

## The Quest for Self-Identity: An Existential View in Sudha Murty's The Mother I Never Knew

K.A. Vilasini<sup>1</sup>, Dr. X. John Paul<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

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The paper showcases the theme of quest for self in Sudha Murty's *The Mother I Never Knew*. It defines the term Identity and Existentialism in the Indian context. The study of relationship in the family and how it plays a significant role in identifying one's identity are exposed in the paper. The contradiction between the tradition and the modern world, the realistic and material world are displayed in depth with the life of Venkatesh and Mukesh in *The Mother I Never Knew*. The paper attempts to exhibit the concept of realization of self through sacrificing and helping others. Hence the purpose of life and meaningful existence can be achieved.

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**Keywords:** Self, Existence, Meaningful life, Search, Sacrifice, Helping, Reconstruction, Rootlessness.

Sudha Kulkarni Murthy was born on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1950 in Shiggaon district in Karnataka. She is the wife of Mr. Narayana Murthy, the founder of Infosys. Presently, she is a chairperson of Infosys Foundation. She is a versatile woman who serves as a writer, teacher, philanthropist, social worker and CEO of Infosys. She has won R.K. Narayan's award for Literature, Attimabe award for her technical book in Kannada, Padma Shri award for her contribution in social work, education and philanthropy. She is a prolific writer in Kannada and English and most of her Kannada books has been translated into English and adopted to movies. Some of her famous works are *The Bird with Golden Wings*, *Wise and Otherwise*, *A Salute to life*, *Old man and his God*, *A wedding in Russai*, *Sweet Hospitality*, *Dollar Bahu*, *House of Cards*, *Gently falls the Bakula*.

The quest for self is the byproduct of existential philosophy which tries to expose the truth from the state of being bare. The novelette *The Mother I Never Knew* is set in a typical Indian background inducing with socio-economic conflicts. One's identity plays a very important role to describe his past, present and future. What happens when there is an unknown identity in the past? Will it affect the present as well as the future? Sudha Murty's novel *The Mother I Never Knew* exclusively picturizes the hidden past in Venkatesh's life. In addition to this, it also depicts the life of Mukesh, the protagonist of another novella, who comes to know that he was an adopted son and how finally he succeeds in search of his real birth after encountering all the frustrations in his life. The two parallel stories experience the quest for identity in different ways and expose the traditional way of Indianess. It shows an awful experience of the protagonists in realizing the fake identity. The interpersonal relationship of the characters and the hollowness present in them are revealed. When one loses his identity, the pathetic condition is described by Pathak in his article "Indo- English novel's quest for identity" in *Explorations in Indo-English fiction*, "it is a dreadful feeling that of being cut off from all one's kind... One begins doubting one's own identity" (Dawn 10).

The identity crisis is taken place due to various factors such as domination, migration and adaptation. But in this case, the birth place plays a major role. Venkatesh, a banker born from an upper-middle class family is transferred to Hubble. Venkatesh is anxious about his life when he meets a man named Shankar resembling his appearance. Shankar is a headmaster from a poor family with many complications in his life. The curiosity of their resemblance made Venkatesh to reach the village Shishunul. There he comes to know that his father has abandoned his wife and a child before marrying his mother.

The poor woman Bhagavva thought that her husband is dead and leads her entire life as a widow. She struggled a lot and has overcome many difficulties to raise her son Shanker. "It seemed unbelievable that she had been subjected to so much injustice, by she was living proof that this was not a story. It was her reality. He couldn't imagine the agony that lay inside her heart" (*The Mother I Never Knew* 79).

The plot shows two distinct in Venkatesh's life i.e. before and after knowing the truth about his father. Since Venkatesh's wife Shanta is very clever in taking care of business deals, his earnings and support are not necessary for the family. Shanta is a straightforward woman and had business logic in all her dealings with others. On the contrary, Venkatesh gave space to sentiments, emotions and feelings towards his life. And thus, there is no proper understanding between Venkatesh and Shanta in marriage life though they are living together. After knowing the tragic incident in Bhagavva's life he decided to pay the debt for the sin which was done by his father to the innocent souls Bhagavva and Shankar. Since Venkatesh has no other relatives except his wife and children he finds a meaningful life in helping Bhagavva and Shankar.

The term existentialism is defined as finding one's own self and meaning towards life at one point of situation. It does not come out of force, pressure, domination or under law but as a free will and personal responsibility. As a son and a brother Venkatesh has a personal responsibility in helping the poor Bhagavva and Shankar's family. He finds a meaning and purpose of life in supporting them financially. Generally, existentialism is focused on the true existence of human beings, actions, responsibilities, emotions and meaning beyond the material world. The difference between the material and the real world is shown from Venkatesh-Shantha and Anaant Patil-Vijaya's family. Patil and Vijaya's life is filled with joy and pleasure and they both loved each other's company. "Both husband and wife enjoyed each other's company and troubled each other like teenagers. It wasn't that they didn't have problems -... But Patil wasn't anxious about it. He would reassure his wife, Vijaya, don't worry about it.

"We will repay it somehow" (*The Mother I Never Knew* 49). They live a happy life despite his son having a mediocre job, bedridden old mother and huge loan from bank. But on the other hand Venkatesh and Shanta have everything in their life except happiness. Shanta goes behind money to earn more and more and goes under stress in the end. This shows that the complete existence of life is gained through passion, emotion and happiness and not through satisfying the material needs. In the modern life, the lack of love and happiness in Venkatesh's life is typically depicted in a thought provoking manner. The deep insight of human nature is seen in Venkatesh and Mukesh. The realistic delineation of the character and his quest for self as a responsible son and a brother shows the meaningful existence of life. According to O.P. Bhatnagar, "renounced this materialistic society and civilization not to be an ascetic but to fulfill all the demands of his self to the perfection of participated joy" (Dhawan 55). The reality of modern civilized society of nothingness is shown from the life of Venkatesh and Shanta. On broadening the element of helping from existential notion, Venkatesh's daughter in fact sacrifices her share of inheritance in her wealth.

As Richards Vyvyan says, "Every touch of kindness that opens one's isolated self to others and theirs to us, begins to enrich and perfect our being" (Dhawan 135). This proves that no one could be abandoned or betrayed if the kindness dwells into every human nature. The meaningful existence is shown through sacrifice and helping others and thus it brings out happy ending. The existential philosophy of life shows the right way to lead a life. The meaningful life can be attained in different ways. This novella shows the quest for identity from the beginning till the end and thus finally the character realizes that the real happiness lies in supporting, helping and sacrificing. And from there, the real meaning of life is existed.

The other novella of *The Mother I Never Knew* deals with Mukesh's encounter in searching his real mother. When he comes to know the truth that he is an adopted child he feels unrooted and baseless. Everyone in the world are concerned about their identity "who I am? And what I am going to do?" Even Mukesh had the same feeling of absurdity upon his existence. According to Socrates dictum "know thyself" the search for self is the predominant concern in all the aspects. "The most noteworthy feature of this existentialist treatment of the self is the way in which it lifts the discussion out of its usual context of cognition. That man is being who acts rather than contemplates had been emphasized by the philosophers before. The existentialist reminds us that man is not only a being who tries to know but a being whom feels and acts" (Chatterjee 213). The urban existence of man-woman relationship and traditional Indian customs make one to realize one's own identity.

The identity of the past and its serious impact in the present as well as future is brilliantly shown. Sumati reveals the secret to Mukesh that Rupinder from Amritsar is the real mother and since he was hated by her mother-in-law and her husband because of his dark patch in his foot she gave him away to Sumati. I don't know whether I'm doing right or wrong, but I'm giving my dear baby to you. I have a bad mother-in-law, an alcoholic husband and a bickering family. Munna doesn't have any future with us. Its better that he stay with you... Don't ever tell him about me, unless it's a matter of life and death. (*The Mother I Never Knew* 155)

Munna was overwhelmed by the unconditional love shown by Rao Saheb and Sumati. They supported his education, marriage and even throughout his life. Sometimes, even the biological parents fail to do their duties towards their children. But what they have done for him is highly immeasurable. Mukesh was highly anxious to know why he had been abandoned by his parents. This is because even the poorest of the poor will not throw their child by blaming such reasons. This longing love is expressed in the words "Mukesh could not control himself, 'Just because I had a dark patch on my foot and your mother-in-law felt that it was a bad omen, how could you reject me without a second thought? Didn't my father ever want to see his child again?'... 'Why? Why didn't you convince my father?' (*The Mother I Never Knew* 177).

The journey in search of his mother is still extended because even Rupinder is not the real biological mother of Mukesh. He was the son of Rupinder's friend Nirmala who was innocently betrayed by an English teacher in her village. Mukesh was distressed by his mixed identity and annoyed by his birth. The loss of identity is witnessed. The place where he was born, brought up and living are totally different with respect to caste, religion and community. He was annoyed of his birth and felt that he was an unwanted child to this earth. A sense of deep bareness is visible in the life of Mukesh. He respected poor Rupinder with great love and affection. A poor lady struggled a lot to raise him despite her family problems. With a deep passion and as a responsible son he wanted to support Rupinder financially. The existence of deep passion towards a particular will is seen in Mukesh.

Mukesh was speechless. It was very hard for him to absorb that he was born out of wedlock and simply abandoned, that he was an unwelcome guest to this world. 'What am I supposed to do now? What kind of a journey have I been on- born somewhere and brought up as someone else? Who am I- a Hindi-speaking Jat, A Punjabi-speaking sardar or a Kannada-speaking south Indian? Or will Nirmala tell me another story?' (*The Mother I Never Knew* 192). The confused identity of Mukesh is exposed in these lines. He was an unwelcomed guest in this world yet Rupinder and Sumati gave their best in his life. The novelette delineates the typical Indian women in Rupinder and Sumati and their condition in the society. The consequences of foolish love, Indian ethos and how woman and her child are betrayed and victimized by the lust are displayed in a poignant manner. The theme of quest is mainly rooted in the self and thus he was confused with his mixed up identity. The relation between the past and the present is very specific because it typically focuses on the continuity of the life of Mukesh where he was born, brought up and currently living. Vinay Dharwadker observes that,

At the end of the search for self- which serves as the subjective centre of experience in the human and natural worlds, even as it seeks to escape from the web of domestic and social relations into a realm of independence- we find a series of 'mere seers' without substantial unity, agency, or will. These watchers can 'make the scene', in the double sense of the phrase, only by returning subjectivity to the objects, events, and relations it encounters routinely in its world of concrete particulars. As self-executes this paradoxical return, it locks itself into the space it wishes to leave in the first place: it involute the entire historical and social structure, so that the innermost circle of experience circles, completing a loop from which there is no escape." (Dharwadker, xxxvi)

Thus even after meeting his biological mother he does not have any sense of love, affection nor did he not ask her why he was thrown away by her nor his real father. When he met her, he was speechless, just got her blessings and left silently. The concept of *Karmayoga* is visible in the life of Mukesh. *Karmayoga* is directly opposite to *Sanyasa*, which is followed by Swami Vivekananda. *Sanyasa* is leaving all the relationships and properties and living a meaningful life. But *Karmayoga* is living a meaningful life not at the cost of relationships, love and passion. Although by birth Mukesh belonged to the so-called mother Nirmala, he appears to be the son of Sumati and Rupinder. Hence, Mukesh found a meaningful life by being a son of Sumati and Rupinder.

According to the proverb, "As you sow, you reap" Nirmala abandoned the child in the past due to illegal birth and thus after her marriage her other children gave her terrible reputation. They have not neither grown up nor settled in a proper way and responsible like Mukesh. Furthermore, it explores the truth that giving birth to a child alone is not the work of the parents. They have to take care of them and grow them as responsible person in their life. In this way, the real credit goes to Rupinder and Sumiti who raised Mukesh as a successful man. "Giving birth is simply a biological event but parents must move mountains to raise a child to be a good human being. I salute the mother who made you what you are" (*The Mother I Never Knew* 202).

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