. This archetype is most powerfully embodied by Sumati in "Mukesh," whose story forms the emotional core of the second novella and articulates the book's central thesis: love, not blood, defines a mother. Sumati's journey into motherhood is unconventional from the start. After giving birth to her daughter, Neeraja, she undergoes an emergency hysterectomy, rendering her unable to have more children—a devastating reality in a culture that privileges male heirs. This biological limitation, however, opens the door to a different kind of maternal fulfillment. When she meets the young, neglected Munna (Mukesh), her affection is immediate and unconditional. Her decision to adopt him is a conscious, deliberate choice, made in partnership with her husband, Krishna. It is an act of compassion that defies social norms of community and caste. She tells the boy's biological surrogate, Rupinder, "We can educate him and treat him the way we treat Neeru... we'll give our best to both the kids" (Murty 152).

Sumati's motherhood is defined by a series of active, sacrificial choices. She understands the immense emotional weight of Rupinder giving up her child and makes a solemn promise to protect Mukesh's future. The gold chain, a gift from Rupinder, becomes a sacred trust. When the family faces poverty, Sumati mortgages this chain—not her own jewelry—to start a sewing business, a decision laden with symbolism. As she explains to her husband, "The chain is Rupinder's gift to her son and we have no right over it... It's our responsibility" (Murty 159). The business, which she builds from scratch through sheer hard work and integrity, is literally founded upon the promise of her maternal duty to Mukesh. The company is later named "Mukesh Exports," cementing his place not as an outsider but as the very foundation of the family's prosperity. This concept of motherhood as a chosen, performative identity aligns with Judith Butler's theories on performativity, which suggest that identity is constituted through a series of acts rather than being an inherent essence. Sumati becomes Mukesh's mother through her daily acts of love, protection, and sacrifice. She nurtures him, educates him, and loves him "more than my life itself" (Murty 142). When the secret of his adoption is finally revealed, Mukesh's initial crisis of identity—feeling like an "outsider" (Murty 165)—is resolved not by

finding his biological parents but by recognizing the profound, unshakeable truth of Sumati's love. He returns to her, declaring, "Amma, in the last few days, I have learnt that you are the architect of my life. I am your son" (Murty 173). The architect metaphor is perfect; Sumati has constructed his identity through love and labor.

In contrast, Shanta in "Venkatesh" represents a form of motherhood that is biologically true but emotionally barren. She is a provider of material wealth and social status, but she is not a nurturer. Her relationship with her children is transactional. She views Ravi's marriage as a business alliance, a way to "impress Veena" and her wealthy family (Murty 9). Her interactions with her daughter, Gauri, are marked by a fundamental disconnect in values. While Shanta is focused on finance and social climbing, Gauri shares a deep, emotional bond with her father, Venkatesh. In a poignant reversal of roles, it is Gauri who nurtures her father, comforting him in his distress and ultimately funding his act of atonement to Bhagavva's family. Gauri's statement, "Anna's happiness is more important to me," demonstrates a capacity for selfless love that her mother lacks (Murty 108). By juxtaposing Sumati's all-encompassing nurture with Shanta's emotional detachment, Murty reinforces the idea that the title of "mother" must be earned through affective labor, not simply conferred by childbirth.

Perhaps the most nuanced and innovative portrayal of the maternal in The Mother I Never Knew is the character of Rupinder Kaur in "Mukesh." She exists in a liminal space, occupying a role that is neither purely biological nor fully nurturing in the lifelong sense of Sumati. Rupinder is the surrogate mother—not in the modern, clinical definition, but in the truest sense of being a substitute who bridges a critical gap. Her character allows Murty to explore a third dimension of motherhood: the temporary, transitional, yet profoundly impactful caregiver whose sacrifice is essential but often invisible.

Rupinder's own maternal journey begins in tragedy with the birth of a stillborn child. This personal loss makes her uniquely empathetic to the plight of an abandoned baby. When she finds the infant left at a temple (the baby who will become Mukesh), she sees a chance for redemption and purpose. She tells the village elders, "My baby died a few days ago... I would like to look after the baby" (Murty 191). Her act of taking him in is immediate and instinctual. Murty makes a point of noting that "milk started filling her breasts and she ran home to feed the baby," a detail that underscores a physical, almost biological, assumption of the maternal role. She breastfeeds him, cares for him, and for over a year, she is his entire world.

This period of care is crucial. Rupinder saves the child from almost certain death and provides the foundational attachment that developmental psychologists like John Bowlby argue is essential for healthy development. She functions as what the scholar Patricia Hill Collins, writing about African-American communities, terms an "other mother"—a woman who shares mothering responsibilities and provides care to children not biologically her own. Rupinder's "other mothering" is a selfless act, but one she cannot sustain. Confronted by a hostile family-in-law who sees the child as a bad omen, she makes the heart-wrenching decision to give him up for a better future.

Her farewell to Munna is one of the most poignant scenes in the book. She gives him to Sumati, along with the only valuable thing she owns—a gold chain—and a final, desperate plea: "Give him a good education and raise him to be a good human being... Don't ever tell him about me, unless it's a matter of life and death" (Murty 154-155). Her sacrifice is total. She erases herself from his life to ensure his stability and happiness. In doing so, she acts as the essential conduit, transferring the child from the world of biological abandonment (Nirmala) to the world of lifelong nurture (Sumati). Without her intervention, Mukesh's story would not be possible.

Rupinder's character challenges a binary understanding of motherhood. She demonstrates that maternal love is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Her role is temporary, but her impact is permanent. She is the unsung hero of the novella, the quiet bridge over which the protagonist travels to his destiny. When Mukesh finally meets her as an adult, he finds a poor, hardworking woman who has lived a life of quiet dignity, her love for him undiminished by time. Her story forces a recognition of the hidden, often unacknowledges, forms of female labor and love that

underpins the very fabric of family and community. She is, in her own way, another "mother I never knew," whose profound sacrifice only comes to light at the end of a long journey.

Contrasting with the selfless love of nurturing and surrogate mothers, Murty presents figures who embody a more transactional or power-oriented form of the maternal. These characters—Champakka and Shanta in "Venkatesh"—are not evil, but their actions are driven by pragmatism, social ambition, and a desire for control rather than unconditional love. Their portrayals serve as a crucial counterpoint, highlighting what motherhood lacks when it is stripped of its affective core and reduced to a function of social strategy.

Champakka, Venkatesh's grandmother, is a formidable matriarch. Having been widowed young, she is a survivor who has single-handedly raised her son, JMR. Her worldview is shaped by a life of struggle, making her fiercely protective and pragmatic. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak might argue, the subaltern woman often develops strategies of survival that can appear harsh or uncompromising. Champakka's primary concern is security and the consolidation of the family's standing. When she arranges her son's marriage to Indir amma and later approves of Venkatesh's marriage to Shanta, her decisions are strategic. She chooses Shanta because she is the "only child of rich parents," a match that promises financial stability (Murty 14). Her most defining act is her cruel rejection of Bhagavva. Based entirely on village gossip, she makes a calculated decision to sever ties, protecting her son and her family's honor from the taint of a potential scandal. Her actions are not born of malice in her own eyes, but of a cold, hard logic where the preservation of the patriarchal family unit outweighs the emotional well-being of an individual woman. She operates within the very system that oppresses women, wielding her matriarchal power to enforce its brutal codes. In her world, a daughter-in-law is a vessel for lineage and an asset or liability to the family's status. There is no room for compassion when the family's "izzat" (honor) is at stake. She represents the institution of motherhood in the way Rich described it: a tool of patriarchal control, even when wielded by a woman.

Shanta, Venkatesh's wife, embodies a modern, urban form of transactional motherhood. While Champakka's motivations were rooted in traditional notions of honor and security, Shanta's are driven by capitalist ambition and social climbing. She is a successful investor who handles the family finances "better than an investment banker" (Murty 4). However, this financial acumen comes at the cost of emotional connection. Her home, "Anandita," is a place of marble floors and modern amenities but lacks warmth and intimacy. Her relationship with her husband is distant, and her approach to her children's lives is akin to managing a portfolio.

Her plan for her son Ravi's marriage is a prime example. She meticulously courts the wealthy socialite Veena Purushottam, viewing the potential match with Veena's daughter, Pinki, as a strategic merger. The goal is not Ravi's happiness but the acquisition of a daughter-in-law who can bring "good social contacts" and whose family can become a "partner in Ravi's company" (Murty 84). She even scoffs at Venkatesh's suggestion of a less extravagant engagement, declaring, "You'll never understand what it means to build relationships and run a business" (Murty 104). For Shanta, relationships are business. When Venkatesh reveals the story of Bhagavva and his desire to make amends by giving her family fifty lakhs, Shanta's immediate reaction is one of cold, financial calculation: "Fifty lakhs!" she exclaims in unison with Ravi (Murty 105). She refuses to help, stating, "I refuse to give them anything. But if you want to give them something, please give them whatever you want out of your own savings" (Murty 109). Her response reveals a complete inability to empathize; her maternal instinct, if it can be called that, is limited to protecting her family's financial assets. Through Shanta and Champakka, Murty illustrates the failure of motherhood when it is detached from empathy and reduced to a function of power, whether traditional or modern.

Conclusion

In The Mother I Never Knew, Sudha Murty embarks on a profound literary exploration that challenges and redefines one of society's most foundational concepts. By presenting two parallel novellas linked by the theme of hidden maternal origins, she

deconstructs the idealized, monolithic figure of the mother and reveals a complex tapestry of biological, surrogate, and nurturing roles. The journeys of Venkatesh and Mukesh are not merely quests to find a lost parent; they are odysseys into the very meaning of identity, family, and love. The biological mothers, Bhagavva and Nirmala, serve as poignant symbols of female vulnerability within a patriarchal society. Their stories are not celebrations of the life-giving power of women but stark reminders of how that power can be co-opted, shamed, and erased by social codes of honor and male authority. They are the spectral "mothers never known," whose tragic absences force a crucial re-evaluation of what truly constitutes a maternal bond. In stark contrast, Murty elevates the nurturing mother as the ultimate anchor of identity. Through the character of Sumati, she presents a powerful argument for motherhood as a conscious, performative act of love and sacrifice. Sumati's unwavering devotion to her adopted son, Mukesh, proves that the labor of nurturing—of raising, protecting, and empowering a child—is far more significant than the biological act of birth. Her love is the bedrock upon which Mukesh's life is built, demonstrating that the most authentic families are often the ones we choose or that are forged in the crucible of shared experience. This is reinforced by the failings of transactional mother figures like Shanta, whose focus on material gain leaves her family emotionally impoverished. Furthermore, Murty's creation of the surrogate figure, Rupinder Kaur, adds a layer of exceptional nuance to the discourse. Rupinder's role as the transitional caregiver highlights a form of maternal love that is temporary yet essential, sacrificial yet largely invisible. She embodies a liminal motherhood that is critical to the child's survival and eventual well-being, demanding a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of the different forms that mothering can take. Ultimately, The Mother I Never Knew is a deeply humanistic work. It moves beyond the rigid demarcations of blood and law to champion a more fluid and affective understanding of kinship. The resolution of both protagonists' crises comes not from a simple reunion with a biological parent, but from a deeper understanding of the love that has shaped them. Venkatesh finds peace in his decision to honor his father's hidden past and to right a historical wrong, supported by his nurturing daughter, Gauri. Mukesh finds his true identity by reaffirming his bond with Sumati, the woman who was the "architect of his life." Sudha Murty's novellas powerfully conclude that while biology may determine our beginning, it is the enduring, selfless, and unconditional act of nurture that defines who we are and, most importantly, who gets to be called "mother."

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