

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN SUDHA MURTY'S *THE MOTHER I NEVER KNEW*: A CRITICAL STUDY

S. Soundarya,

Department of English, Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur – 626 203,
Tamil Nadu, India (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu,
India)

Dr. A. Padmashini,

Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur – 626 203,
Tamil Nadu, India (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu,
India)

Abstract

The concept of 'self-discovery' runs as a central thread throughout Sudha Murty's "The Mother I Never Knew." She illustrated this idea through the hardships endured by her characters and the erosion of their personal identity.

This study examines protagonists who experience a loss of selfhood and explores their psychological framework, revealing how material wealth strips human beings of their emotional depth. The authority wielded by one person frequently robs another of their individual sense of self.

The paper further investigates the estrangement of individuals from society, the healing of their emotional wounds, and the strength they discover in reclaiming control over their own lives.

Folklore and myth are deeply embedded in the fabric of Indian society. The narrative draws parallels with the Mahabharata by mirroring the predicaments of its characters. The profound emotional bond shared between mothers and their sons forms a compelling undercurrent throughout the storyline.

In essence, this paper will explore the thematic concerns embedded in the narrative, focusing on those characters who surrender their sense of self and examining the pivotal influence of money on human relationships and choices.

Key Words: Dominance, Identity crisis, Materialism (Money), Struggle and Selfhood.

Sudha Murty has earned recognition as a storyteller who gives voice to ordinary people. This academic study centers on two pivotal figures - Venkatesh and Mukesh - both of whom undergo a profound loss of identity. The work is structured around two novellas, each presenting a distinct narrative yet anchored by a shared thematic concern. Venkatesh holds a position as a bank official earning a modest but stable salary. However, in contrast to his wife Shantha, who is a successful businesswoman, his standing within the household appears diminished. Shantha possessed exceptional acumen in financial investments and household administration, managing the family's affairs far more efficiently than any professional money manager could have. As a result, Venkatesh found himself without a meaningful role at home. He was reduced to being merely known as "Madam's husband." Gowri and Ravi were the couple's two children. The element of female authority is unmistakably woven into these narrative details. Shantha's entrepreneurial success becomes the driving force behind her dominance over her husband, ultimately causing Venkatesh to forfeit his sense of identity within the household.

“Don’t be foolish like your father and accept inconsequential job offer and stick to it. Fortune does not tap everyone’s door, you know only the courteous and aggressive in Lakshmi over, ‘Shantha would advise her son’. Shantha’s desire towards attaining wealth makes her to insist her own son to concentrate on material valuables.”

The relentless pursuit of material possessions cultivates arrogance in human nature.

“Shantha had turned to Ravi and grumbled. This girl is down write idealistic” It’s because she is got everything easily.” (Page no: 8)

“If the girl is from a family richer than ours, then perhaps Ravi’s life may also turn out to be like mine” (Page No:10).

These passages make it evident to the reader that female dominance permeates the domestic sphere. Despite the household’s financial prosperity, Venkatesh continues to feel the sting of social and emotional marginalization, as Shantha’s unquenchable appetite for wealth leaves him feeling perpetually insignificant. Her materialistic obsession steadily erodes his psychological well-being. Greed, it becomes clear, holds tremendous sway over the human mind.

In an effort to elevate her family’s social standing, Shantha orchestrates the marriage of her son Ravi to Pinky, a young woman from an affluent household.

“Ravi would smile and agree, ‘Yes, these days Acharyas from India are much more in demand than software engineers’. They make a lot more money too”. (Page No: 56)

The adage “Like mother, like son” finds its embodiment in Ravi, who mirrors Shantha’s fixation on financial gain. He is, at his core, a man driven entirely by commercial thinking.

“Sometimes, she would get angry with the unborn baby and think, isn’t it, Because of this baby that people are talking ill of me? May be I should starve myself so that it will die inside my womb. But who do I do. It’s a part of a me and a part of Sethu too. The baby is my reason to live. Had I not been pregnant, I would have drowned myself in the river Krishna days ago.” (Page No: 74)

Bhagirathi, Sethu’s first wife, is stripped of her sense of self when her mother-in-law casts doubt upon her moral character. The accusation leaves her with a longing to escape life itself. Carrying her unborn child, she becomes a target of cruelty and scorn from those around her. Through the institution of marriage, she loses not only her social standing but her very identity, ultimately experiencing a deep sense of alienation.

“Bhagirathi was just beginning to accept the cruel hand that fate had dealt her, But then came the month of Shravana- festival time of the year. It was month of great joy for married women, Who would wear new cloths and jewellery, Worship Mangla Gauri and pray for husband’s long life. It was an ill omen to see a widow on such an occasion and the entire village shunned. Bhagirathi. Everybody avoided her like the plague.” (Page No: 76)

The moment the central character is branded a widow, she is robbed of both her contentment and her identity. Overcome by despair, she attempts to end her life, but is saved by a fisherman. Resolving thereafter to chart her own course, she makes the courageous choice to live independently and forge her own path.

“Earlier Ravi had wanted to marry a Computer Engineer or an MBA, but after returning from America, He told his mother over dinner, ‘Amma, I’ve realized that the life is only about businesses. Think about it parents rise their children so that they will look after them when they get old. That’s emotional business. Marriage is like that too. My partner and I should know what to expect from each other, or else it will be a discordant match like that of Appa and you.” (Page No: 84)

Ravi, Shantha's son, remains perpetually consumed by the pursuit of financial success. He reduces the sacred institution of marriage to what he calls a form of "Emotional business."

"Ravi replied calmly, I'll go to the court. That is our ancestor's property and you don't have right just give it away without our consent. You can only donate money or property you have earned on your own". (Page No: 107).

Ravi goes so far as to initiate legal proceedings against his own father over ancestral property. This callous behavior unmistakably reflects his emotional detachment from his parent, stemming entirely from his single-minded obsession with monetary gain - money, in his worldview, reigns supreme above all else.

The work consists of two novellas whose characters and storylines collectively guide the reader toward a deeper understanding of each figure's quest to reclaim their sense of self.

"Rupinder was treated like a servant in that family. Her mother-in-law was horrible and her husband ill-treated her till the day he died" (Page No: 172).

The passage above unmistakably reflects an attitude of male chauvinism. By the laws of nature, every human being deserves to be treated as an equal. Yet in this narrative, the subjugation of women occurs without any acknowledgement of their inherent identity or worth.

"Parents usually don't give their children away unless it is the question of a life and death. Even the poorest of poor such as beggars was to keep their children. Why did you give me away so easily? Didn't my father resist your decision? How could you be so hard-hearted that you never see me?" (Page No: 176)

Mukesh, raised between two mothers, turns to his biological mother with desperate questions about the truth of his origins. As he unravels Rupinder's story, he is met with a devastating revelation—she, too, is not his real mother.

"She cried and touched his feet 'Beta, Please forgive me'. I can't leave you somewhere to die of hunger or cold. Rupinder is a nice women. At the least, She'll ensure your survival and you won group as an illegitimate child" (Page no: 190)

These lines lay bare a mother's anguish and her reluctant yet well-intentioned decision to entrust her son to Rupinder. This pivotal act becomes the source of Mukesh's lifelong identity crisis. Meanwhile, Nirmala grows increasingly anxious about her own well-being. In an attempt to divert her companion's mind, she opens up about her own history to Rupinder, revealing that her father was Chowdary Saran Singh—a powerful Zamindar who commanded great respect and authority in his village.

Nirmala, born into the household of a landed aristocrat, becomes romantically involved with a man named Anand and gives birth to Munna outside the bonds of marriage. Rupinder steps in to care for the child, who is later passed on to Sumathi.

"Mukesh touched the feet, 'Please bless me, I may reach the end of this journey and find myself'." (Page No: 193)

Upon learning the truth about his past, Munna receives blessings from her and quietly departs. He comes to understand that Nirmala is his birth mother. After an earnest search, he finally locates her and, in a moment of silent reunion, receives her blessing without exchanging a single word.

"Mukesh simply watched her. She was his mother- who had abandoned him within hour of his birth, A mother who had conceived him without preparing for the consequences... Who taught the teenage sex was enjoyable was did not know that it would result in a pregnancy, Mother who dominated by the men in her life". (Page No: 199)

Nirmala, Munna's biological mother, humbles herself by touching his feet and begging his forgiveness for surrendering him to Rupinder so soon after his birth. Consumed by a need to understand, Mukesh internally poses all the agonizing questions he wishes he could ask her - yet he remains silent, choosing not to voice his turmoil in her presence.

"He got blessings from her and came back to the mother who raised him. He felt bit tears drops on his hair. She caressed his head with a shaky hand. He was her past her first child...I used to think that Karan and Kundhi only existed in the Mahabaratha but now it happened to me... I salute the mother who made you what you are.' (Page no: 202)

The lines above poignantly expose the fractured bond of identity between a mother and her son.

"Amma, in the last few days, I have learned you are the architect of my life...Nothing can separate us in the lifetime." (Page No: 204)

Ultimately, Munna acknowledges with heartfelt gratitude the woman who nurtured and raised him, and through this act of recognition, he arrives at a profound understanding of his own true identity.

References

1. Murty, S. (2014). **The Mother I Never Knew**. Penguin Random House India.
2. Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2015). **A Glossary of Literary Terms** (11th ed.). Cengage Learning.
3. Barry, P. (2017). **Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory** (4th ed.). Manchester University Press.
4. Erikson, E. H. (1968). **Identity: Youth and Crisis**. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). **Questions of Cultural Identity**. SAGE Publications.
6. Taylor, C. (1994). **Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition**. Princeton University Press.
7. Tyson, L. (2015). **Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide** (3rd ed.). Routledge.
8. Woodward, K. (Ed.). (1997). **Identity and Difference**. SAGE Publications.
9. Bauman, Z. (2001). **The Individualized Society**. Polity Press.
10. Giddens, A. (1991). **Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age**. Stanford University Press.
11. Hogg, M. A., & Abrams, D. (1988). **Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes**. Routledge.
12. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Personal identity. Retrieved June 22, 2026, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/personal-identity>
13. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Self-concept or identity. Retrieved June 22, 2026, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-behavior/Self-concept-or-identity>